



A U.S. Air Force C-17 prepares to depart Iraq with U.S. Marine Corps Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Jan. 8, 2016. During the trip, Dunford met with U.S. and coalition leaders in Germany, Iraq and Turkey to assess the progress of counter-ISIL efforts. (DOD/Dominique Peneiro)

“The Irreducible Minimum”

An Evaluation of Counterterrorism Operations in Iraq

By Richard Shultz

With the end of full-scale combat operations in Iraq in late April 2003, no one at the senior level in Washington or Baghdad expected an organized insurgency to materialize—a “war after the war” was unimaginable. However, mounting violence in August suggested otherwise. Then, in the early fall, several high-profile attacks took place: a member of the Iraqi governing council was assassinated; the United Nations Headquarters and International Committee of the Red Cross offices in Baghdad, and the Italian police facility in Nasiriya were hit by suicide bombs; and a Chinook helicopter was shot down near Fallujah, killing 15 American soldiers.

By the beginning of 2004, the violence had shifted from periodic high-profile episodes to a rapidly increasing number of attacks against U.S. forces and facilities. During early January, the number of significant insurgent activities reported throughout Iraq was more than 200 each week. By the last week of April, these spiked to more than 600 and continued to fluctuate around that number for the rest of 2004. During 2005 the number of weekly incidents, on more than one occasion, climbed to more than 800.¹

A key actor in the burgeoning insurgency was al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which was comprised of an array of planning and decisionmaking mechanisms, operational detachments, financial units, communications and media centers, intelligence branches, bomb and improvised explosive device production facilities, and arms acquisition systems. AQI’s internal workings and organizational structure were considerably different from 20th century counterparts. It was a web of networks.

AQI’s center of gravity was not the top leadership but all those who commanded and managed the mid-level functional components of its networks. It was AQI’s mid-level leaders and managers who had authority and capacity to maintain and even escalate operations. And there was a plethora of them operating across Iraq.

Task Force-714

During the 1990s, the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) developed a highly proficient counterterrorism (CT) force tailor-made for hostage rescue and discrete, direct-action operations.² Arguably, that force became the best of its kind in the world. It also was a highly compartmentalized force with a culture of secrecy and semi-autonomy. But for the infrequent missions it was designed to carry out

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prior to 9/11, those characteristics did not impede its operational capacity.³

In planning Operation *Iraqi Freedom* (OIF), consideration was not given to the possibility that in its aftermath a protracted irregular war would follow, and that U.S. counterterrorism forces, which had deployed to Iraq as Task Force-714 (TF-714), would play a major role in fighting the irregular war. Following the fall of Baghdad, General Stanley McChrystal, who took command of the counterterrorism forces in 2003, focused on capturing or killing high-value former Ba'athist leaders—"the deck of cards."⁴

However, while this was taking place, the security situation in Iraq rapidly deteriorated. During the fall of 2003 there were signs—often dismissed by Washington—that pointed to an organized insurgency rapidly taking shape. And as it grew in intensity, the mission of TF-714 changed from taking out a small number of top Ba'athists to going to war against an enemy that was different from any it had previously prepared to confront. Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, TF-714's intelligence chief beginning in the late spring of 2004, characterized AQI as "a strategic surprise" because "the capability and scale of the threat [it posed] was far bigger than any we had ever previously thought about . . . Clearly, the scale of the terrorist networks that existed . . . and the scope of AQI's operations surprised us."⁵

Surprise is a constant in war. But the surprise experienced by TF-714 in Iraq proved to be

a major challenge even for an organization comprised of units that excelled at tactical adaptation. Consequently, TF-714's initial response was to do more of what it already did extremely well. "The initial response," explained General McChrystal in a 2014 interview, was that "we will just do more of what we are already very good at and then we would have done our part."⁶ What became evident to the task force leadership, however, was that a "more of the same" response was not going to have a meaningful impact on AQI. To be sure, those operations that TF-714 executed were highly successful. The problem was there were not enough of them. They had, at best, only a limited impact on AQI's operational tempo. The Task Force was facing an enemy it had never envisaged and could not degrade through its existing ways of operating.

Task Force-714 was operating as a peacetime strategic scalpel, and no matter how excellent, it was losing ground in an unfamiliar wartime environment. A sea change was required, explained McChrystal: "We needed to view the mission differently and that was whether we were winning or losing in Iraq against al-Qaeda, not just whether we captured or killed its members. Winning is what counts.

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By the fall of 2004 the realization set in that TF-714 had to change from a strategic scalpel to an industrial-strength CT machine. It had to "capture or kill on an industrial scale which was not something it had ever been built to do," explained

Admiral William McRaven, who served as Deputy Task Force Commander under General McChrystal, and later replaced him.⁸ To operate at the industrial-strength level meant that “the basic mission fundamentally had to change,” which was going to “require us to change the way we were organizationally structured, manned, trained, equipped, and everything else.”⁹

Task Force-714 had suffered a strategic surprise for which it was not prepared, but was not paralyzed by it. Rather, it recognized the significance of what it had discovered and that it would have to demonstrate agility and adaptability to overcome an enemy unlike any terrorist organization that had preceded it. AQI was, said McChrystal, “much bigger . . . much more dynamic. It had more speed, momentum, and was benefiting from a very different operating environment than the task force had ever anticipated.”¹⁰

By early 2005 McChrystal concluded the task force had to “adapt to a new, more ominous threat.”¹¹ During the next two years TF-714 did just that, reinventing itself in the midst of the Iraq war. Consider the following acceleration in its capacity to conduct operations against AQI’s networks. In August 2004, TF-714 was able to execute 18 raids across Iraq. “As great as those 18 raids were, they couldn’t make a dent in the exploding insurgency,” McChrystal explained. In August 2006, TF-714 executed 300 raids.¹² And those raids did much more than decapitate the top leadership of AQI. More importantly, the raids began to dismantle AQI’s extensive network of mid-level operational commanders and the managers of its operational cells, financial units, communications centers, IED facilities, and arms acquisition enterprises.

