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A War Examined: Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2003

A Discussion With Kevin Benson, COL (USA Retired)

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Describe your background and your key duties and responsibilities in OIF.

Benson: I started my Army career as an Armor/Cavalry officer and served in tank battalions, divisional cavalry squadrons and a cavalry regiment. I also served as a planner at the corps and army level. My key duty and responsibility during the opening stage of Operation Iraqi Freedom was serving as the C/J-5 of the Combined Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC). As such, I coordinated the development of the CFLCC major operations plan COBRA II, our initial plan for the invasion, and ECLIPSE II, our sequel plan for post-hostilities operations. Having thought about war for a long time, and reflecting on my experience at war, I believe professionals must recognize two key points: (1) before taking the decision to use force we have to advance the discussion of military requirements AND policy guidance so all parties understand what we are doing, and (2) we military professionals must ALWAYS bear in mind that political and policy conditions are going to change in the duration of a campaign. We must keep this in mind because policy will change and war, being an instrument of policy, must match the objectives of policy. The political object is the real motive for war and thus will determine the amount of effort needed to attain the objective.

What kind of policy guidance did you receive, and what were the main sources of your guidance?

Benson: I worked for two CFLCC commanding generals: LTG P. T. Mikolashek and LTG David McKiernan. LTG Mikolashek's guidance and mine flowed from the Office of the Secretary of Defense through US Central Command (CENTCOM) and GEN Franks. Mikolashek initially offered the base war plan for the invasion of Iraq, the so-called standing start plan. It was immediately pooh-pooed as "old think" by Secretary Rumsfeld. This plan was first developed in the aftermath of the first Gulf War envisioning a long build-up of forces followed by the invasion. Mikolashek was leaving command as we were developing the rudiments of the so-called "running start" plan. This plan envisioned starting the invasion with a minimal force and then deploying forces as needed. The next plan was termed the "hybrid" plan. It reflected an effort by all ground component officers, Army and Marine, to increase forces on the ground before the start of the war and continue the deployment/employment cycle of the remainder of the apportioned forces.

The policy objectives at the start of the Iraq war were plainly stated in the Central Command campaign plan, 1003V. They were: a stable Iraq, with its territorial integrity intact; a broad-based government that renounces weapons of mass destruction (WMD) development and use, and no longer supports terrorism or threatens its neighbors; and success

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in Iraq leveraged to convince or compel other countries to cease support to terrorists and to deny them access to WMD.

The military objectives were to: destabilize, isolate, and overthrow the Iraqi regime and provide support to a new, broad-based government; destroy Iraqi WMD capability and infrastructure; protect allies and supporters from Iraqi threats and attacks; destroy terrorist networks in Iraq; gather intelligence on global terrorism; detain terrorists and war criminals and free individuals unjustly detained under the Iraqi regime; and support international efforts to set conditions for long-term stability in Iraq and the region. We used these objectives to develop our campaign and major operations plans. My duties during the development and execution of our plans encompassed more than directing, planning, and reviewing written products.

LTG McKiernan took command of CFLCC in September of 2002; however, our policy and military guidance remained unchanged. What was in flux, almost until D-Day, was the number of forces we would have to execute the plan.

How often did the guidance change, and how did you adjust your battle rhythm to accommodate such changes?

Benson: The best way to answer this is to say the ends of the policy/strategy did not change. We faced a constant tension regarding the means in terms of how many troops we would be allowed for execution. For example, in February of 2003, right around the time GEN Shinseki offered his answer regarding the number of troops required for an occupation of Iraq, we began to receive inquiries from staff officers within the Office of the Secretary of Defense concerning “off-ramps.” The off-ramps were specifically directed at not deploying Army divisions to the theater. We had not yet started the campaign and we were engaged in justifying the necessity of follow-on forces.

As another part of my duties during execution of 1003V and our plan, COBRA II, I participated in the daily secure video-teleconferences (SVTC) with the Secretary of Defense and his senior staff. These sessions produced lots of sound and occasional fury as different people spoke, usually after Mr. Rumsfeld left the room. For example, on 24 March 2003, after an explanation by LTG John Abizaid, of how the coalition would deal with Ba’ath party members, Douglas Feith stated that “de-Baathification” was the policy of the US government. He actually thumped on the table to emphasize his point. He went on to say that mere party membership was not an automatic disqualifier for future work in the new Iraqi government. This was counter to my understanding of the guidance given during planning by Abizaid to the people on the SVTC. During the conference and immediately afterwards, I asked for clarification of this (to me) just announced “policy.” I never got a response. Policy confusion did not end with this one secure video-teleconference.¹

¹ This paragraph is based on the personal journal I kept while serving as the C/J 5 of the Combined Forces Land Component Command, entry dated 24 March 2002, and hereafter cited as Journal with the associated date.

How did you decide between conflicting policy aims?

