



Learning under Fire: The US Military, Dissent and Organizational Learning Post-9/11



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ABSTRACT

After initial successes, the US military suffered many painful years in Afghanistan and Iraq before undertaking the most significant retooling of any military while in active combat since the German Army in 1917. The change to a counterinsurgency posture was catalyzed by a combination of junior leadership responding to the tactical problems that confronted them and senior institutional dissidents driving deep, controversial changes in doctrine and culture to meet the new requirements. Both components were necessary, but neither was sufficient on its own. They were the product of an institutional culture that strove to be self-learning, with varying levels of success. Specific recommendations recognize, preserve, and advance this dynamic in anticipation of future requirements for rapid change in response to the next conflict.

Learning under Fire: The US Military, Dissent and Organizational Learning Post-9/11*

*Philipp Rotmann, David Tohn, and Jaron Wharton***

In one of the exchanges during a town-hall-style meeting, Specialist Thomas Wilson complained that he and his comrades were rooting through Kuwaiti junkyards to find improvised armor for their military vehicles to protect against bomb blasts and small-arms attacks.

"A lot of us are getting ready to move north relatively soon . . . Our vehicles are not armored. We're digging pieces of rusted scrap metal and compromised ballistic glass that's already been shot up . . . picking the best out of this scrap to put on our vehicles to take into combat. We do not have proper . . . vehicles to carry with us north."

[Secretary of Defense] Rumsfeld replied: "As you know, you go to war with the Army you have. They're not the Army you might want or wish to have at a later time."¹

Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld was absolutely correct in his assessment of the basic physics of building, training, and fielding a combat force for war. But his exchange with Specialist Wilson is most-telling; it captures the fundamental dilemma of any military during an inter-war period – are you preparing to fight the next war, or the last war? It also begs the question: *How - and how well - did the U.S. military adapt over the course of the war to become “the Army [we] wish to have?”*

After September 11th, the U.S. went to war with exactly the military it wanted; it planned to fight the war based on that military’s strengths. The U.S. military that crossed the Kuwait-Iraq border in March of 2003 was the product of the past three decades of

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evolution, validated and accelerated by the unprecedented success of Operation Desert Storm. It was a military optimized to bring to bear all of the strengths of high-tech, advanced maneuver warfare that the American military establishment had mastered without equal. The equipment was state of the art and beyond, the training was the most-advanced in the world, the doctrine was the most mature and integrated it has ever been, and the Soldiers, Airmen, Marines, and Sailors the most capable in the U.S.'s history. Less than two years after the rapid overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the march to Baghdad was the fastest and farthest any military had ever conquered in the history of military operations.²

However, the second half of Secretary Rumsfeld's response is critical – “or wish to have at a later time.” The U.S. and Coalition quickly found itself in an unconventional war almost entirely unlike what it had prepared for and mastered. The world's most advanced battle tank was not designed nor were the crews trained to repel “boarders” - Fedayeen irregular fighters swarming the armored columns. The world's most advanced intelligence and surveillance systems could find a single enemy tank from hundreds or thousands of miles away, but could not determine if the ambulance racing up the street was filled with injured Iraqis or insurgents strapped with hundreds of pounds of explosives. Humvees that could cover hundreds of miles of open desert could not withstand even the most crudely designed roadside bombs. And almost without exception, the world's most capable infantryman had almost no training or experience in administering a small town in the aftermath of the collapse of the local and national government.

The transformation of the nature of the war in Iraq echoed the necessary transformation of America's understanding of its enduring threat. No longer a purely conventional threat, the U.S. military came to understand that the enduring mission included significant and sustained counterinsurgency operations. So, while the story of Afghanistan and Iraq is a complex, multi-faceted drama at the national and international policy level, it is also the story of how the U.S. military undertook one of the most comprehensive retooling of a force while in the midst of an active war since the German Army in 1917.

