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# **Brave New World War**

## **Part I - Why Leavenworth's finest know they're not in Kansas anymore**

**By**  
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What can a wooly-headed civilian teach a combatant commander about conducting a military operation? After four years of working with the commanders of all nine geographic and functional commands, as well as USFK, NATO, and various JTFs, my answer is: not a whole lot. These leaders have deep experience, tested judgment, and other natural gifts that commend them to positions of high responsibility. If given the latitude to develop courses of action and apply the resources at their disposal, they will reliably accomplish important objectives, with or without the counsel of civilians.

This humbling realization keeps me from attempting a little levity by venturing a clumsy wordplay about “Commandments” in the title – a decision all the more prudent since I will offer, as it happens, 10 ‘suggestions’ in Part II of this essay. Yet for all the deference owed to our combatant commanders, the reality is that official Washington is not shy about looking over a combatant commander’s shoulder and offering generous helpings of advice.

My ‘suggestions’ will not end this fact of life in the contemporary American way of war. Nor should we necessarily wish to dial down the frequency or fidelity of communications between the nation’s capital and the distant field of battle. War has always been understood to be hard to manage in the best of circumstances. In the 21st century, it features some new management challenges: it is less likely to be confined to a single AOR; it is less likely to be an exclusively or even predominantly military contest; and contact with the enemy is more likely to occur in areas populated by civilians.

These and other inconvenient conditions create a drag on a combatant commander’s presumed monopoly of control over the action. Moreover, regardless of the fog of war, more information on our military activities than ever before finds its way back home to be graphically arrayed and circulated to a wide audience of official and public spectators in the U.S. and abroad. Media commentary from the grandstand, some quite well informed and some quite critical, is by now a thriving cottage industry. Such is the freedom of speech that our military forces fight to preserve.

### **Paradigms Lost**

America’s military engagements for most of the 20th century dealt with conventional, nationally-directed military aggressors, mercifully distant from our homeland, whose purposes we analyzed at length and whose will and capacity to keep fighting we were ultimately aiming to break. From these experiences emerged a political code of conduct in Washington: the commander’s assessment from the battlefield enjoys a special status, and the civilian leaders and policymakers



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as well as the nation's senior military leadership view their roles as supporting the commander on the scene in his (or her) warfight.

The code generally endures, but 21st century conditions do not lend themselves as neatly to this functional concept for channeling all assets and resources to a supported commander – meaning a geographic combatant commander (or Commander USSOCOM) – or the related notion from past wars that civilians have little relevance to prosecution of the “kinetic” phase of an operation.

What is new today is not just the emergence of non-state actor adversaries, their asymmetric methods, or their penetration of our homeland – important though all of these trends are. The strategic shift we have perhaps not grasped is that success in conducting the nation's wars is no longer a function solely of mastering the other side's center of gravity.

Increasingly over the past decade or two, our own military engagements have departed from the WWII, Korea, Vietnam model where the enemy was perceived to be on the march in pursuit of political and territorial ambitions and the judgment was made that he had to be stopped, and soon, to avert a strategically unacceptable outcome.

More recent operations in Panama, Kuwait, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq have all been less reactive and more pre-meditated: each was launched by our decision, on our timetable, and according to our plans. In most of these more recent cases, America's adversaries have had occasion during the run-up to hostilities to ponder America's intentions. How would we react if challenged? How large an effort would we risk? How ambitious would our political “war aims” be? We also had time to think hard about how they might exert leverage on our own national willpower.

Domestic political debates, media second-guessing and public opinion swings have become a fixture of the American landscape when our forces are committed to a foreign engagement of any duration. That free exercise of our liberties is a good thing, but we need to recognize that it has become a prime focus of our adversaries' strategies. Never mind that informed Americans believe this nation to be highly resilient when challenged, even indomitable when threatened; our adversaries are less informed, and appear to believe, or at least hope, otherwise. We focus on their rhetoric, apparent goals and decision calculus; but more than ever they are now focusing on ours. This factor alone expands the conflict both geographically and bureaucratically. It is not the only such factor.

## **A Force of a Different Color**

The Iraq and Afghanistan operations both illustrate how the U.S. and its adversaries appear to be measuring their own respective progress by different yardsticks. In Iraq, U.S. authorities cite with justification the achievement of historic political milestones – three elections held, and a constitution adopted – as evidence that the extremists are not succeeding. We tally Iraqi security forces trained as a metric of the new Iraqi government's readiness to stand on its own and we aggregate national levels of electrical power, potable water, oil production and other such civil amenities as indicators of the population's welfare.



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These are all meaningful metrics, and we are not wrong to cite them. But does the adversary read the same scoreboard, the same way? And what are we doing to ensure that his own scoreboard marks him as a failure at his own game, a loser in the eyes of his own target audience?

Consider the secretive network of Sunni rejectionists and foreign Jihadists in Iraq. Since most of the foreign Jihadists have already consigned themselves to become casualties via suicide, their death at Coalition hands is not, in and of itself, a loss from their perspective. For some it is a destiny fulfilled, a mission accomplished. The only variable that matters to them is how many U.S., Iraqi and third country casualties they can take with them and how much the resulting public distress shakes the confidence of public opinion in coalition countries and erodes Iraqi popular support for our presence, role and program.