In doing so, by late 2009 TF-714 had acutely degraded AQI’s capacity to carry out operations. In General McChrystal’s words, TF-714 “clawed the guts out of AQI.”

Transformation in Wartime

The capacity of TF-714 to transform runs counter to what organizational theory experts identify as barriers inhibiting militaries from learning, innovating, and changing, especially in wartime.¹³ But its leadership concluded that they faced an enemy never envisaged that could not be degraded through preexisting ways of operation. Organizational experts argue that for organizations facing complex challenges, problem solving must become a shared responsibility for the whole organization, not just the task of the leadership. It is the duty of the entire organization—a new way of thinking and acting.¹⁴

TF-714’s method of problem solving was too deliberate, hierarchical, and self-contained to counter Iraq’s fast-paced and networked insurgency. The Task Force had to transform and partner with several U.S. intelligence agencies to neutralize this unprecedented operational challenge. The mechanism for that transformation was a joint interagency task force (JIATF). The JIATF forged these intelligence agencies and TF-714 into a union, based on interdependence and cooperation that established problem solving methods capable of uncovering AQI’s networks. Having adopted the JIATF, TF-714 shed its top-down style of command, substituting decentralized authority and problem solving from below. To outpace AQI, problem solving and decisionmaking could not wait for senior leaders to disseminate commands—that took too long.

TF-714 transformed into an intelligence-led organization. The action arm of the JIATF, the operational units, was coordinated with a robust intelligence capability drawn from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), National Security Agency (NSA), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), and National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), among others.

To learn and adapt, TF-714 amassed information and knowledge about a new problem set—a complex, clandestine, and networked enemy empowered by information age technology. The Task Force achieved intelligence dominance over AQI. This necessitated the JIATF's adoption of a new operational concept—find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate (F3EAD). This transformed targeting and provided the means to get inside AQI's networks to dominate the operational tempo of the fight.

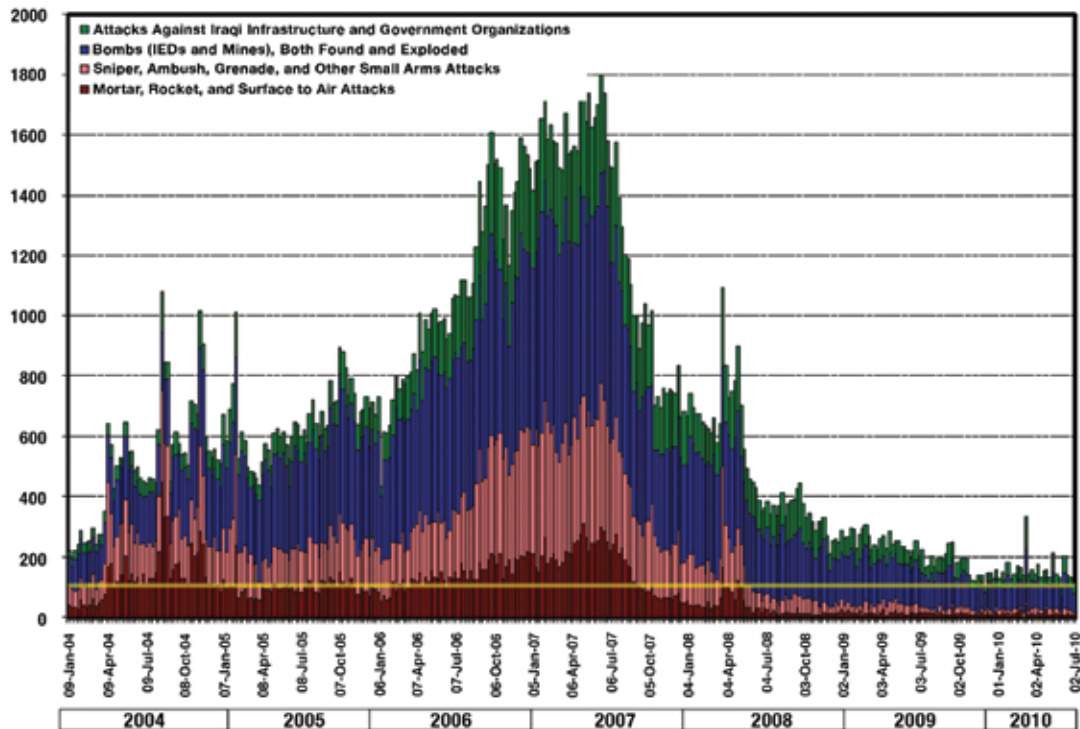
Once inside, the JIATF identified central and peripheral figures, patterns of behavior, and clusters of nodes to degrade parts of AQI's operating system. By doing this fast enough—hitting many targets each night—TF-714 outpaced AQI's capacity to adapt, causing it to collapse in upon itself.

The focus of the remainder of this article is on the impact that transformation had on AQI's operational tempo and the extent to which it allowed TF-714 to eliminate a large number of its mid-level commanders and managers, those who made AQI networks work.¹⁵

The "Irreducible Minimum"—Winning at the Operational Level

A situation report of U.S. prospects in Iraq from the spring into the early fall of 2006 would have had the following bottom line assessment: *surging violence and a grim prognosis*. To be sure, such a forecast could have been deduced from the escalating "significant acts of violence" reported in the Department of Defense's *Weekly Security Incidents*

Figure 1: Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq.