Benson: I do not wish to appear taking on too much for myself. I was charged with the continued refinement of my commanding general's plan while he was engaged with the oversight of execution. As best as I can recall, the circumstances of the battlefield dictated which way to go regarding conflicting policy aims. To return to "de-Baathification," since no one either amplified or clarified Feith's "policy" announcement, we continued with our work. In mid-May 2003, we received a visit from Mr. Walt Slocombe, the Coalition Provisional Authority's senior representative in the post-Saddam Iraqi Ministry of Defense. On 18 May 2003, we presented a briefing to Slocombe on the proposal for the establishment of what we were calling the New Iraqi Corps (NIC). LTG McKiernan's guidance to me and the planners, based on what he knew Slocombe was bringing with him from Washington, was to bear in mind two what he termed "principles": (1) nobody above the rank of LTC will be allowed into NIC, and (2) no reestablishment of any Ministry of Defense organization in the near term. Reestablishing the Iraqi army would require a grass-roots, bottom-up approach. Slocombe would listen to McKiernan's input regarding the use of former Iraqi army general officers and determine if they could serve as advisors in the process. I was to consider the effect these two principles would have on recruitment, additional anti-coalition effects such as continued armed opposition by former regime loyalists, and finding leadership for the NIC. The outcome of the briefing was not quite what we anticipated.²

Slocombe listened to our presentation very closely. Near the end, I asked if we were still acting in accord with policy since we had based our planning on the assumption that we could recall the regular Iraqi army. I asked this twice during the presentation. Slocombe's answer was, "Thanks for the briefing Colonel." Thus, when Slocombe left, we were still unsure of where our operations to reestablish the Iraqi Army stood vis-à-vis US policy. Later, Ambassador Bremer, acting essentially as pro-consul in Iraq, disbanded the Iraqi army and prohibited anyone who held Ba'ath party membership from joining the new Iraqi government. This made execution of our existing plan problematic, to say the least.

How well did your professional military education prepare you for your role as a planner?

Benson: On the surface one would expect that, since I was a Command and General Staff College (CGSC) and School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) graduate, a graduate of a US Army War College Fellowship at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Security Studies Program, that my education, as well as my post SAMS experience as a planner, was the best preparation possible to serve as the chief planner for a land component. I certainly did not want to "take counsel of my fears." On the other hand, this was my very first, and only, war experience. I was conscious of that as well. On the whole, my formal professional military education and my personal continuing studies prepared me for the start of the war planning. I adapted afterward and that, too, was aided by the totality of my preparation.

² Journal, entries dated 18 and 25 May 2002.

Were the types of forces you had on hand sufficient and the right kind?

Benson: The entire apportioned force was the correct force to serve as an “instrument of policy.” The joint combined arms team was appropriate to execute the invasion successfully and, I believe, conclude the campaign through phase IV. We had an entire Marine Expeditionary Force and a US Army Corps of six divisions and two cavalry regiments as well as appropriate combat support and combat service support forces. This was the apportioned force. It is a moot point, of course, but we will never know if committing the entire apportioned force for the expected 125 days of our so-called phase III followed by six months to a year of phase IV would have ended with a different result.

What words of advice would you offer to other war planners?

Benson: While professional soldiers study war, in the 21st century they must also study policymaking. Soldiers and policymakers cannot afford the risk of talking past each other as happened during the Iraq war. This is more likely now than in our history because policy elites and professional soldiers seem increasingly to come from widely disparate backgrounds.³ Professional soldiers and professional policymakers should accept that they approach the problems of strategy from dramatically different perspectives. This phenomenon is clearly not associated with one or another party. Military professionals must understand the domestic and foreign pressures on the development of policy. Soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen should take the first and longest step to close the gap and reconcile perspectives. To quote Clausewitz, “To bring a war, or one of its campaigns to a successful close requires a thorough grasp of national policy. On that level strategy and policy coalesce.”⁴

The end result of spending a year at CGSC, SAMS, and the War College should be a broader view of the circumstances of war and a shared understanding of that phenomenon. A personal theory of war is useless. What we absolutely require is a shared understanding that enables the development and execution of strategy, operational, and tactical plans. Professional officers must understand the influence of history and the interpretation of history through the lens of a theory of warfare on the evolution of Army and Joint doctrine as well as on the relevant policy for which war is waged. This knowledge will enable individual agility of mind required to adapt to the changing conditions of war. This is the essence of the art of strategy.

The US armed forces concluded the Iraq war in a manner that must be considered a victory: never defeated in battle, accomplished objectives that led to attaining the policy goal of delivering the security challenge to the Iraqis; and departing in accord with a nation-to-nation

3 For example, see James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Penguin, 2004); John Heilemann and Mark Halperin, *Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2010); Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007); Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013); and any of the books written by Bob Woodward.

4 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 111

agreement in December 2011. This is something never done before in that region of the world—an Army leaving in accord with a treaty and not remaining indefinitely as an occupying power.

My war experience was primarily at the operational level of war and in operational level headquarters. My military and professional education, coupled with my experience, confirmed for me the purpose of the operational headquarters is to translate the tasks of policy and strategy into attainable tactical tasks. I am also convinced tactics without strategy is noise before defeat.⁵ Regardless how one defines strategy and policy, understanding the interrelationship of those two concepts and the role played by the operational level commander and staff is important. Of equal importance is an understanding of how strategy is designed, shaped, and adapted over the course of a campaign, all while maintaining an eye on accomplishing the initial purpose of the war.⁶

5 Attributed to Sun Tzu, this quotation is not in “The Art of War.”

6 This essay was based on an opinion essay I wrote, “An Iraq War Planner Reflects on Lessons Learned,” published at *Time.com* on 1 April 2013. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Greg Fontenot, COL (USA Retired), Professor Steve Lauer, LTC (USMC Retired), and my wife Kate Benson in the development of this essay.