This retooling on the fly, as it were, is a remarkable institutional accomplishment. Specifically, it took the convergence of two distinct, but interconnected dynamics to force the US military to rapidly adapt to its new reality: a proactive cadre of junior leadership working hard to solve immediate problems that the institutional military had failed to foresee or adequately address in a timely manner; coupled with a cadre of senior institutional dissidents who shared the same critique of the institution drawn from their own observations and the echoes of the junior cadre's complaints. Neither one of these dynamics was sufficient itself to force lasting institutional change at the most basic cultural levels – it took activism from both ends of the leadership spectrum to force the middle to change. In other words, both dynamics were necessary, but neither was sufficient. The result is a fundamentally reshaped military, particularly the ground forces of the Army and Marines, that is widely credited with making a critical contribution, at the very least, to the improvement of the security situation in Iraq since 2007.

This story may also hint at some key principles for any organization that strives to be a self-learning organization during times of great internal and external stress. The two active ingredients that overcame institutional inertia, a proactive and empowered junior cadre and a dissident senior cadre, were the happy coincident of leader development and institutional culture colliding with dire requirements born of war. That the military enjoyed this dual phenomenon at exactly the time and place it was needed was as much an accident as a deliberate result of its institutional design for leader development institutional self-learning.

So if the premise that either dynamic is necessary but not sufficient is accepted, the question on the table is: can an organization systemically nurture these cadres without causing dysfunctional disruptions? And since a degree of cultural and procedural consistency, inertia, and measured change is critical for any large organization to sustain over time, can an organization create the processes to identify when the need for change is so great that it crosses the threshold for action?

The following pages start with a brief description of how the military entered the long war post 9-11 and its posture to conduct counterinsurgency operations. After initial successes in Iraq and Afghanistan, cracks and gaps in capability started to show, followed

by ad hoc fixes, and then the institutionalization of those changes as lessons *gathered* became lessons *learned*. The second section draws from these experiences some of the basic dynamics of leader development and enabling organizational change and offers considerations for fostering that self-learning dynamic into the future.

For the military, organizational success does not rest on mastering the basics of a current war, but on doing so while being prepared for the next war. But the basic truism holds that, no matter how well prepared a military is, the next war will be different than imagined; change on the fly will always be necessary. If this is so, organizational success must also include nurturing and protecting the critical ingredients for institutional change under duress.

The U.S. military before 9/11: hardly a learning organization

Before September 11th, the U.S. military's strengths and weaknesses, as well as the institutional constraints that would shape its ability to adapt in the years to come, were shaped most importantly by two legacies: the institutional response to the Vietnam War and, more recently, the collective infatuation with technology that was sold as the "Revolution in Military Affairs" (RMA). Together, they locked the institution into a strategic paradigm that was fundamentally unable to deal with the reality of irregular warfare.

The U.S. military's dominant institutional lesson from the Vietnam War was to never again engage in a prolonged war against irregular forces. Haunted by the memory of the gradual escalation of involvement in irregular warfare, a new generation of military leaders made it their first priority to limit the risk of sliding down that slippery slope. Unconventional warfare was seen as contrary to the American Way of War: "aggressive, direct, and focused on achieving decisive victory".³ The Weinberger-Powell Doctrine and decisions by Army leaders not to create counterinsurgency doctrine and to provide almost no training or specialized equipment for counterinsurgency operations have their origin in these institutional lessons of Vietnam.

Following the 1991 Iraq War, the Revolution in Military Affairs emerged from the universal awe at the power of technology combined with the strong domestic political demand for a “peace dividend.” Instead of fielding large and costly ground forces that might incur significant casualties, its advocates argued that high-tech sensors, weapons, and communications would allow U.S. forces to “find, fix, and destroy” the enemy at ranges and operational tempos never seen before in the history of warfare.⁴ By reducing ground forces (by 34 percent between 1987 and 1999⁵) and instead investing in modern technology, the military optimized its combat power against a conventional force in open, uncluttered and unambiguous terrain – a logical extension of the Desert Storm experience.

Air and naval forces followed similar paths, focusing on improved sensors, long-range precision strike, ubiquitous communications, and command and control. While creating a formidable toolbox that the military services would later draw on when called into combat in Operations Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Iraqi Freedom (OIF), the so-called “revolution” fundamentally failed in its ephemeral aim to change the character of warfare. Its basic flaw, as relatively low-tech terrorist and insurgent groups were about to prove, was the assumption that technological preponderance would give the United States exclusive choice over the terms and order of battle.

