

REFLECTIONS ON LESSONS ENCOUNTERED

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This volume is an effort to capture, at the strategic level, useful lessons from America's long and painful experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. Earlier chapters explore in detail a range of the important strategic dimensions and dynamics of these campaigns. In this chapter, we render an early accounting of the costs and gains, followed by more general observations that may inform the soldier/statesman and strategist when facing similar complex challenges. In particular, we focus on three major strategic events: the decisions to invade Iraq in 2003, to surge in Iraq in 2006, and to surge in Afghanistan in 2009. Our audience is that cohort of present and future senior military leaders, as well as those advising them, who operate at the apex of civil-military relations, the politico-military interface where all key strategic decisions are made. The task has been daunting, not least because we find ourselves far enough removed from events to lend a measure of clarity, but not so far as to permit true objectivity. This is not history, at least not yet, nor is it revealed truth. But it is, we hope, something of a beginning on a journey of discovery.

Two Campaigns: A Complex Balance Sheet

Iraq and Afghanistan loom large in the popular consciousness as the long, grinding conflicts that, along with the economic collapse of 2008, dominated American political life in the years following 9/11. Both were separate and distinct cases, yet each was inextricably involved with the other, usually as a competitor for resources. Both began as more or less conventional state-on-state military interventions but evolved quickly into full-blown counterinsurgencies. Both involved large coalitions, massive security assistance programs, and bitterly divided ethno-sectarian groups, challenging attempts to employ a

“comprehensive approach” that could unite civil and military action across the effort. Both featured weak, corrupt host-nation governments.

Yet there were also important differences. Iraq featured greater wealth, a more advanced infrastructure, less daunting logistical challenges, different tribal and ethno-sectarian dynamics, and more human capital. Afghanistan, lacking oil and other natural resources, was desperately poor and vulnerable to outside intervention, while its harsh climate and topography made military operations difficult. As in Vietnam, the U.S. military was forced to adapt its doctrine, training, and equipment in nonstandard ways, while the civilian component strained to build host-nation capacity.

With this as context, we state unequivocally that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq carried high costs in blood and treasure. More than 10,000 American Servicemembers, government civilians, and contractor personnel have been killed, and well over 80,000 have been wounded or injured, many seriously. Veterans and Servicemembers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury add hundreds of thousands more to the casualty count. Our allies and partners, not including host nations, count over 1,400 dead. In Iraq alone, at least 135,000 civilians were killed, mostly by terrorists and insurgents.¹ In Afghanistan, from 2009 to 2014, nearly 18,000 civilians were killed, over 70 percent at the hands of the enemy.² The effects of these wars, at home and abroad, will be felt for many years to come.

The direct costs of these campaigns are \$1.6 trillion, which in the main were covered not by revenues but by deficit spending. More complex, long-term estimates exceed \$4 trillion.³ The U.S. Armed Forces—especially its ground forces—experienced extraordinary stress and have yet to recover. That process has suffered from the simultaneous challenges of sequestration, downsizing, and the requirements of new and pressing conflicts.

Fourteen years after 9/11, any attempt to accurately gauge political losses and gains from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is problematic. The costs appear high and the benefits slight, though long-term outcomes remain uncertain. Iraq, thought to have been stabilized in 2011 when U.S. and coalition troops withdrew, now faces partition and a strong pull into an Iranian orbit. Though al Qaeda in Iraq was defeated, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has emerged as an even stronger threat, further destabilizing Iraq, Syria, and the region as a whole. Afghanistan under the new Ashraf Ghani adminis-

tration remains a work in progress, its future after the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in question.

Looking back at this remove, the costs seem clear, painful, and excessive, while the benefits are unclear or still beyond the horizon. Throughout, the Armed Forces performed with courage and competence, retaining the trust and confidence of the American people. Yet success in both campaigns is elusive. Progress in Afghanistan and Iraq, in the words of General David Petraeus, USA (Ret.), still appears fragile and reversible.

There have been solid gains. Saddam Hussein's tyranny, aggression, and lust for weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are history. Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan has been all but destroyed. The Taliban have been checked, although their various branches remain a potent force in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Because of the dedicated work of our Intelligence Community, Armed Forces, Department of Homeland Security, and national law enforcement establishment, al Qaeda has been unable to repeat the catastrophic attacks of September 2001. This is a crowning achievement of the Long War, and one that should not be discounted.

Both Afghanistan and Iraq have been liberated from highly oppressive regimes. They have also been introduced to democracy. More immediately, both nations have received generous help in reconstruction. Afghanistan, for example, had been at war for nearly 24 years before the United States and its partners helped to oust the backward and highly authoritarian Taliban regime. The devastation of the country in 2002 stands in great contrast to the effects of U.S. and allied reconstruction efforts, which have significantly improved the quality of life for Afghan citizens.⁴

Al Qaeda terrorism, however, has morphed from a single hierarchical organization to a set of interlocking networks. There are now al Qaeda rivals, such as ISIL, that have significant capabilities, and there are other violent extremist organizations, especially in North Africa and the Horn of Africa, that have declared themselves to be members or affiliates of al Qaeda. Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, USA (Ret.), former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, noted, "In 2004, there were 21 total Islamic terrorist groups spread out in 18 countries. Today, there are 41 Islamic terrorist groups spread out in 24 countries."⁵ While we may have prevented major terrorist attacks against the homeland since 9/11, we have no reason to be complacent.

