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## Making Sense of the “Long Wars” – Advice to the US Army

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Tami Davis Biddle

Most military institutions that experience success or failure in war will seek to understand their recent history so they can make sense of it, and learn intelligently from it. The process is never easy or straightforward; indeed, it is often fraught. Those inside the institution have positions and reputations to defend; those outside it—often anxious to level critiques—may not have enough knowledge to offer sophisticated and informed analyses, or may be so determined to build a good story around “goats” and “heroes” they miscast the events and offer far more heat than light. Analyses of the “long wars” in Afghanistan and Iraq have come in every possible form: journalists’ accounts were first on the scene, but they were followed quickly by those of think-tank analysts, academics, defense intellectuals, official historians, and memoir writers. Each of these has its own weaknesses and strengths. Many have echoed the frustration felt by the American people—frustration driven by a belief that while the US seemed to invest extraordinary amounts of time, blood, and treasure in these campaigns, we have little to show for them.

The US Army had the biggest investment—and thus the biggest stake—in the long wars. It is unsurprising, then, that the Army should be the service most buffeted by the experience and the institutional effort to make sense of it. After all, the senior leaders of the US Army must continue to hold the trust and confidence of the American people, and justify the resources invested in the organization. They must learn from and adapt to past experience even as they look forward to a future that arrives with unforgiving speed. They must fight ongoing budget battles, maintain force readiness, keep up with new technologies, plan for new weapons systems, and educate personnel even as they try to process and absorb the recent past. Adding to the difficulty of this task is the fact that, of all the services, the Army may have the greatest challenge when it comes to predicting the future and getting ready for it. In many ways, the Army is the utility infielder of the US military: because it can never be sure exactly what the nation will ask of it, it must be prepared to perform a wide range of tasks well. It must be able to transform itself from Retriever to Rottweiler, and back again, quickly and seamlessly.

As an institution, the Army is not averse to introspection and self-analysis. But like all institutions, it is susceptible to the pathologies that stem from cognitive bias and sensitivity to criticism. At one moment senior leaders may ignore that which is painful; the next moment they may over-react to it. Similarly, they may miss moments of success that deserve capture and amplification. At present, the Army seems to be in

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a phase not dissimilar to the one it entered after Vietnam: it does not study the hard problems and failures deeply enough, and it overlooks and forgets the things that deserve positive acknowledgment and reinforcement. As the Army works through its own analyses of the long wars, and responds to external critiques, it must discern which problems were internal, which were external, and which emerged due to frictions and pathologies along the ever-challenging civil-military fault line. While the Army must understand and take responsibility for the ways it contributed to unsatisfactory outcomes, its leaders must recognize these failings were located inside a broader national security framework that must be addressed comprehensively. Simply put, the Army operates within a civil-military system in which *both* parties are responsible for failure and success.

One can hardly argue, for instance, the flawed assumptions embedded in the Bush 43 decision for regime change in Iraq in 2003 stemmed principally from a failure of strategic thinking inside the Army. One can *and should* argue senior Army officers might have found more effective ways to ask probing questions about the direction of events, and about the theory of victory operative in the minds of those who were driving the decision for war. But it is not clear such questions, even if done energetically and fully within the bounds of civil-military norms, would have changed administration behavior. By virtue of the system of representative government in place in the United States, civilians have “a right to be wrong.”<sup>1</sup> Flawed assumptions always reveal themselves in war, though, and in this case the consequences landed in the lap of the Army. The institution had two obligations at that moment: 1) refrain from making things any worse, and 2) locate sound operating assumptions—or as Clausewitz counseled, figure out the kind of war you are actually fighting—to create a way forward.

With respect to the first point, the Army clearly failed to make a graceful transition from major combat operations to security operations. It’s painfully obvious now that knocking down doors and unnecessary roughness helped alienate the Iraqi civilian population.<sup>2</sup> Abandoning its own professional principles, the Army mistreated prisoners of war, and, in places like Abu Ghraib and Camp Bucca, generated resentments that helped fuel the early development of groups like ISIL. Pressure from outside institutions had much to do with this breakdown of norms, but many of the problems stemmed from a failure to anticipate fully and clearly the post-combat phases of the campaign. In this realm, the Army has some important things to answer for. With respect to the second point, one can legitimately argue it took the Army too long to see the situation for what it was, and then find a way forward. The institution ought to examine this crucial moment closely to determine what it reveals about its own organizational instincts, proclivities, culture, and vulnerabilities.