Source: Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-Saddam Iraq (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, November 30, 2011).²⁰

summary. By September 2006 those totals had risen to more than 1,400—nearly double from the previous summer. And by the summer of 2007, significant acts of violence peaked at nearly 1,800 incidents weekly.¹⁶ Enemy violence was skyrocketing, while almost every prediction of any possibility of U.S. success in Iraq was spiraling downward.¹⁷

However, by the end of 2009 significant acts of violence had plummeted to fewer than 200 a week. And this trend continued into 2010 as can be seen in the graphic below of weekly enemy attacks against U.S. and coalition partners.¹⁸ Another measure of the decline in the insurgency was the decline in U.S. military fatalities. That number had escalated from 486 in 2003 to 904 in 2007. However, in 2009 the number had dropped to 149, and in 2010 to 60.¹⁹

The security situation had dramatically changed at the operational level.²¹ Factors that contributed to this dramatic change include:

- the adoption of a new counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy;
- the addition of 30,000 troops through the Surge;
- the Awakening Movement, which opened the door for the remarkable growth of police which, in turn, gave the coalition forces the capacity needed to control the physical and human terrain once cleared of insurgent forces; and
- the operations conducted by TF-714 against AQI's clandestine networks.

The introduction of COIN began with the Marine campaign plan initiated in early 2006 in Anbar Province. At that time, many believed Anbar was lost.²² But by the end of 2006, Anbar was reaching a security tipping point. The COIN-based campaign plan with its interrelated elements of clearing out insurgents through maneuver operations, holding that territory through combat outposts, engaging and aligning with the sheikhs

and their tribes, and building local Iraqi police units drawn from those tribes had shifted the ground in Anbar. The conditions were in place to bring about a sea change in 2007.²³ That came in the late spring when the weekly violent incidents for the province dropped from 450 attacks the first week of January to roughly 150 four months later. By July it was less than 100.²⁴ And when General John Kelly took command of the Marines in Anbar in January 2008, the number was down to 50 attacks a week.²⁵

In February 2007, General David Petraeus replaced General William Casey as commander of Multi-National Force-Iraq. He initiated a similar COIN effort enabled by the addition of 30,000 surge forces and the Awakening Movement. The latter was critical to success. As the Marines found in Anbar in 2006, “without the Awakening, the surge would not have stabilized Iraq by the summer of 2008. It was not until the Sons of Iraq stood up that bloodshed fell fast enough; without them, our findings suggest that Iraq’s violence would still have been at mid-2006 levels when the surge ended.”²⁶ The focus initially of the Surge was on the greater Baghdad region. As in Anbar, the results were the same as the violence declined precipitously by the end of 2008.²⁷

But effective counterinsurgency requires more than the “clear, hold, build” formula found in the classic COIN literature of the 1960s, as well as in its post-9/11 counterpart, Field Manual 3-24 on Counterinsurgency.²⁸ It also necessitates the capacity to dismantle the clandestine infrastructure or secret underground apparatus of the insurgent organization. It was that subterranean networked mechanism that gave AQI the capacity to initiate, rapidly increase, and sustain insurgent operations across Iraq. The mission of the Task Force was to learn about the inner workings of that largely invisible ecosystem in order to dismantle it.²⁹

To what extent was TF-714 able to accomplish this mission and dismantle AQI's networks? As noted earlier, it was able to raise its monthly

operational tempo from 18 raids in August 2004 to 300 in August 2006, and to sustain that rate into 2009. But how effective were those operations? To what extent were they able to “claw the guts out of AQI” so that its networks collapsed?

The linchpin for degrading AQI’s operational capacity was to reduce its mid-level commanders and managers, those who made its networks run; what McChrystal described as “the guts of AQI.” They were identifiable and potentially vulnerable because they had to move, communicate, and make things happen. But to try to identify, isolate, and focus on one key node or individual within AQI networks at a time “was a fool’s mission trying to be so precise. It was beyond what we could know when we initiated operations against a particular network in AQI,” McChrystal noted. The alternative was to focus on the attrition of those mid-level elements as they emerged through the F3EAD process. “To hit those targets faster than they could replace them, to make them worry about our ability to constantly pummel them, and to make younger and less experienced those who replaced them.”³⁰

The goal was attrition. According to Lieutenant General Bennett Sacolick “We intended to conduct raids at a rate that they could not withstand. Through those raids we sought to disrupt, degrade, and dismantle their networks faster than they could re-establish them. Eventually, we concluded, that led to the decline in the capacity of their networks.”³¹ The results were demonstrable, and “we could see our impact on particular parts of their networks during a given period,” explained Admiral McRaven, once TF-714 reached the 300 missions a month tempo.³²

We measured cycles in different operational elements such as bomb making facilities and financing elements. We might seriously degrade a bomb making unit and we could measure its decline in productivity. The same was true for other parts of their operating system. We could also see when a unit was able

*to re-establish itself, and how long it would take to do so. Then we would begin hitting it extensively again, driving down its capacity.*³³

From 2006–09 the Task Force maintained an operational tempo of 300 raids a month against AQI’s networks in Iraq. During 2008, McRaven continued

*What we saw in the intelligence being collected during our raids, and from the interrogations of the many members of AQI that we captured on those raids, was that a major decline was taking place in the capacity of different parts of their networks to carry out operations. Our kill/capture raids were considerably driving down their operational capacity. We were able to gauge and evaluate that decline.*³⁴

In fact, General McChrystal added, as early as the end of 2006, the commanders of TF-714’s raiding teams began sensing the impact of their operations. They told him that AQI was “cracking, it was not at the same level of proficiency and its effectiveness was lessening. We can see it.” He noted this was “counter-intuitive because at that time violence was escalating.”³⁵ But those at the operational level saw a weakening. “What they saw and what we heard from many of those who were captured and interrogated was that AQI could not control territory as they had earlier. And that the TF-714 teams were able to attack them in those areas and beat them up badly.”³⁶