After September 11th, the military could no longer afford to treat its irregular warfare capabilities as an afterthought. Starting with the decision to destroy Al Qaeda and seek regime change in Afghanistan, the U.S. military found itself on an unconventional battlefield which required every element of the irregular warfare toolbox: direct strikes against terrorist cells and their infrastructure by special operations forces, building indigenous military forces from scratch, stabilization operations, and when those failed, two protracted counterinsurgency campaigns. Despite these manifold challenges on the battlefield, the military as an institution remained caught in its conventional warfare paradigm, from a procurement system in which priorities were locked in for a decade and longer to an organizational culture and senior officer promotion system designed to perpetuate the prevailing paradigm rather than encouraging dissent and innovation.

As a result, the U.S. military's capacity to learn and adapt at the operational and strategic level proved to be severely limited for several years into the war. Organizational learning in large military organizations requires a culture of independent thinking all the way down the chain of command, open communications across hierarchical barriers, a certain amount of space for questioning the institution's basic assumptions, and a process of drawing on decentralized and informally evolved tactics and rules in addition to centrally created concepts in doctrine development.⁶ The U.S. military's tradition of decision-making autonomy at the lower levels of command served it well in enabling rapid tactical adaptation and learning among small unit leaders. But despite elaborate procedures for after-action reviews, lessons learned studies, and many other bureaucratic instruments to channel organizational learning under the aegis of a whole "military learning bureaucracy," experience would show that the US military qualified only *in part* as a learning organization.

Early failures

The war opened in Afghanistan with the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom on October 7, 2001 with an unexpectedly quick and easy victory of the Afghan Northern Alliance against Taliban forces. This rapid success strengthened the position of the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, who had pushed for a lighter, more flexible doctrine than that advocated by many senior generals in the spirit of Weinberger-Powell. The invasion of Afghanistan in the winter of 2001 put Rumsfeld's vision into reality: the technological fruits of RMA enabled an unprecedented level of situational awareness and the devastating use of airpower, which allowed a very small number of U.S. forces on the ground to effectively support local allies who conducted the actual maneuver warfare.

From October to early December 2001, the Taliban were steadily driven out of key strongholds across the country. Still, the U.S. military did not deploy conventional ground forces on the scale required to effectively support counterterrorist operations against the Al Qaeda leadership themselves. Instead, they relied on tribal groups whose forces proved to be less than reliable when used to support the capture of Osama Bin

Laden and the Al Qaeda leadership. Tora Bora is the first place where these blind spots in Rumsfeld's vision revealed themselves. It showed how this "new" military was not nearly as ready for counterterrorism campaigns as it thought it was.

The Battle of Tora Bora in December 2001 turned out to be only a "half-victory" for the United States. U.S. forces and their allies took control of the cave complex in the White Mountains of eastern Afghanistan, but failed to capture both Osama bin Laden and Mullah Muhammed Omar, the leader of the Taliban. The main causes of the failure were an over-reliance on tribal chiefs, too few special operations troops on the ground initially, failure to employ more conventional troops, and intelligence and communication failures that were easily avoidable. More conventional troops could have set up blocking positions that could have overwhelmed those fleeing from the caves, potentially resulting in the capture of bin Laden and Omar.⁷ In short, operations and doctrine were inadequate on numerous levels.

In both operations, the military attempted to employ the capabilities and initial counterterrorism doctrine developed over the past decade. However, the heavy reliance on technology and air-power-enhanced small ground units proved insufficient to meet the unanticipated conditions during the battle. Unlike the support of largely conventional operations by the Northern Alliance against Taliban forces in the initial stage of the war, the effective support of counterterrorism operations required a more sophisticated, balanced application of people and technology than the RMA-powered military had brought to bear so far. The military had not changed enough over the previous decade.