In geostrategic terms, our intervention in Iraq has accelerated the Sunni-Shia conflict that now rends the Middle East. Saddam was an odious tyrant, but his Iraq represented a powerful counterweight to Iranian hegemonic aspirations. Iran has been the winner, as a weakened and fractured Iraq, dominated by Shia political forces, is now heavily influenced by Tehran. The intense sectarianism that followed the U.S. departure from Iraq enabled the rise of ISIL in the years that followed, with grave consequences for the region and the world.

It is important to note that neither Iraq nor Afghanistan was originally a counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign. Both interventions unseated existing governments, to be replaced by new leaders, nascent governance structures, and a bewildering array of international aid organizations that flooded these countries with money and advisors. A practical working democracy, competent ministries, and the rule of law did not materialize quickly, frustrating the desire to hand over governance and security responsibilities and withdraw. In both cases, the opposition was defeated but not destroyed. Over time, strong insurgent forces were reconstituted to contest host-nation governance and coalition security forces. U.S. leaders were slow to acknowledge the nature and character of these conflicts as they evolved into true insurgencies, though subsequent adaptations were rapid and effective, especially at the tactical and operational levels.

In Afghanistan, a sober assessment shows that while the Afghan people are clearly better off than they were under the Taliban, and while Afghanistan is no longer a safe haven for al Qaeda, the Taliban were not eliminated. In the Hindu Kush, the new Ghani regime, backed by an army that has succeeded at great costs in three fighting seasons, has reduced friction in the coalition and is fighting hard to improve governance and reduce corruption. Nevertheless, the future stability and prosperity of Afghanistan remain in some doubt. In Iraq, in the 3½ years subsequent to the U.S. withdrawal, the Nouri al-Maliki government adopted intensely sectarian practices, weakened its army, and opened the door for ISIL. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, our military efforts were able to set conditions and create space for a resolution of the political issues that had impelled both insurgencies in the first place. This must be seen as a major accomplishment. Unfortunately, both the Iraqi and Afghan political establishments lacked the will and capacity to fully exploit these gains. Internal corruption and inadequate democratic structures, grafted onto traditionally

authoritarian and tribal cultures, prevented stable power-sharing solutions in Iraq and inhibited them in Afghanistan. Thus, the military gains achieved were not enough to enable political solutions, despite the commitment of huge sums and the sustained efforts over many years of coalition diplomats and development experts. Herein lies a powerful lesson: by itself, the military instrument cannot solve inherently political questions, absent the total defeat of an adversary and its reconstruction from the ground up. This is unlikely in all but the most extreme cases.

There is, however, a larger context. The ideological and sociological seeds of Islamist terrorism and insurgency are found in the larger war between fundamentalist and more moderate camps and a struggle for political modernization in a greater Middle East much in need of reform.⁶ This suggests that the conflict in which we have been engaged for the past 14 years will continue, albeit in new forms.

The Long War has become a longer war; as Clausewitz noted, the results of war are never final.⁷ Those who crave a final accounting of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will have to wait decades to get it. It is, however, possible to offer judgments and observations that may be helpful to the rising generation of senior military leadership. Both civilian and military leaders are required to cooperate to make effective strategy, yet their cultures vary widely. As noted elsewhere, the dialogue is an unequal one, with the power of decision residing exclusively with the President and the civilian leadership. Nevertheless, the role of senior military leaders is critical. If military professionalism means anything at all, those leaders possess expert knowledge not available anywhere else. By law and precedent, they have a right to be heard. Navigating this terrain represents the art of generalship at its most challenging. Success derives from intellectual preparation, decades of experiential learning and high success in leading complex military organizations, a decided character that is sturdy and self-confident while also open to new ideas, an advanced grasp of higher strategy, and a strong moral-ethical compass. Not all who rise to the top of the military hierarchy are so equipped.

Case Analysis

While a comprehensive discussion of findings and observations is found in earlier chapters and in a separate annex, Operations *Iraqi Freedom* and *Enduring*

Freedom represent distinct case studies in how policy and strategy are made, each a rich vein to be mined. Immediately following the 9/11 attacks, an urgent consensus formed demanding a military response. In the case of Afghanistan, time was short, and only limited interagency discussion took place before military forces were in motion. In a sense, our approach to the campaign was always, in Helmuth von Moltke's felicitous phrase, a "system of expedients" as the interagency community adapted and evolved to changing conditions and to the reality that for many years, Afghanistan was a secondary priority to Iraq. Only in 2010 did Afghanistan become the primary theater of war.