By the late spring of 2007, those same commanders were coming to the conclusion that AQI was in demonstrable decline.³⁷ One year later, Task Force Deputy Commander, Lieutenant General Eric Fiel believed the indicators were even stronger, signifying that “AQI had been seriously degraded.”³⁸ Those indicators included “What AQI was saying about their situation in their own messaging and communications,” which TF-714 was collecting through its extensive signals intelligence capacity. This

reinforced what “we were learning from detainee interrogations about the impact of our targeting.”³⁹

“Capturing or killing AQI’s mid-level managers and commanders was,” according to TF-714’s leadership, the most important target because they “made the organization function.”⁴⁰ But “estimating with precision the degree to which the task force was able to degrade those mid-level operational commanders and managers was difficult.” This was because there was no “finite target set we could know about,” observed McChrystal. That said, TF-714 did “keep a running total of the Emirs, commanders, and managers that were taken off the battlefield. And there was real attrition.”⁴¹

During the 2006–09 timeframe, the count grew considerably as the Task Force was gaining extensive knowledge about various parts of the networks. This included an understanding of who the commanders and managers of various sub-network components were. Admiral McRaven observed that as this period progressed, “we were able to map out different parts of their networks, what they were involved in, who was involved, how they were linked together. With that knowledge, we were able, through raid after raid, to shatter it.”⁴²

The research underlying this article indicated a strong consensus that by the end of 2009 AQI had been seriously degraded by task force operations, and this was reflected in the decline in its ability to function and carry out missions. Lieutenant General Sacolick, in asserting this was the case, employed the “continuum of effects” framework—disrupt, degrade, dismantle, and defeat. By 2009, TF-714 had disrupted AQI’s clandestine apparatus, operational timetable, and freedom of movement, putting the group on the defensive. It also degraded the group’s ability to conduct larger operations and a large number of AQI’s operational cells, financial units, communications and media centers, bomb and IED production facilities, and arms acquisition networks. Finally, TF-714 dismantled networks to the degree

that they could no longer function in the cohesive manner they once had.⁴³ The task force had developed the capacity to operate inside those networks to break up a considerable number of them.

However, when it came to winning, Lieutenant General Sacolick proposed that in today’s irregular wars, a final defeat of the insurgent underground networks is illusive, because the remaining elements of such organizations, once they have been seriously disrupted and degraded, can go into a semi-dormant stage, regroup, and then phoenix-like reappear. Consequently, once AQI was largely degraded, it had to be kept at that stage, while the political reconciliation and reconstruction phases that follow a successful COIN/CT program have time to be established and take root.⁴⁴

General McChrystal added that: “Winning is relative in these kinds of wars. There is no VE Day. We put AQI on its back, having badly beaten it up. But until the political causes of the conflict are addressed, it could reemerge.” Consequently, during this post-conflict period which can go on for an extended period of time because political reconciliation and reconstruction do not happen overnight, AQI “had to be kept on its back.”⁴⁵

In effect, after three years of industrial-strength CT, Task Force-714 had reached what General Raymond Odierno, then Commander Multi-National Force-Iraq, referred to as the “irreducible minimum.” By this, he meant that even when a COIN/CT program is able to greatly weaken a group like AQI, they will still retain a capacity to carry out periodic attacks.⁴⁶ At the operational level this is winning. During 2009, the Task Force was “only carrying out two to three raids a night because AQI’s operational tempo was way down. And we were beginning to hand those missions off to our Iraqi CT force counterparts.”⁴⁷ In 2010, those missions contributed to the killing or capturing of 26 insurgent leaders.⁴⁸

That said, the conclusion of those who led TF-714 was that an effective COIN and CT program

can take you only so far. They are necessary parts of the resolution of such wars, but they are never sufficient in and of themselves. This critical conclusion was stressed by the leadership of TF-714. What COIN and CT can achieve is to establish the prerequisites for post-conflict transition, political reconciliation, and reconstruction. For the COIN forces, the goal was to sweep the insurgents from the cities and towns in Iraq and then to hold that ground after it was cleared. In Iraq, the Awakening Movement was an important facilitator for holding ground once the insurgents were cleared. For TF-714 the mission was to disrupt, degrade, and dismantle AQI's networked secret underground; to hit AQI's networks every night, killing or capturing a large number of its mid-level managers and operational commanders, and undermining its operational tempo.

Once territory was held and the insurgent networks degraded to their irreducible minimum, the conditions were set to begin post-conflict transition, political reconciliation, and reconstruction. In Iraq, transition began in August 2010 and culminated in December 2011, with the completion of the U.S. withdrawal of its forces in accord with the 2008 "Agreement between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq on the Withdrawal of the United States." While withdrawing, the United States would continue to train Iraqi security forces to enhance their capacity and professionalism. Beginning in 2012, there was a generally held assumption that a follow-on U.S. force would stay in Iraq to continue security capacity building, while other interagency elements facilitated post-conflict political reconciliation and reconstruction. A follow-on version of TF-714 would help its Iraqi counterparts maintaining the irreducible minimum to ensure that AQI did not have an opportunity to reconstitute itself and return to the offensive.

Operation Iraqi Freedom Transition to Operation New Dawn

In August 2010, the last Brigade Combat Team withdrew from Iraq, and on the 31st of that month, President Obama declared the end to "the American combat mission." Those U.S. forces remaining were to transition to non-combat stability activities as part of Operation *New Dawn* (OND). The remaining 50,000 troops would concentrate on training and advising the Iraqi Security Force (ISF) to improve its capacity to maintain the stability established in Iraq during OIF, while simultaneously withdrawing. To manage the transition, General Lloyd Austin assumed command of United States Forces-Iraq and Ambassador James Jeffery became ambassador.

