

U.S. Marine Corps photo by Staff Sgt. William T. Greeson Jr./Released



U.S. Marines en route to stabilization operation, May 25, 2009

Response to the Decade of War

By James Dobbins

Last summer, in response to a directive from Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Martin Dempsey, the Joint Staff issued a short summary of lessons learned from the past decade of military operations. The document, entitled *Decade of War, Volume 1* frankly and cogently acknowledges mistakes made over this period, and particularly during the first half of the decade, that is to say between the invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001 and the surge of troops into Iraq in early 2007. Among the admitted deficiencies were the failure to adequately grasp the operating environment, a reliance on conventional tactics to fight unconventional enemies, an inability to articulate a convincing public narrative, and poor interagency coordination. The document is testimony to the capacity of the American military for self-criticism and eventual correction, albeit not always in time to avoid costly setbacks.

This Joint Staff critique nevertheless fails to address two of the most serious errors of that first half-decade. The most glaring mistake was the decision to attack Iraq on the basis of an erroneous intelligence assessment. Surely there can be few greater failings than to invade a country by mistake. Blame for this failure has fallen principally on Central Intelligence Agency and its then Director, George Tenet. Yet among the multiple American intelligence agencies, several of the most important of which are lodged in the Defense Department and headed by serving military officers, only the tiny intelligence bureau of the State Department demurred from the judgments that Saddam Hussein had active WMD programs and indeed

actual such weapons, neither of which turned out to be true.

The second major point on which *Decade of War* is silent is any judgment regarding the level of forces originally committed to the post-conflict stabilization of Afghanistan and subsequently Iraq. The document acknowledges that the planning for this phase of both operations was inadequate, but it makes no mention of the most serious effect of that flaw, which was the failure to deploy forces numerous enough for the purpose in either country. As with the flawed assessment of Iraqi WMD, the Bush administrations civilian leaders were ultimately responsible for this error as well. Some senior officers, most notably then Army

James Dobbins served for eleven years as the Director of the RAND Corporation's International Security and Defense Policy Center. Since contributing this article, he has returned to the Department of State to become the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan



U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Pete Thibodeau/Released

The Counterinsurgency Field Manual produced in 2006 under General David Petraeus' direction recommends a force of one soldier for each fifty inhabitants.

Chief of Staff Erik Shinseki, argued for a larger occupation force, but his was a rather isolated voice within the country's top military leadership.

the fact that troop strength had to be continuously increased through 2007 in Iraq and 2011 in Afghanistan is pretty compelling evidence that the original levels were too low

This second omission may be the more consequential than the first, since it represents not simply a glossing over of a now widely acknowledged failure, but rather reflects a continued inability to come to closure on a still controversial issue. No one contests that American intelligence estimates on Iraq were flawed. As a result, measures have been put into effect to reduce the prospect of any repetition. By contrast, there is continued debate between those who argue that the United States

put too few troops into Afghanistan and Iraq in the immediate aftermath of conventional conflict, and those who argue that it put in too many.

By 2011 United States had ten times more soldiers in Afghanistan than it had in the year after its entry. In Iraq American commanders actually began to reduce the number of troops as soon as Baghdad fell. That decision was reversed as an insurgency developed, but the American troop presence in Iraq only reached its peak of 160,000 in late 2007, four years after the emergence of a violent resistance movement. In both countries, local insurgencies were thus given abundant space and time to recruit, organize, and intimidate the population, leaving the United States to belatedly reinforce its military presence only under threat of strategic defeat.

Decade of War acknowledges those early military setbacks, but blames them solely on insufficient situational awareness, inappropriate tactics, poor public communications and inadequate

interagency coordination. All of these factors contributed to the reverses suffered during these early years, but the fact that troop strength had to be continuously increased through 2007 in Iraq and 2011 in Afghanistan is pretty compelling evidence that the original levels were too low. So why not say so?

The success of the 2007 surge of American troops into Iraq seemed, for a while, to have resolved the debate within the American military and beyond between those who argued that more and those that argued that fewer forces would be more efficacious in securing each of those countries. General Colin Powell's doctrine of decisive force (and General Shinseki's reservations about the planned Iraq occupation force) seemed to have been vindicated and former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's preference for low profile post conventional combat footprints repudiated. Unfortunately, the more limited success produced by a similar surge into Afghanistan in 2010 may provide new grist for the mills of those who argue that less is more in such circumstances.

One can certainly argue that the expense of stabilizing Afghanistan and Iraq has proved inordinate, that the United States should have confined itself to mere punitive responses in either case, and that whatever the provocation, the United States should not invade and occupy large adversary states in the future. Explicitly acknowledging the manpower and money costs of occupation is indeed a good way to drive this lesson home.

The Counterinsurgency Field Manual produced in 2006 under General David Petraeus' direction recommends a force of one soldier for each fifty inhabitants, or five hundred thousand for a country the size of Iraq, which is about the number actually reached in 2007, including the newly raised and trained Iraqi forces. Acceptance of this figure as an ideal, if not absolutely essential goal in 2003 would have militated against disbanding the Iraqi army and for a much larger American occupation force than was initially deployed. Alternatively, recognition of the need for a force

of this magnitude might well have scotched the whole idea of invading Iraq.

The Obama administration has explicitly embraced the view that counterinsurgency is too resource intensive to be done, at least by Americans, on any but a very small scale. But policies can change overnight, whereas military adaptation to unforeseen circumstances takes much longer, as *Decade of War* makes abundantly clear. Creating a doctrinal basis for sizing large-scale stabilization missions (or extending that in the Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 3-24) to stability operations more generally) will encourage skeptical questioning when such ventures are considered in the future, but will also help ensure that these are appropriately resourced if embarked upon. Rather than sweep this controversial issue under the rug on the grounds that the United States not going to engage in operations of this scale any more, our military authorities should include force sizing among those matters critically examined in the light of the past decade of war. **PRISM**