Eighteen months after 9/11, another U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq and disposed of Saddam Hussein's regime, again with a surprisingly small footprint of conventional forces. Like in the initial assault against the Taliban, the U.S. military proved its unparalleled dominance in modern conventional warfare. But similar to the lack of effective, countrywide stabilization efforts in Afghanistan that provided a fertile ground for the resurgence of the Taliban after 2003, the U.S. military failed to prepare adequately for follow-on stabilization operations or counterinsurgency in Iraq. In the summer of 2003, after the U.S. government's radical "de-Baathification" and the wholesale disbandment of the Iraqi Army created a massive power vacuum throughout the country,

the U.S. military found itself unprepared in the midst of an irregular war fueled by former regime loyalists, foreign terrorists and homegrown insurgents overlaid with elements of civil war and organized crime. As early as May of 2003, a young officer observed in a timely research paper for the Army's School of Advanced Military Studies that the U.S. military "[did] not have a viable counterinsurgency doctrine, understood by all soldiers, or taught at service schools."⁸ Nor, for that matter, did it have the necessary human resources or equipment.

Learning under Fire

Following 2003, the lessons of the initial months in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as many additional instances of hard-won experience fed into a gradual, painful process of adaptation and partial learning while under the heavy strain of two ongoing wars. Success varied heavily across military units depending on the individual initiative and flexibility of mid-level commanders. Early top-down adaptation originating at the Pentagon and the regional commands worked only where the problem and solution fit into the pre-existing doctrinal framework of the military as an institution. However, the most critical lessons required the greatest flexibility and sometimes a radical break with the past; a break the top leadership was not prepared to make. As a result, the most important early changes came from the bottom up, from junior leaders who saw their conventional training and doctrine fail on the battlefield, and who were often more open to seek and embrace counterintuitive solutions than their superiors.

Dissent and Adaptation from Below: Changing the Army from the Bottom Up

As the Iraqi insurgency became more and more entrenched and the initial stability in Afghanistan began to wane, the many shortcomings of doctrine, training and equipment for counterinsurgency became painfully obvious to the troops on the ground. At the tactical level, on-the-spot adaptation by junior leaders was most rapid and successful to deal with straightforward challenges such as counter-IED equipment and procedures, where solutions were often technically complex but did not require a fundamentally

different operational paradigm. Through ad-hoc task forces and emergency procurement procedures bypassing the regular rules, the military made huge improvements on these technical issues.

Similarly to the situation on tactical level adaptation, the military had a much easier time on the operational level making gradual improvements to its combat capability rather than the more fundamental changes required to adapt to the counterinsurgency challenge. A prime example is the cultural and organizational rapprochement between special operations forces and conventional forces, particularly within the Army. The nature of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan tightened this working relationship because many missions require small groups of fast-moving infantry to conduct quick-strike operations against enemy positions. Increasingly, conventional Army infantry units seamlessly cooperate with special operations forces for reconnaissance and attack missions, while assuming capabilities that were previously the sole purview of the Special Forces.

While modifying equipment or convoy procedures and the expansion of a proven and effective branch of the military is comparatively straightforward, accumulating the body of higher-level knowledge about operations is more complex and was slower going. Above and beyond the work of the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL), which became involved very early in the identification and mainstreaming of “best practices,” enterprising young officers on the ground set up a bottom-up network of private web sites to share and discuss more complex tactical innovations. The value of these programs was soon recognized by the Army and Marine Corps, who incorporated some of them into their official information systems.⁹ As an additional vehicle to support learning among junior officers in Iraq, an ad-hoc “Counterinsurgency Academy” was established in early 2005.¹⁰

However, the effectiveness of these learning mechanisms remained limited by the fact that they took place within the confines of the post-Vietnam paradigm of conventional warfare.¹¹ As long as this paradigm on the operational and strategic levels was not replaced, it was only bits and pieces of counterinsurgency theory and experience

that made their way into pre-deployment training and operations in some units but not others, depending on the creativity of battalion to brigade-level leaders.¹²

Open discussion and dissent by junior officers thus became a major force for change on the tactical level, even as those same officers debated vigorously about the merits of dissent at the highest political levels between military and civilian leaders about the war itself. Young captains, lieutenants and non-commissioned officers, many of whom had more combat experience than their peacetime-trained military seniors, began to question tactics and operational methods for fighting the insurgency.