Operation *New Dawn* had three principal objectives. First, to continue to advise, train, and equip ISF to become capable of maintaining internal stability and security. Second, to assist Iraq's Defense Ministry and other security institutions develop the capacity to oversee and manage operating forces. Each of these activities fit within the non-combat stability mandate of OND. But the third component called for a continuation of TF-714's warfighting operations, carried out in conjunction with its counterpart, the Iraq Special



Airmen prepare to take-off on a C-17 at Ali Air Base, Iraq, signaling the end of Operation *New Dawn* on December 18, 2011. The airmen were part of the last troops to leave Iraq. (U.S. Air Force/Cecilio Ricardo)

Operations Force (ISOF). They were to persistently attack and degrade AQI, keeping it “on its back,” preventing any resurgence.⁴⁹ During 2010, TF-714 did so very effectively. Nevertheless, despite heavy losses, AQI still managed to maintain a small number of surviving network elements and competent commanders and managers.

Even as OND was being implemented, there was a view among senior U.S. military commanders that Iraq’s security forces faced considerable challenges in reaching the point where they could stand on their own. And it would take substantial time to overcome those challenges. Consequently, in Baghdad and Washington senior officers assessed the need for a U.S. military presence after OND ended. In early 2011, General Austin, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen, and Commander of U.S. Central Command General James Mattis concluded that a U.S. force of 20–24,000 would be needed.⁵⁰ This was the best military advice of the senior military leadership.

Referred to as the Residual Force, they saw it as essential if Iraqi stability was to be maintained, ISF professionalization continued, and the longer process of post-conflict political reconciliation and reconstruction undertaken. Settling on the size of the Residual Force was the first step in developing an interagency plan for how the U.S. could help facilitate reconciliation and reconstruction. But developing that plan never received attention as the size of the Residual Force became a highly contentious political issue for the Obama administration.

The Austin–Mullen–Mattis number caused “sticker shock” at the White House. As a result, a Principals Committee meeting at the end of April 2011 chaired by National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon sought to outflank the generals, setting a 10,000 ceiling. When Admiral Mullen learned of the maneuver he “prepared a confidential memo to Donilon outlining his position and that of the collective military leadership.”

The Chairman reduced the number to “16,000 troops.” The memo was seen as an attempt to “box the White House in.”⁵¹ The result was no Administration decision on the size of the Residual Force at that time, and that indecision continued into the summer months of 2011.⁵²

The size of the force was not the only issue that had to be addressed. The White House also stipulated that any force remaining in Iraq after 2011 required a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between Washington and Baghdad that would provide the same immunities for U.S. forces as had been agreed to in the 2008 SOFA. For the Obama Administration a new SOFA authorized by executive agreement would not do. It had to be approved by the Iraqi parliament. Such an agreement was never reached.⁵³

Also impeding a decision on the Residual Force was the political turmoil in Iraq, as Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki had been maneuvering for months to have himself re-appointed following his loss of the March 2010 election. Even though Maliki’s party had come in second in the elections to the Iraqiya Party of Ayad Allawi, it was clear to some he had no intention of “stepping down” so Allawi could try to form a government.

In November, Maliki brokered a power-sharing agreement with Allawi and Iraq’s two Kurdish vice presidents and resumed the position of Prime Minister. He would use that reappointment in 2011 to consolidate power at the expense of those with whom he had agreed to share power.⁵⁴ During that period of political intrigue, Maliki was unwilling to take the risk of making a formal request for a Residual Force to stay in Iraq after 2011. As this dragged on into the summer, the White House started revising the size of the Residual Force downward, while continuing to insist on a SOFA approved by the parliament. In mid-August, the proposed size reached a low of 1,600.⁵⁵ This made any accord impossible. Agreeing to a Residual Force

was a contentious political issue in Iraq, and not a risk Maliki was about to take for this level of continuing U.S. support. As a result, President Obama on October 21 informed him that the United States would reduce its forces to zero by the end of 2011, terminating the U.S. military presence.

The Consequences of Withdrawal

During 2011, as the likelihood of a Residual Force faded, Prime Minister Maliki moved to consolidate control of the Iraqi Security Forces by accelerating the removal of senior Sunni officers that he feared could be disloyal to him—a cleanse that began in 2009 with Maliki’s removal of Sunni commanders that he believed to be secret supporters of the former Ba’athist regime—and their replacement with loyal Shia officers.⁵⁶ The same thing was taking place in the police force. Cleansing accelerated into 2012, as the Prime Minister unremittingly placed his loyalists in senior command posts.

The result of this cronyism was politicization and corruption of the ISF officer corps. The non-sectarian professional army leadership that the United States worked hard to foster, with an officer’s corps comprised of competent Shia, Sunni, and Kurds, disappeared. Maliki loyalists were rewarded with high-ranking appointments in combat and intelligence units to ensure that the military posed no internal threat to him. Rather, it could be used by him against all he perceived as political rivals.

Maliki was able to consolidate civilian control of the security institutions, turning them into a sectarian tool he could use for political purposes. He consolidated control over the army and other security institutions through the “Office of the Commander in Chief, which he used to bypass other state institutions theoretically involved in civil-military relations.” That office “became the de facto executive body for the whole security sector,” and Maliki used it to “established control over the [entire] security

sector.” This included “controlling appointments to all senior positions in the ISF to create a network of officers loyal to him.”⁵⁷ Of course, this ran counter to what the United States had sought to achieve—a professionalized Iraqi army in which officers were promoted based on merit.

Maliki’s control of the security institutions included the ISOF that had become a highly capable partner of TF-714. But during the transition period, Maliki began to increase his use of those units against political enemies. As politicization and sectarianism crept into ISOF, partnered operations with TF-714 suffered. As it became clear there would be no Residual Force, TF-714 began decamping from its base in Balad and operations ended.