Following a civilian intervention in 2006-7, however, things began to change. A new field commander in Iraq, aided by a fresh assessment, opened a new avenue. While success stemmed centrally from a change

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1 This useful phrase was coined in Peter Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

2 This is a key theme in Thomas Ricks’ penetrating critique, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2003-2005* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

in the attitude of Sunni insurgents, progress was aided and abetted by senior Army leaders who now had a far clearer grasp of the situation, and were thus in a position to address it in an effective manner. In many ways Iraq was a brigade commanders' fight: the battle varied from location to location, and leadership varied from location to location. But it is hardly too much to say the Army pulled itself upward, and managed to help turn around a situation that by 2005-6 had become quite relentlessly grim.

Success rested in large part on enlightened and powerful civil-military cooperation in the form of the Petraeus-Crocker team. (One could hardly anticipate a good outcome in a situation so deeply political as Iraq except as a result of highly-functional civil-military interaction.) Success rested, too, on a heavy lift by the Army—an extraordinary effort realized by immense energy and sacrifice. Here the Army deserves both credit and respect. And here the Army ought to examine, closely, the ingredients of its success: To what degree did Army institutional culture facilitate progress, and to what degree did it inhibit it? How did solutions move from the field to higher headquarters? Is the Petraeus-Crocker model one that can be mimicked in other situations, or was it *sui generis*? If the former, how can a foundation be laid for it in future scenarios?

Once this fragile success was attained, however, it was not consolidated: US decision-makers failed to utilize fully the coercive leverage they had over the situation. And once Petraeus and Crocker departed the scene, momentum was lost, and Iraq fell into a kind of benign neglect that culminated in a too early-withdrawal of American influence and troops—a fact that allowed Nouri al-Maliki to create conditions that drove the Sunnis back into opposition, this time in an even more virulent way.

This fumbling of the ball on the two-yard line should not be laid at the feet of the Army. As was the case in 2002-3, one can and should ask why senior Army officers were not more aggressive in warning the second Bush 43 administration, and the new Obama administration, that the situation in Iraq was now back on a very dangerous path. But, here too, even if Army officers had done this—and even if they had executed it perfectly within acceptable civil-military norms—it is not clear they could have shifted either administration on to a different path.

One could walk through a similar analysis of the war in Afghanistan, but space precludes it here. The point is simply if the Army is to understand the long wars (and benefit from such an understanding), its leaders and educators must comprehend realms of authority and responsibility—in particular how they were shared by civilian and military decision makers. When critics charge that senior Army officers lack skills in strategic thinking, what they often mean is they lack skills in effective communication with civilian decision-makers. Army senior leaders (and those who educate them) must ask themselves: How do officers raise difficult and demanding questions without challenging civilian authority? How do they register dissenting views respectfully but persistently, and in ways that do not undermine civilian control? How do they know when to abandon a strategy (or simply a course of action) that is not working? How do senior officers craft clear-headed and sophisticated professional military advice, and pose options that convey what is feasible with the resources available, and what is not? And how do senior

officers prepare the Army to cope with what may ensue if their advice is declined or ignored?

Senior military leaders *and* senior civilian leaders have an obligation to develop a textured understanding of how, when, and why strategy goes awry—in particular within the context of civil-military communication. Within the Army this topic tends to be marginalized and given relatively short shrift in comparison to the attention given to tactical and operational issues. But quite a few recent analyses have told Army leaders their emphasis on tactics/operations is costly, particularly in the complex environment of the 21st century. The critique is beginning to take hold; in particular, the Army is recognizing that both education and broadening assignments are essential to the development of officers who will be comfortable working within the complicated US national security complex. And it recognizes its overriding emphasis on tactics creates narrow career paths that often preclude exactly the kind of educational and broadening experiences needed most by senior officers. But change on this front is non-trivial since it cuts against long-standing institutional behavior and culture.