As the institutional military's reaction to the counterinsurgency challenge remained inadequate in terms of doctrine and tactics, the frustration among junior and mid-level officers grew and led to open criticism through Service periodicals and on-line platforms. The most notable example was Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling's widely-circulated article in *Armed Forces Journal* that became iconic for a whole wave of dissenting arguments. Yingling argued that the military had been failed by its generals who had ignored professional knowledge and neglected to adapt rapidly to the challenges on the battlefield. Denying to reduce the role of generals and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in particular, to providing military advice to a civilian leadership who had ignored it, Yingling pointed out that it was the generals who had been responsible to properly plan, organize, and equip the force to fight in these hybrid wars.¹³

While it remains a point of discussion among officers to what extent such dissent was appropriate or dangerous for the military's cohesion at wartime, no actions were taken against Yingling and many other dissenting voices and their critiques were essentially left to stand unchallenged.¹⁴ As a result, blame was no longer solely on the shoulders of the civilian leadership¹⁵ for a military invasion plan referred to by some as the "worst war plan in American history."¹⁶

Fueled by the grim realities on the ground, sergeants, captains and majors were often ready to try a new approach, even a fundamentally different set of principles, while more senior officers still stuck to their conventional training and doctrine. Continued dissent from junior officers began to surface in op-eds, and in some cases, direct

confrontation with superiors. Some asserted that their “colonels and generals keep holding on to flawed concepts.”¹⁷ A “trust gap” had opened between the junior and senior echelons of leadership in the military.¹⁸

Dissent and Adaptation from Above – Changing the Military from the Top Down

While the military experienced many successes at both the tactical and operational level, there was near unanimous consent that the military was strategically broken; largely a by-product of the relationship between senior civilians and uniformed personnel and differences in their vision of how warfare would be conducted. The controversies among serving officers in wartime took place before the backdrop of an already strained civil-military relationship. When Donald Rumsfeld returned to the Pentagon in 2001 with the “desire to re-establish civilian control over a military that ran circles around the Clinton Administration,”¹⁹ his authoritarian management style and intolerance for dissent further strained the relations between the civilian and the military leadership.

Implementing what appeared to be a foregone conclusion to go to war with Iraq, Rumsfeld requested responsibility for the post-war reconstruction efforts in Iraq over the State Department, yet subverted the military’s planning efforts. When Rumsfeld’s deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, went before Congress and openly dismissed the Army Chief of Staff, General Eric Shinseki, in a disagreement about troop numbers required for the stabilization of Iraq, the incident severely undermined the military’s trust in their civilian leadership.

A few years into the war, several recently retired general officers spoke up against the war. This “revolt of the generals” criticized almost every aspect of the war and was especially critical towards Rumsfeld. Marine Lieutenant General Gregory Newbold stated,

“I was a witness and therefore a party to the actions that led us to the invasion of Iraq—an unnecessary war...I have resisted speaking out in public. I’ve been silent long enough. I am driven to action now by the mistakes and misjudgments of the White House and the Pentagon, and by my many painful visits to our military hospitals...a leader’s responsibility

is to give voice to those who can't—or don't—have the opportunity to speak.”²⁰

Newbold was joined by several others including Army Major General John Riggs who charged that “they (civilian leaders) only need the military advice when it satisfies their agenda.”²¹ As Don Snider points out, this revolt was essentially over policies that the generals helped implement themselves.²² Like many in the military, he argued that public dissent among the strategic leaders threatened the profession at large.²³ Civil-military relations regressed as tensions mounted over the fundamental strategic context for the wars. Having been overruled on the issue of troop estimates before the invasion of Iraq, many senior military leaders were effectively hiding behind this particular disagreement to avoid tough questions on the doctrine, equipment and force structure they would have deployed to Iraq.²⁴

Against this background of turmoil at the strategic level of military and political leadership, a new generation of senior generals started to address the shortcomings in how the war was being fought. From the summer of 2003 until late 2006, when General David Petraeus began to implement his new counterinsurgency doctrine in Iraq,²⁵ the military clung to a flawed operational paradigm that misidentified the center of gravity in a counterinsurgency environment. Several major operations, most notably the two battles of Fallujah in April and November of 2004, as well as the handling of detainee operations which led to the Abu Gharib scandal, were not only extremely costly to Coalition forces but also had a negative net effect on the war effort.²⁶ Although there were well-publicized examples of highly effective operations, such as those conducted by the 101st Airborne Division under then Major General Petraeus in Mosul (2003) or the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment’s Operation Restoring Rights in Tal Afar (2004), the military failed to systemically tap into these successes to learn more rapidly as an institution.