During 2011, Maliki also moved against the Sons of Iraq, the Sunni tribesmen who first emerged in Anbar Province in 2005 and then became the foot soldiers of the Awakening Movement.⁵⁸ Their number had risen to more than 90,000 members and the Awakening Movement was credited with having helped reduce the violence first in Anbar and then in the other areas in which they operated during the Surge. The government had planned to reward the Sons of Iraq with jobs in different security institutions when stability was achieved in 2008, but less than 10,000 received assignments. This created a critical mass of unemployed fighters who had been disenfranchised by the government that they had help to survive.

In sum, in 2011 as the U.S. moved down the path to zero, the Maliki government employed the security institutions, which he controlled, to consolidate power. But in doing so, the gains the Iraqi military and police forces had made, thanks to the tens of billions invested by the U.S. to train and equip them, began rapidly reversing. Serious questions began to emerge about the capacity of the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior forces to execute the full range of their duties. Instead, they were devolving into “Maliki’s private militia.”⁵⁹

AQI Redux and the Origins of Islamic State

By 2009 three years of industrial-strength CT operations by TF-714 had greatly weakened AQI. Then in 2010, 26 of its leaders were either killed or captured. These included Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Abdullah al-Raschid al-Baghdadi, AQI's top leaders. The organization appeared to be at the end of the line, on life support. But the developments chronicled above that took place during Operation New Dawn provided its surviving elements with an opportunity to revive the organization.

First, AQI's Shura Council selected a new leader or emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. A new operations chief likewise emerged in Hajji Bakr, a former Ba'athist officer, as well as a new war minister, Nu'man Salman Mansur al-Zaydi. This new leadership began calling AQI the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). To build up the rank and file of the new organization, ISI initiated an "intensive recruitment campaign" directed, in part, at members of the Sons of Iraq who were being "dismissed from their positions in significant numbers" by the Maliki government.⁶⁰

According to an October 2010 account, while "there are no firm figures, security and political officials say hundreds of the well-disciplined fighters—many of whom have gained extensive knowledge about the American military—appear to have joined." Moreover, there may be many other "Awakening fighters still on the Iraqi government payroll . . . covertly aiding the insurgency."⁶¹ According to a former Awakening leader, Nathum al-Jubouri, Sons of Iraq "members have two options: Stay with the government, which would be a threat to their lives, or help al-Qaeda by being a double agent." Many are choosing the latter option, he added, providing a "database for al-Qaeda that can be used to target places that had been out of reach before."⁶²

With the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, the Obama Administration judged al-Qaeda to

be nearing defeat. But that was not the case in Iraq. ISI's ranks swelled in 2011–12, as did their attacks on police and military facilities and checkpoints. Facilitating these developments were the sectarian policies of the Maliki government and the draw-down of U.S. forces, in particular TF-714 and other special operations and intelligence capabilities.

During 2011–12 high casualty terrorist operations burgeoned as ISI launched several suicide car bomb attacks in Baghdad and other major cities. Illustrative of this escalation was the ISI suicide bomber attack on the Umm al-Qura Mosque in Baghdad on August 28, 2011. The terrorist set off the IED inside the mosque, killing 32 and wounding many more.⁶³ And while the most spectacular, there were a total of "42 apparently coordinated attacks [that] underscored the reality that few places in Iraq are safe."⁶⁴

These operations were the beginning of a resurgence that would culminate in ISI taking control of significant territory in Northern Iraq from 2012–14. And, as a result, Baghdadi promoted himself to Caliph Ibrahim and declared the creation of the Islamic Caliphate on this territory. ISI then became the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and seized control of much of Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, and its surrounding province. In six days of fighting, ISIL routed 30,000 ISF soldiers and 30,000 federal police.

Who Lost Iraq?

In the wake of these developments a narrative gained considerable traction that "George W. Bush's 'surge' of American troops in Iraq achieved victory, before Obama fecklessly withdrew U.S. soldiers, transforming success into failure and triggering the rise of ISIS."⁶⁵ For critics of the Obama Administration, this outcome was clear. They "blame President Obama's administration for losing [Iraq]," asserting that the administration's failure "to renegotiate a status of forces agreement that would have allowed

some American combat troops to remain in Iraq and secure the hard-fought gains the American soldier had won by 2009” gave AQI the opportunity to reconstitute itself first as ISI and then ISIL.⁶⁶

In effect, President Obama is charged with having snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. Upon entering office, “he inherited a pacified Iraq, where the terrorists had been defeated both militarily and ideologically. Militarily, thanks to Bush’s surge, coupled with the Sunni Awakening, al-Qaeda in Iraq was driven from the strongholds it had established in Anbar and other Iraqi provinces. It controlled no major territory, and its top leader—Abu Musab al-Zarqawi—had been killed by U.S. Special Operations Forces. Ideologically, the terrorists had suffered a popular rejection.” All of this was squandered by Obama with his decision at the end of 2011 to “withdraw all U.S. forces from Iraq; taking our boot off of the terrorists’ neck; allowing them to regroup.”⁶⁷ The bottom line, according to General Jack Keene: “Bush won the war. Obama lost the peace.”⁶⁸

To be sure, there is a kernel of truth in this assessment but there also is considerable overstatement of what had been achieved “on the ground” and where Iraq stood at the end of 2011. Critics of this interpretation of the consequences of the 2011 withdrawal counter that there was no victory in Iraq to squander—U.S. military power had gone as far as it could. Ultimately, it was up to the Iraqis to consolidate those 2006–09 gains. What the Surge and its aftermath achieved, according to supporters of President Obama’s policy, was to give the Iraqis an opportunity. But Maliki and the Iraqi leadership had to “seize the moment.”⁶⁹