Would it be surprising if we were to learn that some among the Iraqi resistance think they have succeeded since 2003 in framing the conflict on their terms rather than ours, i.e., maneuvering the mighty Americans into a grinding war of attrition that has cost the U.S. a division equivalent of ground forces killed or wounded?

In Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan, our side cites the steady progress in capturing or killing senior al Qaeda figures, clearly a top U.S. priority. At the same time, the videotaped missives from Osama bin Ladin and Ayman Zawahiri openly taunt the U.S. as though Arab and Islamic audiences will readily understand their survival to be their victory and our failure. Granted that there are vast cultural differences at play, it is still worth asking whether it matters that we and our adversaries seem to be talking past each other.

President Bush, throughout 2005 and 2006, has given a series of speeches to explain to American citizens and international public opinion the stakes, the goals and the costs of waging this war on terrorism. In so doing, he has often cited Osama bin Ladin's aspiration to create an all-powerful Caliphate, toppling moderate governments throughout the Middle East and ruling over the entire Islamic world. The specter of a total strategic collapse of Westphalian governance across a large and economically sensitive swath of the world at the hands of militant Islamists may well succeed in galvanizing domestic American support to continue backing the Administration's efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But might not the popular perception among millions of youth in the Arab and Islamic "street" – the enemy's center of gravity – accord bin Ladin a substantial measure of status, borne of fear if not respect, for a remarkable achievement? After all, this reclusive fugitive not only carried off the most spectacular act of terrorism in history on 9/11, but he now has the leader of the world's sole superpower regularly advertising his political/religious program of action.

The fact is that Al Qaeda has achieved not one iota of tangible progress toward this radical utopian vision of supplanting existing Arab governments with its fabled Salafist Caliphate. Why isn't bin Ladin's utter failure to steer the direction of political events a central theme of America's wartime public narrative? Why not the cynicism of his using impressionable young Arabs as explosive mules, the moral corruption of promising sexual rewards for their fulfillment of this purported religious "duty," the telltale opportunism and unseriousness in his



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pronouncements on regional political causes, and the growing scar Al Qaeda's bombings of unsuspecting innocents are inflicting on Islam?

Osama bin Ladin may be six-foot-five, but the only way he can become ten feet tall is by the status we grant him. Perhaps our side has not fully grasped the extent to which our public demeanor and that of the enemy constitute a central front in this war.

### **Dueling Banquos**

In recent months Americans proudly watched Iraqis and Afghans waving their ink-stained fingers to the cameras, and we were justified in savoring the legacy of democratic reform our soldiers' exertions and sacrifices are yielding. Our adversaries, meanwhile, plastered images of the U.S. abuses at Abu Ghraib on walls, buses, and television, reveling in the derogatory message that sent about American principles and purpose.

One would have thought that dispelling those toxic images as quickly and definitively as possible would be priority one. Indeed, was it not obvious that the U.S. forces, for all their incredibly selfless endeavors in Iraq, stood to suffer a terrible (and terribly unfair) reversal in their standing among many Iraqi citizens, to say nothing of Arab and international opinion generally, if the image of harsh American mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners inside Saddam's most notorious prison was not quickly countered?

Washington understood that the alleged abuse of prisoners was a body blow in the campaign for Iraqi hearts and minds. And yet, some in positions of responsibility seemed slow to find their voices in distancing the United States – and by extension, the United States Armed Forces – from the accusations. While Arab media savaged the U.S. over Abu Ghraib (harping as well on apparent deficiencies in accountability throughout the chain of command), the President's advisors reserved their energies for a protracted effort to keep a venerated combat veteran in his own party from committing the U.S. by legislation to observe international legal prohibitions against torture.

Their apparently overriding concern was to avoid a fettering of Presidential wartime prerogatives. But whether or not powers given under the Constitution could truly have been eroded by executive or legislative actions, the result of this baroque intramural debate at home was a diminished effort to stanch the bleeding of America's reputation and influence abroad caused by the Abu Ghraib abuse scandal.

In a mature democracy such as the U.S., leaders are expected to explain their actions and set public expectations when sacrifice is required. This tradition continues. However, the 21st century question posed by the current war effort is whether, if all our leaders seek to do in their public pronouncements is to solidify domestic support – are they not merely playing defense, and ceding much of the psychological battlespace to the adversary?

It is fair to ask whether our political aims and declaratory policy are calibrated to the most efficacious political, cultural, and religious frequencies from which to undercut and diminish al Qaeda's prestige, reputation and corresponding potency even as we continue physical measures



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to capture or kill its operatives and disrupt its freedom of action. It is hard to shake the impression that we and our adversaries, while clearly fighting each other with lethal force, are not tugging on the same psychological line of rope.