Essentially, it took an intellectual surge of sorts of officers rotating off their second and third combat tours to right the operational ship. Officers such as Generals William Wallace and David Petraeus rotated back into the US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), the Army’s institution dedicated to the self-learning function, and brought their experiences to bear. Equally importantly, these generals

brought their trusted junior leaders with them into TRADOC to capitalize on both their experience and proven talent. This was a very untypical pattern for the military where successful combat leaders had traditionally been assigned to high profile operational positions in their service-level staffs and the major regional commands. In these positions, they would bring their combat experience and leadership skills to bear to the crisis of the day, leaving hardly any time and attention to reflect on their combat experience and address fundamental concerns in a systemic manner. Rarely do high-performing mid-grade officers move into the more staid TRADOC or similar educational and research establishments that are not typically seen as “career enhancing” assignments.

Beginning in 2005, this infusion of combat experienced senior and mid-grade leaders reversed the impact of a policy decision in the late 1990s to pull uniformed personnel from TRADOC in order to bring the operationally stressed combat units up to full Manning.²⁷ TRADOC assignments were considered second tier as the Army struggled with the high operational tempo plus up combat units with uniformed personnel that were in the schoolhouse.²⁸ These officers were mainly replaced by contractors or retirees serving as civil servants, which effectively severed the link between the operationally current field Army and the institutional training base, thus tamping the overall Army capability to quickly adapt to changes on the battlefield.

The net result of this reversal in the status quo essentially turned the Army on its head and spearheaded progress on the battlefield through an inculcation of top-down lessons learned that diffused into its training centers. By the end of 2006, the Army and Marine Corps published the new COIN doctrine and started implementing it in 2007. This marked the closure of the first turn in the institutional learning cycle at the operational level. What followed was a constant assessment and adaptation to the doctrine as it underwent “field testing” in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Strategic Adaptation to Irregular Warfare and the Need for Soft Power

Beginning with the implementation of the new counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq and the changing of the guard at the top of the Pentagon following Donald Rumsfeld’s

resignation in December 2006, civil-military relations at the top have markedly improved. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is seen as an open-minded, pragmatist who maintains a better rapport with the military but does not fail to exercise his authority, as illustrated by his quick dismissal of several senior leaders during his tenure. At the same time, Gates encouraged criticism from young officers and admitted that his mind has changed on several occasions due to constructive dissent.²⁹

As a result of the less ideological climate at the Pentagon, combined with positive results from the implementation of the new counterinsurgency doctrine in Iraq, the military is beginning to adapt at the strategic level to the post-9/11 environment. A series of fundamental pieces of doctrine were revised to reflect the requirement for irregular warfare capabilities, military and political leaders appear to be in agreement on the need to expand ground forces at the ultimate expense of air and/or sea power, and the Pentagon leadership is strongly supporting a more active and much better funded role of the State Department in civilian reconstruction efforts. Among other initiatives, the Department of State is set to introduce a rapidly deployable corps of civilian experts for governance and nation-building tasks; an initiative that perhaps the previous senior defense leadership would have deemed irrelevant. These actions, spanning across the Executive Branch and supported by Congress, mark a maturation and general acceptance of the dramatic changes in response to the new security environment started within the U.S. military and extending outward across the whole of government.

Conclusion: Looking Forward

Prior to 9/11, the U.S. military's preparation for irregular warfare was grossly inadequate. Its response in terms of adaptation and learning was rapid at the tactical level, much slower on the operational level, and almost non-existent on the strategic level. Through the process of tactical and operational learning, the military has become more of a learning organization by encouraging independent thinking on the part of field leaders, promoting open communication, making space for questioning the organization's

basic assumptions, and local and informal creation of standard operating procedures that are fed to the center and mainstreamed.³⁰

By so doing, the military adapted to the mission handed to it and became increasingly effective even at those parts that had been anathema to its predisposition and culture for decades. After several years of organizational learning at the great expense of blood and treasure, the embracement of counterinsurgency principles contributed to measurable successes in Iraq. To conduct a wholesale review and revision of the military's posture towards counterinsurgency in the middle of two wars was the single most important institutional change within the post-9/11 military. At least at the level of doctrine, the U.S. military is now generally considered to be very well prepared for counterinsurgency operations. Its success in practice will be seen in Afghanistan.