There likewise is a kernel of truth here as well, but also a downplaying of what a Residual Force could have contributed in helping Iraq consolidate the gains made by COIN and CT operations from 2006–09. Those operations had markedly improved the security conditions in Iraq. The Surge

and COIN strategy allowed American forces and their Iraqi partners to gain control of Baghdad, Diyala, and other major urban areas where AQI had ensconced itself. And TF–714 had reduced AQI’s networks considerably by 2009, keeping them through 2010 at what General Odierno described as the “irreducible minimum.”⁷⁰

In an irregular war, there is no decisive battle that culminates in victory for one side over the other. As Rupert Smith writes in *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*: “In contrast to these hard, strategic ends we tend now to conduct operations for ‘softer,’ more malleable, complex, sub-strategic objectives.” Military force is employed “to establish a condition in which the political objective can be achieved by other means in other ways . . . Overall, therefore, if a decisive strategic victory was the hallmark of [traditional] interstate industrial war,” for irregular warfare, “establishing a *condition* may be deemed the hallmark of the new paradigm of war.”⁷¹ What that means is establishing security and stability which *sets the conditions* in which post–conflict reconciliation can take place.

That condition was reached by the end of 2009. Operation *New Dawn* sought to maintain and enhance it by continuing to advise, train, and equip ISF, as well as other security forces, to become capable of maintaining internal stability and security. At the same time, TF–714 continued to attack and degrade AQI, preventing its resurgence. But what was missing in OND, and what should have been a key part of an interagency-based Residual Force going forward in 2012, was a capacity to foster political mediation and reconciliation in Iraq. It is the key component for settling irregular wars like that which took place in Iraq.

Political reconciliation, within the context of irregular war, is a process designed to foster intergroup understanding, coexistence, and conflict resolution. Political reconciliation seeks to establish

accommodation and to normalize relations among elements of a society that have been in violent conflict with one another. In Iraq, this necessitated an agreement on power sharing among the three major identity groups. To achieve this, an overarching political framework had to be established for negotiating these arrangements at the national level. For that reconciliation to take place, third party mediators have a critical role to play. But as several accounts have reported, post-conflict reconciliation was not facilitated through the formation of a long-term strategic partnership between Washington and Baghdad as part of a post-Operation *New Dawn* Residual Force. The Obama Administration had an important role to play in mediating that political reconciliation process. By not doing so and withdrawing, the security gains that had been achieved through operational level success from 2006–09 by the United States quickly dissipated. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ This data, which was compiled weekly by the Department of Defense from January 2004 to April 2009 is contained in article by CSIS expert Anthony Cordesman on “The Uncertain Security Situation in Iraq: Trends in Violence, Casualties, and Iraqi Perceptions,” (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2010), available at < <https://www.csis.org/analysis/uncertain-security-situation-iraq> >.

² William B. Ostlund, “Irregular Warfare: Counterterrorism Forces in Support of Counterinsurgency Operations,” *The Land Warfare Papers*, No. 51 (September 2012).

³ David Tucker and Chris Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Linda Robinson, *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004); Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Re-building U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1997); and Thomas Adams, *US Special Operations Forces in Action: The Challenge of Unconventional Warfare* (London: Routledge Press, 1998). For a discussion of the theory underlying such forces, see chapter one of William McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Presidio Press, 1995).

⁴ Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 101. The Pentagon had printed packs of playing cards with the grainy photographs and names of the top Ba’athists. During the summer of 2003, TF 714 tracked down the Iraqi dictator’s two sons, Uday and Qusay. Then on December 13, in the town of ad-Dawr, near Tikrit, they captured Saddam himself.

⁵ Interview with Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, U.S. Army retired, Alexandria, VA, October 2014.

⁶ Interview with General Stanley McChrystal, U.S. Army retired, Alexandria, VA, July 2014.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Interview with Admiral William McRaven, U.S. Navy retired, Washington, DC, September 2014.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Interview with General Stanley McChrystal.

¹¹ Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 92.

¹² “A Conversation with Stanley McChrystal,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2013).

¹³ Adam Grissom, “The Future of Military Innovation Studies,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* (October 2006); John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Richard Downie, *Learning From Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998); Kimberly Zisk, *Engaging the Enemy: Organization Theory and Soviet Military Innovation 1955-1991* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Michael McNerney, “Military Innovation During War: Paradox or Paradigm,” *Defense & Security Analysis* (June, 2005); Theo Farrell, “Figuring Out Fighting Organizations: New Organizational Analysis in Strategic Studies,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* (March 1996).

¹⁴ Creating and sustaining such an organizational approach to problem solving, explain Spender and Grinyer, should be a responsibility “shared by top management and employees.” They do so by nurturing a “dialectic between the organization as a whole and its parts.” J.C. Spender and P.H. Grinyer, “Organizational Renewal: Top Management’s Role in a Loosely Coupled System,” *Human Relations*, no. 8 (1995), 913. Also see Nirmal Pal and Daniel Pantaleo, *The Agile Enterprise: Reinventing your Organization for Success in an On-demand World* (New York: Springer, 2005) and Emmanuel Gobillot, *The Connected Leader: Creating Agile Organizations for People, Performance and Profit* (London: Kogan, 2008).

¹⁵ The details of how Task Force-714 carried out this organizational transformation and recreated itself during the Iraq war is beyond the scope of this article. Those developments have been described and analyzed

in considerable detail in *Military Innovation in War: It Takes a Learning Organization*.

¹⁶ *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq. Report to Congress in Accordance with the Department of Defense Supplemental Appropriations Act 2008 (Section 9204, Public Law 110-252)* Washington, DC, Department of Defense, June 2010, available at <http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/June_9204>.

