LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE IRAQ AND AFGHAN WARS

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Our book Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War was produced in response to two questions from General Martin Dempsey, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs: what were the costs and benefits of the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, and what were the strategic lessons of these campaigns. The National Defense University’s Institute of National Strategic Studies was tasked to answer them and publish the results within a year. The resulting collection of essays is intended for senior officers, their senior staffs, and the students in Joint Professional Military Education courses, the future leaders of the Armed Forces, as well as the larger community of national security professionals and interested citizens.

This edited volume begins with an introduction that addresses the difficulty of learning strategic lessons and previews the major lessons identified (and only possibly learned) in the study. The first chapter by Collins analyzes the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq from their initiation to the onset of the U.S. Surge in both campaigns. Frank Hoffman and Alexander Crowther then turn to the Surge in both campaigns as a test of assessment and adaptation. The next and longest chapter by Christopher Lamb with Megan Franco dives deeply into decision-making, implementation, and unity of effort. T.X. Hammes analyzes the all-important issue of raising and mentoring indigenous security forces, the basis for the U.S. exit strategy in both campaigns. Nicholas Rostow and Harvey Rishikof address legal issues that range from detention to the use of unmanned aerial vehicles. The final chapter by Hooker and Collins analyzes costs and benefits, dissects decision-making in both campaigns, and summarizes the lessons encountered. Supporting the text are three annexes: one by Sara Thannhauser and Christoff Luehrs on the human and financial costs of the war, and two detailed timelines for the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The costs of these campaigns have been significant. The United States lost 6,837 Servicemembers, approximately 40 government civilian employees, and 3,212 contractor employees in Afghanistan and Iraq. In Afghanistan and Iraq, international coalition partners recorded 1,449 dead, 632 of whom were British soldiers. Over 52,000 US servicemembers and around 30,000 contractors were wounded in action or injured. Conservative estimates of the death toll among host-nation civilians and security forces range from 180,000 to almost 230,000. In terms of direct financial costs, the United States has spent at least $1.6 trillion dollars on the wars with more inclusive estimates reaching almost three times that number. By any calculation, the war on terrorism, led by the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan has surpassed Vietnam as America’s second most expensive war.

Operations are ongoing and a more accurate reckoning will have to wait for a later date. At present, one may note that the war in Iraq, once concluded, has begun again, this time against ISIS, a self-proclaimed state with ambitions to be a caliphate. Iran has grown in power vis a vis Iraq and its neighbors. The fighting in Afghanistan continues. A stable Afghan government commands Afghan forces, who fight on in their third fighting season without U.S. ground combat forces. While much of the original al Qaeda organization has been destroyed, extremist franchises operate in many countries. A geo-strategic balance
sheet must await more stable outcomes in both theaters.

The lessons encountered in Afghanistan and Iraq on the strategic level inform our understanding of national security decision-making, intelligence, the character of contemporary conflict, and unity of effort and command, and security force assistance. There are no “cookie cutter” strategic lessons that can be pressed onto any new batch of situational dough. Lessons have to be applied in context-dependent settings. Herewith are the lessons encountered in our study.

**National Security Decision-Making**

Military participation in national decision-making is both necessary and problematic. Part of this comes from normal civil-military tension, but many instances in the Long War also show unnecessary misunderstandings. Civilian national security decision-makers need a better understanding of the complexity of military strategy and the military’s need for planning guidance. Senior military officers for their part require a deep understanding of the interagency decision-making process, an appreciation and a willingness to embrace, and not resist, the complexities and challenges inherent in our system of civilian control. As noted by General John Allen, USMC ret., both civilian and military planners should cultivate the art of backward planning, starting with the desired political end-state and working back toward the present.

Best military advice should be provided without fear or favor, but always nested within a larger appreciation of the strategic context and its political, economic, diplomatic, and informational dimensions. As General Lloyd Austin put it when interviewed for this study, “We have a sacred responsibility to provide best military advice. If we fail, we concede that right.”

Generals and admirals have mastered Service and joint warfighting, but at the most senior levels, other attributes are necessary: interagency acumen, media savvy, a detailed understanding of congressional relations and the defense planning, programming, and budgeting system, and skill in multinational environments. Normal career development patterns do not always provide opportunities to build these competencies. In a number of the examples discussed in this volume, gaps in these skill sets contributed to poor outcomes that might have been prevented.