That culture is not irrational. There are reasons why the contemporary US Army became tactically-oriented.<sup>3</sup> First, modern combined arms is a tremendously complex and difficult realm (indeed, only a handful of militaries in history have mastered it fully), and the Army is highly-resistant to taking risk in this realm. After all, tactical failure is obvious, embarrassing, and potentially very costly. Tactical proficiency also serves as something of a hedge against civilian dithering or underfunding—and also against the small size of the Army relative to the jobs it is sometimes handed. Senior officers realized once the United States abandoned the draft and then moved the Army to an all-volunteer status, second chances and do-overs would be rare in wartime. (This was in stark contrast, for instance, to the Second World War where serial setbacks on multiple fronts were made good by a wealth of resources, both human and material.)

The Army is, moreover, an institution that must make extensive and constant personnel choices. This drives it to look for skills and qualifications that can be readily measured. At the National Training Center, a young officer's tactical ability is made abundantly clear. Much less clear is that same officer's potential to function with high efficiency in a complicated COIN or hybrid war-fighting environment, or his/her ability to convey to civilian masters the strengths and limits of military force as a coercive instrument in a given situation. And, of course, once an institutional culture is established, it can be hard to alter. Senior officers, who control promotion processes, are naturally inclined to promote those who look most like themselves.

An army that is tactically weak is of no use to anyone. Thus, the US Army must find a way to maintain its tactical and operational prowess even as it strengthens and emphasizes strategic-level skills. The US Army War College (and indeed all US senior service colleges) are alive to this challenge and have taken steps to address pressing concerns about the

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3 It is also planning-oriented – and for good reason. To accomplish anything at all, an organization as complex as the Army must have expert planning skills. But planning should not dominate all else.

tactics-strategy imbalance. But the USAWC's resident program is only ten months long; its work must therefore be part of a broader, Army-wide commitment to encouraging all that is required for success at the strategic level, including highly-developed critical thinking skills, outstanding oral and written communications, and a sophisticated understanding of the outlook, proclivities, and behavior of senior civilian leaders.

This will require some cultural shifts, some breaking of old patterns, and some limited (and, I believe, short-term) risk. Opportunities for officer education outside the Army—especially for advanced degrees like MAs, MBAs, and PhDs from civilian universities—must *not* be seen as diversions from the “warrior path.” Instead, they should be regarded as welcome opportunities to enhance crucial skill sets and build comfort (and contacts) in the civilian world. Unconventional assignments—serving as a defense attaché, working with the UN, or teaching in a PME setting—ought not to be seen as career killers but as career enhancers. Right now the Army punishes people for doing the very things they need to do in order to acquire the abilities the Army is convinced it needs.

Mimicking a program the US Air Force has used successfully in the past, the Army should consistently rotate its brightest captains into the Pentagon for short but active tours that expose them to the Washington national security environment. Along with their work in the building, they should attend talks and conferences at think tanks, observe Congressional testimony, and study civil-military relations in crisis and war.

The Army should bolster its educational programs at the one-, two-, and three-star levels. Such programs need not be lengthy, but they should be intensely focused on the civil-military skills needed badly at those ranks. The Army ought to plunge its general officers into several week- or fortnight-long examinations of crucial case studies from the past record of strategic decision-making. Since they dive deeply into complex events, case studies led by scholars and policymakers can help students understand the kinds of environments they may face in the future, and enable students to hone their critical thinking skills by closely observing and critiquing *the actual language* of civil-military discourse.

Finally, the Army ought to leverage its highest ranking leaders fully when it comes to general officer education. This might include asking retired General Dempsey to talk about what it is like to testify before Congress; asking retired General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker to talk together about how they managed to work as a team; and asking retired Generals McChrystal, McKiernan, and Barno to talk about their work in Afghanistan. Finally, the Army should bring in senior officers from other countries to talk frankly about the frustrations of dealing with Americans.

These steps, which are easy to implement, might well have an immediately beneficial impact—one disproportionate to what they would require in time and money.