¹⁷ Consider the December 2006 report of the Iraq Study Group, co-chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Indiana Congressman Lee Hamilton. The report painted a grim picture: “The challenges in Iraq are complex,”... “Violence is increasing in scope and lethality... If the situation continues to deteriorate, the consequences could be severe.” The Report made 79 recommendations, but the key issue was security and the role of U.S. forces. With respect to that it asserted: “There is no action the American military can take that, by itself, can bring about success in Iraq.” See James Baker, Lee Hamilton, and Lawrence S. Eagleburger, *The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward—A New Approach* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 7, 48, and 51.

¹⁸ *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, 27.

¹⁹ Frank Hoffman and Alexander Crowther, “The Surge in Iraq and Afghanistan,” in Richard Hooker and Joseph Collins, ed., *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 124–25.

²⁰ The most recent Iraq Index is available at <www.brookings.edu/iraq-index/>

²¹ Richard Shultz, *The Marines Take Anbar: The Four-Year Fight Against Al Qaeda* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012), chapter 5.

²² See for example Thomas Ricks, “Situation Called Dire in West Iraq,” *Washington Post* (September 11, 2006).

²³ Shultz, *The Marines Take Anbar: The Four-Year Fight Against Al Qaeda*, see chapter 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, see chapter 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

²⁶ Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro, “Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?” *International Security* (Summer 2012), 37.

²⁷ For assessments of the Surge see Kimberly Kim Kagan, *The Surge: A Military History* (New York: Encounter Books, 2009); Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Vintage, 2013); and Peter Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

²⁸ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare:*

Theory and Practice (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 1964); Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1966); Richard Clutterbuck, *The Long Long War: Counterinsurgency in Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966); Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency and Peacekeeping* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1971); John McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Press, 1966); and Sarah Sewall et al., *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency FM* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

²⁹ Follow-up interview with General Stanley McChrystal, U.S. Army retired, Alexandria, VA, May 2015.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Follow-up interview with General Bennet Sacolick, U.S. Army, McLean, VA, June 2015.

³² Follow-up interview with Admiral William McRaven, U.S. Navy retired, June 2015.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Follow-up interview with General Stanley McChrystal.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Interview with General Joseph Votel, U.S. Army, Tampa, FL, May 2015.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Interview with Lieutenant General Fiel, U.S. Air Force retired, Tampa, FL, May 2015.

⁴¹ Follow-up interview with General Stanley McChrystal.

⁴² Follow-up interview with Admiral William McRaven.

⁴³ Follow-up interview with General Bennet Sacolick.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Follow-up interview with General Stanley McChrystal.

⁴⁶ Cited in David Strachan-Morris, “The Irreducible Minimum: Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation,” *RUSI Journal* (August/September 2010), 32–36.

⁴⁷ Follow-up interview with Admiral William McRaven.

⁴⁸ Strachan-Morris, “The Irreducible Minimum...,” 32. These included Abu Ayyub al-Masri, AQI’s overall leader, and Abu Abdullah al-Raschid al-Baghdadi, the head of the Islamic State of Iraq.

⁴⁹ For an elaboration of these three objectives see Richard R. Brennan, Jr., et. al, *Ending the U.S. War in Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013),

chapter 4.

⁵⁰ Gordon and Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama*, 657.

⁵¹ Ibid, 658–59.

⁵² Robert Gates, *Duty: The Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), 554–55.

⁵³ Gordon and Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama*, 666.

⁵⁴ Gordon and Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama*, chapter 34.

⁵⁵ Brennan, Jr., et. al, *Ending the U.S. War in Iraq*, 103.

⁵⁶ Kenneth Pollack, *Iraq Military Situation Report* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2014), available at <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2014/06/14/iraq-military-situation-report/>>.

⁵⁷ Florence, “An Unhappy Marriage: Civil-Military Relations in Post-Saddam Iraq,” *Carnegie Middle East Center* (January 2016), available at <<http://carnegie-mec.org/2016/01/13/unhappy-marriage-civil-military-relations-in-post-saddam-iraq-pub-61955>>.

⁵⁸ Lelia Fadel, “Iraq’s Awakening Stripped of Their Police Ranks,” *New York Times* (October 2, 2010).

⁵⁹ T.X. Hammes, “Raising and Mentoring Security Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq,” in Hooker and Collins, ed., *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, 311.

⁶⁰ Timothy Williams and Duraid Adnan, “Sunnis in Iraq Allied With U.S. Rejoin Rebels,” *New York Times* (October 16, 2010), available at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/17/world/middleeast/17awakening.html?mcubz=0>>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ BBC, “Baghdad Mosque Attack,” (August 28, 2011), available at <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14704484>>.

⁶⁴ Michael Schmitt, “Threat Resurges in Deadliest Day of Year for Iraq,” *New York Times* (August 15, 2011), available at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/16/world/middleeast/16iraq.html?mcubz=0>>.

⁶⁵ Dominic Tierney, “Who Really Lost Iraq? Obama Didn’t Turn Victory into Defeat. There Was No Victory,” *The Atlantic* (January 21, 2016).

⁶⁶ James Traub, “The Mess Obama Left Behind in Iraq,” *Foreign Policy* (October 7, 2016), available at <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/07/the-mess-obama-left-behind-in-iraq-surge-debate/>>.

⁶⁷ Marc Thiessen, “Obama’s Retreat from War Made Matters Worse,” *Newsweek* (May 21, 2016), available at <<http://www.newsweek.com/>

obama-retreat-war-made-matters-worse-461598>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Michael Crowley, “Who Lost Iraq? Did George W. Bush Create the Islamic State? Did Barack Obama? We Asked the Insiders to Tell Us Who is to Blame,” *POLITICO Magazine* (July/August 2015), available at <<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/06/iraq-roundtable-george-w-bush-barack-obama-119221>>.

⁷⁰ Although not discussed above, it is also important to note that the Shia militias, which had posed a serious security threat to the Iraqi government, had likewise been considerably degraded in 2008.

⁷¹ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of war in the Modern Age* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 272–73.