At its core, strategy is all about making hard decisions, potentially raising issues of great moral or ethical significance. While the ultimate power of decision rests firmly in civilian hands, senior military officials have a duty to support effective and successful policy and strategy and to offer their best military advice and, if necessary, respectful dissent to help preclude strategic failure. Senior military planners must pay more attention to the linkage between political and military objectives. Civil and military planning for post-conflict stability operations was inadequate. Poor post-conflict planning set back operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Policy and strategy are highly sensitive to budget, election, and news cycles. The health of the Nation’s economy is also a key factor. Career military officers are not always attuned to these realities, but civilian decision-makers are.

**Unity of Effort/Unity of Command**

The best strategic decisions exemplify unity of command on the military side and unity of effort in all areas. The campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq suffered from significant problems in this regard, both in the military and the interagency aspects of the operations.

The United States was often unable to knit its vast interagency capabilities together for best effect. The implementation of national decisions by various agencies and departments was a continuing problem for senior officials. The inability to integrate, direct, prioritize, and apply capabilities in the optimal manner diminished success as much as any faulty strategy or campaign plan. The converse is also true: our greatest successes were those pockets of interagency collaboration stimulated by innovative leaders.

Unity of command is a time-proven American tradition that has been applied to great effect in the Civil War, World War I, and World War II. This principle, however, seems to have been bypassed in the development of disjointed command and control structures in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, General David Petraeus noted that we did not get the strategy and command and control architecture right in Afghanistan until 2010. Creating unity of command within large coalitions will remain a high point of military art.

Continuous monitoring of strategy implementation is part of the portfolio of the National Security Council, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, and field commanders. U.S. departments and agencies must work closely early on to develop performance metrics and use them consistently over time to manage the conflict. Honest periodic reassessments should be meticulously planned and ruthlessly executed.
Intelligence and Understanding the Operational Environment

Neither national nor military intelligence in Iraq and Afghanistan was a success in supporting decision-makers. Intelligence on Afghanistan itself was initially scant and not actionable. In Iraq, pre-war intelligence was wrong about weapons of mass destruction, the Iraqi police, and the state of Iraqi infrastructure. U.S. forces had little information on tribal dynamics and the potential role of Iran. In both wars, U.S. intelligence failed in telling battlespace owners about the people whom they were protecting. The effects of these shortcomings were grave.

The biggest advances in intelligence came in improved support for the warfighter at the tactical level, and the intimate relationship that developed between special operations forces and all-source intelligence.

Neither national-level figures nor field commanders fully understood the operational environment, including the human aspects of military operations. To fight, in Rupert Smith’s term, war among the people, one must first understand them. We were not intellectually prepared for the unique aspects of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Understanding the operational environment calls for a whole array of fixes, such as improving language training, pre-deployment training, fostering area expertise, and reforming the intelligence/information organizations. There can be no substitute for excellent joint professional military education, reinforce by dedicated self-study by career officers and non-commissioned officers. For senior officers and advisors, every dollar spent on civilian graduate education in policy sciences and history is returned many times over.

U.S. leaders must also know themselves and the social, political, and systemic constraints that will impact the ability to respond well to the threat. If we ask more than the public and its representatives in Congress can bear or the national security system can provide, our ability to counter the threat will be handicapped. Even in those cases, political support for policy or strategy in war is short-lived and can be extended only by success.

In the same vein, future senior officers and policymakers must understand constitutional, domestic legal, and international legal norms. To address legal norms and intelligence-gathering, planning for military operations must include detention planning. Policymakers and joint force commanders must sort out the complex legal and practical issues in advance of arrival in the country in question.

Character of Contemporary Conflict

The analysis of these two campaigns reinforced a number of lessons about the nature of war and the character of contemporary conflict. Again, few of these lessons are new. When conventional warfare or logistical skills were called for in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Armed Forces generally achieved excellent results. At the same time, the military was insensitive to needs of the post-conflict environment and not prepared well for insurgency in either country. Our lack of preparation for dealing with irregular conflicts was the result of a post-Vietnam organizational blindspot. Military performance improved over time. In-deed, field-level innovation on counterinsurgency showed an admirable capacity for learning and innovation. Furthermore, the development of Army and Marine Corps doctrine on counterinsurgency and the inculcation of the doctrine into the force was an excellent example of systemic adaptation. The doctrine for counterinsurgency and stability operations needs revision, and this work is well under way.