Seen from within the military, the tactical and operational turnaround in Iraq has served to validate the process that produced it. As a consequence, the institution began to prize dissent and discussion among its officers as a necessary ingredient for a mentally flexible and creative organization. The profession seems to be evolving as senior leaders recognize the necessity to harness intellectual capital from its young officers, following Clausewitz's classic dictum that "war is not to be taken lightly and it is no place for irresponsible enthusiasts."³¹

Nonetheless, this leaves us with the same question we started with: is the US military preparing to re-fight the last war – this war – or is it getting ready to fight the next one? The one plausible assumption is that the next war will require changes perhaps as fundamental as the current ones demanded. Openness and encouragement for organizational change catalyzed by institutional dissidents at both ends of the hierarchy needs to become the military's new standard operating procedure if it is to be ready to meet that new reality.

How does the military as an institution protect this dynamic of top-down and bottom-up dissent that was so crucial to recent successes on the battlefield? While bottom-up change will almost always occur as long as a culture of junior leader empowerment persists, it is a reticent cadre of senior leaders who must be nurtured to be

ready to turn the Army on its head. The ultimate lesson is that a relationship must exist between top-down and bottom-up thought, so that even if the military's structure and operational culture at any one point in time turn out to be ill suited to the challenges on the battlefield, it will be able to adapt and harness its own intellectual capital to further progress. This internal capacity must be able to transcend traditional doctrinal frameworks and needs to be deeply embedded in its institutional culture.

One approach to creating such a culture might be to systemically draw the best and brightest experienced mid-grade and senior leaders back into the institutions of self-learning, such as TRADOC for the Army. To systemically institutionalize what Generals Wallace and Petraeus achieved in the current war, the Army can no longer denigrate TRADOC assignments in the context of career rewards and systematic incentives. In assigning "high-profile" post-battalion command jobs, it needs to rebalance the needs for further operational leadership experience and inter-service exchange in so-called "joint" assignments with the opportunity to use the most promising mid-grade officers to shape the future of the institution in its training and doctrine centers. The military at-large must protect and promote the cycle between operational and school house assignments as to not solely pay lip service to the notion of field to flagpole assignments without regard for strategy and policy positions.

Today, personal career development is in direct conflict with Army leader development and institutional learning. Officers must jump through narrow hoops of Army and Joint assignments to remain eligible for advancement. While good for the officer, it means that there is precious little time to commit to reinvesting back into the Army. Many knowledge-based organizations such as global consulting firms have made it a standard practice to rotate their top performers between client work and internal think tanks. In contrast, the Army typically wants to rotate between operational assignments. We must get the right senior leaders in the right jobs to trigger the top-down catalyst that is ultimately required to support, protect and embrace the bottom-up solutions. The next war may not afford the luxury of such long-term adaptation.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Thomas Ricks, "Rumsfeld Gets Earful From Troops Complaints Cite Equipment Woes, Extended Tours and Pay Delays," *Washington Post*, Dec. 9, 2004 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A46508-2004Dec8?language=printer>).

² During OIF, the U.S. moved 350 miles in 16 days. The closest two campaigns was Nazi Germany during the Minsk Offensive (JUN 41) where they moved 300 miles in 8 days and the Smolensk Offensive (JUL 41) where they moved 400 miles in 25 days.

³ Douglas Lovelace, Jr., "Foreword," in Antulio J. Echevarria, II, *Toward an American Way of War* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2004), iii.

⁴ George Friedman and Meredith Friedman, *The Future of War: Power, Technology, and American World Dominance in the 21st Century* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1996).

⁵ United States General Accounting Office, Report to Chairman, Subcommittee on Military personnel, Committee on National Security, House of Representatives: Military personnel – High Aggregate personnel Levels Maintained Throughout Drawdown (Washington, D.C.: GAO, 1995), 11.

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