### **Through the Looking Glass, Darkly**

The larger point here is that this new kind of war is being fought on many levels, and American steadfastness, valor, generosity and goodwill in rebuilding the new democracies of Afghanistan and Iraq, even when accomplishing the defined tasks set for them, are pointing up gaps in the national effort. We have measurably reduced our adversaries' physical capacity to harm our interests; it is less clear that we are breaking their will to fight on, or their hope of outlasting us and reconstituting their positions, in Iraq, or Afghanistan, or any place where these radicals operate.

Granted that we know our adversaries cannot inflict enough pain on the U.S. to shake our commitment to wage war against them, they can and do use our democratic dialogue as fodder for self-aggrandizing, and perhaps self-deluding, propaganda. They may not know they are losing.

The policy telescope we have long used to watch events in the AOR can no longer point only one way. It needs to be turned around so that we are more conscious of how the enemy is thinking about us, and what he is taking to be his own measures of effectiveness. The home team no longer has the luxury of acting as though "What's mine is mine and what's yours is negotiable." Not only should we be alert to the potential for a terror attack on U.S. soil; we should be aware that our political system, amplified by a media megaphone that echoes around the world, is part of the other guy's AOR. This has implications for the way we fight in the future.

The foregoing, admittedly, is more in the vein of broad analytical observation than something that points to specific changes in operational tradecraft at the combatant command level. But the new reality of an expanded battlefield is significant. To us, the going-in mission is military and political – destroying and degrading the other side's capacity to control territory, exercise political power, and threaten civil populations as well as American interests. To the adversary, psychological effects appear to loom large as tactical objectives. The metrics by which we and our new enemy respectively measure our success and appeal to our supporters, as compared to past conflicts with traditional military adversaries, have become wildly divergent.

### **The Agony of Victory**

The good news is that our military forces have achieved the goal the nation set for them, namely superiority at every level of the spectrum of military operations. No standing military force in the world could possibly wish to confront the Armed Forces of the United States in a hot war. That is why we find our forces today in Iraq and Afghanistan dealing with threats from persons whose identity, purposes and methods place them outside of the spectrum of military operations, including the laws of war, as these have been commonly understood for at least half a century.

The bad news is that our country is now trying to apply the most advanced and capable tools we currently have for addressing security threats – military capabilities – to what arguably are non-



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military exigencies. A reasonable conclusion from the above discussion of the extremist adversary is that defeating him is not a military mission, not a DoD mission, but rather a national mission, albeit one with important military components. Nearly five years after 9/11, we still have precious little operational capability outside of DoD that could effect meaningful change in a tense post-conflict environment such as Iraq.

In Washington, the need to adapt old tools to new conditions is increasingly recognized. DoD introduced the concept of transformation even before 9/11; the President created the Department of Homeland Security soon after; the 9/11 Commission led to establishment of the Directorate of National Intelligence; and Secretary of State Rice in January 2006 announced transformational measures in the nation's diplomatic corps serving around the world.

As laudable as these efforts may be, the U.S. Government continues to operate under the basic framework of The National Security Act of 1947. In other words, there is no concept of a national civilian "supported commander" equipped and empowered to synchronize the employment of disparate tools against extremism in a real-time, tactical manner worldwide. Thus, soldiers will still detain and interview the insurgents, intelligence agencies will liaise with foreign counterparts, diplomats and politicians will make the statements that constitute our public diplomacy effort, aid agencies will manage programs abroad, treasury officials will chase terrorist financing leads, and the NSC Staff will keep all these strands of programmatic activity generally coordinated.

All the while, Washington think tanks are examining new concepts for interagency coordination, better plans for post-conflict reconstruction, and the daunting issue of more coherent ways to budget for national security activities of all kinds, among other reforms. While surprisingly little has been heard to date from Congress itself about ways that it might 'transform' so as to improve its vital oversight role, it is clear the U.S. national security community is sufficiently conscious of its institutional inadequacies to be exploring sensible changes, and this will affect the future planning and conduct of military operations. Will it be enough?

### **All Quiet, Please, on the Western Front**

A Combatant Commander might be forgiven for thinking that much of the preceding deals with matters outside his purview. By traditional measures of a command's purview, he would not be wrong. The purpose of this discussion is to connect the command's operations with actions outside the AOR, including back home, as part of the same struggle, hence part of the same 'national' mission. What in the past may have been perceived as exogenous factors to the operation could more properly be seen as geographically distant but centrally relevant aspects of the warfight.

We can already begin to glimpse the nature of the expanded battlefield and the real-time interplay of military and non-military issues in 21st century conflict. There are non-military issues that belong on the military planner's radar screen and oblige the commander on the scene to keep one ear cocked to civilian policymakers in Washington. The task of leading such an effort has become more complex.



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After delivering for America a world in which no rival conventional force could credibly threaten its sovereignty or liberty, our military's reward has been the task of protecting us in a world where practically unrecognizable enemies can inflict nearly intolerable pain on the nation. As different as this adversary is from military foes of the past, so is the shape of the U.S. effort that will decisively defeat it. Much of the work in crafting that effort still lies ahead.

*Part II of this essay will offer ten takeaways from Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. Each is intended to illustrate further how the supported Commander of the future will need to be cognizant of operations well outside the lanes implied by the Unified Command Plan, his mission statement and even the execute orders that direct him to conduct an operation.*

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