In a similar manner, with great fits and starts and a great deal of managerial attention, the acquisition system of the Department of Defense was able to create, field, and deploy the equipment needed to turn the military we had into the military we needed. Long-term planning in the Services for future wars can retard warfighting adaptations in the near term. The speed of battlefield learning was admirable, and the speed of technological innovation in this war was satisfactory.

A prudent great power should avoid being a third party in a large-scale counterinsurgency effort. Foreign expeditionary forces in another country’s insurgency have almost always failed. Exceptions to this rule came only where the foreign expeditionary force controlled the government and did not have to contend with insurgents who possessed secure sanctuaries. At the same time, it should also be remembered that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan did not begin as insurgencies, but evolved in that direction. The Armed Forces must be ready for combat across the spectrum of conflict, and irregular wars on the low end of the spectrum will remain the most frequent form of conflict that they encounter. Another salient issue in irregular conflicts is the question of sanctuary.

Wars that involve regime change are likely to be protracted conflicts. They require a substantial, patient, and prudent international effort to bring stability and foster reconstruction, especially in the wake of weak, corrupt, or failed states. These exercises in armed nation-building are complex, uncertain, and, with the passing of time, increasingly unpopular in the United States. In the often used words of General Petraeus, progress in such conflicts will be “fragile and reversible.” Nevertheless,
regime change and long-duration stability operations will at times be necessary.

Long and complex conflicts are likely to be coalition efforts, which lend legitimacy and ease manpower and material requirements. Coalitions also confound unity of command and may hurt unity of effort. On balance, sound coalitions of the willing contribute more to success than they detract from it.

In a counterinsurgency, success will depend in part on the political development of the host government, whose weakness, corruption, and ineffectiveness are ironically an important factor in the development of the insurgency. There are few assets in the State Department or USAID inventory to mentor and assist a host government in political development. In collateral areas, such as humanitarian assistance, development, rule of law, and reconstruction, State and USAID have more assets, but far fewer than large-scale contingencies require. Ideally, the United States should have a civilian response corps, but the urge to develop whole-of-government capabilities is waning.

Strategic communications was a weak point in our performance in Washington, DC, and in the field. Making friends, allies, and locals understand our intent has proved difficult. At times, the situation on the ground will block good messaging. However, our disabilities in this area—partly caused by too much bureaucracy and too little empathy—stand in contradistinction to the ability of clever enemies to package their message and beat us at a game that was perfected in Hollywood and on Madison Avenue. This is not a psychological operation or public affairs issue. Strategic communications is a vital task for commanders and senior policymakers at every level.

Security Force Assistance

Security force assistance—especially the building of indigenous police and military forces—is a key strategic activity, which in Iraq and Afghanistan was the centerpiece of the coalition exit strategy. It was also an area where successes followed a painful process of trial and error, and coalition approaches were often mismatched with the local population and circumstances.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States developed host-nation ministries and military forces modeled on Western institutions and structures. In Iraq, initial efforts focused on creating an army to defend the country from external enemies. In Afghanistan, the decision to focus on a national army and police force, albeit at the insistence of the government of Afghanistan, increased tensions with local tribes and ethnic groups.

Whenever possible, U.S. forces should be placed in a supporting role to the host nation. U.S. assistance should usually be framed, in the words of General Dempsey as “transactional” and “conditional,” based on shared objectives and situational variables. Where possible, the host nation must take ownership of the training effort and associated architecture.

Improving our ability to teach others to defeat an insurgency or terrorists is likely the key to future U.S. participation in irregular conflicts. U.S. advisors can only train what they know. Before they deploy, advisors must be educated culturally and politically to organize ministries and/or train forces that fit the operational environment and local needs. Except for the special operations forces, the United States is not well organized to accomplish this mission.

In conclusion, this book is an assessment of two unfinished campaigns, written for future senior officers, their key advisors, and other national security professionals. The lessons identified here emerged from a study rich in strategic context and immediate circumstances. Any application of these lessons must be done with an understanding of the situational context, particular circumstances, and the mission at hand. Learning strategic lessons will be difficult but not impossible. In the future, the national interest and the lives of our men and women in uniform will be hostage to how well we have learned and institutionalized them.