The opportunity for planning and preparation was far greater in the case of Iraq. Here the case for war was less clear, the higher prioritization less convincing, the military less enthusiastic. Perhaps the most basic of strategic questions—what is the problem to be solved?—became a football to be kicked around for the next several years, with the answer ranging from destruction of WMD to preventing a nexus of terror to establishing democracy in the heart of the Arab world. Many key assumptions—that Saddam's WMD program presented a clear and present danger, that Iraqi reconstruction would pay for itself, that the majority Shiite population would welcome coalition forces as liberators, that working through Iraqi tribal structures could be safely ignored, that a small footprint could be successful, that large-scale de-Ba'athification was needful and practical, that a rapid transfer to Iraqi control was possible—proved unfounded, dislocating our strategy and the campaign. The failure to plan adequately and comprehensively for the postconflict period ushered in a new, dangerous, and intractable phase that saw a rapid descent first into insurgency and then into intense sectarian violence.⁸ National decisions linking strategic success to corrupt and incapable host-nation governments—the primary drivers of the insurgencies in the first place—proved a major brake.

What was the appropriate role for senior military figures in this regard? The answer lies partly in the degree to which military leaders at the politico-military interface are expected to limit their advice to purely military matters—to delivering "best military advice" only, leaving aside political, economic, legal, and other dimensions for others to weigh. This is a recurring theme in civil-military relations, dating to the 1950s if not earlier, that has not yet been fully resolved. Political leaders may believe, and some clearly do, that military officers are ill-equipped to operate in this environment.⁹

[M]ilitary officers are ill-prepared to contribute to high policy. Normal career patterns do not look towards such a role. . . . half-hearted attempts at irregular intervals in an officer's career to introduce him to questions of international politics produce only superficiality and presumption and an altogether deficient sense of the real complexity of the problems facing the nation.¹⁰

An alternate perspective, voiced by President John F. Kennedy but with roots in Clausewitz, holds that military officers engaged at the highest levels have not only a right but also a duty to take into consideration the context of critical national security issues, including their political, diplomatic, and economic dimensions, lest their military advice be rendered useless or impractical. President Kennedy specifically urged—even ordered—the military, from the Joint Chiefs right down to academy cadets, to eschew “narrow” definitions of military competence and responsibilities, take political considerations into account in their military recommendations, and prepare themselves to take active roles in the policymaking process.¹¹

We take the latter view. For the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and combatant commanders, there is no “purely military” question, no neat distinction between different dimensions of strategy and policy. They are conjoined. In this regard, we do not find in the record convincing evidence of vigorous debate or respectful dissent from senior military leaders on the key questions raised above, though admittedly all rise above the purely military. Nor do we see them as apparent only in hindsight. The military operations leading to the overthrow of Saddam were outstandingly successful, a tribute to superb military leadership and to the Armed Forces as a whole. Nevertheless, the basic assumptions upon which our national and campaign strategies for Iraq were based were flawed, with doleful consequences.¹² The primary responsibility must lie with the political leaders who made them. But senior military leaders also have a voice and real influence as expert practitioners in their fields. In the case of the decision to invade Iraq, this influence was not used in full.

This dynamic speaks fundamentally to how we make strategy in America and how our civil-military relations are ordered. Despite criticism of the military as “praetorian” or “out of control,”¹³ deference to civilian control is real, especially when dealing with strong civilian personalities. The example of

early success in Afghanistan with limited forces empowered proponents of a similar approach for Iraq, as did the heavy support by the administration for “transformational” thinking about armed conflict. In terms of organizational culture, and our experience in Vietnam notwithstanding, the Armed Forces were more predisposed to sharp, decisive, conventional operations than protracted irregular ones. These factors help explain, in part, the approaches taken by senior military leaders in the run-up to Iraq.

A separate but related case is President George W. Bush’s decision to surge in Iraq in 2006, made against the recommendations of the military chain of command. The ultimate success of the Surge remains open to debate. Some argue that the Surge precipitated a major reduction in violence, creating conditions for a political settlement that ultimately failed when U.S. forces withdrew in 2011. Others see the crisis in Iraq today as evidence that the Surge along with the Anbar Awakening were only tactical successes with temporarily positive effects that were undone later by the political failures of the Maliki administration. While these differing perspectives will not be resolved, the role played by senior military leaders at this time illuminates both the strengths and weaknesses of America’s unique approach to making strategy.

The year 2006 was difficult for the United States and the coalition in Iraq. The February 22 bombing of the al-Askari mosque led to an extraordinary spike in violence. By most accounts Iraq began to degenerate into open civil war, a conflict that the new Maliki government was unwilling or unable to control. Several attempts to stabilize Baghdad failed. That summer, officials with the National Security Council staff began to push for a “policy review.” In November, the administration was dealt a strong rebuff in the midterm elections, leading to the resignation of Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. In early December, the bipartisan Iraq Study Group released its report, stating that “the situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating.”¹⁴

Aware that the success of the campaign was in doubt, President Bush reached out to a number of advisors, both in and outside the formal military and political chains. He was provided essentially with three options: to accelerate the withdrawal of American troops and the handover to Iraqi security forces, to pull back from the capital and allow the factions to fight it out, or to surge forces dramatically to regain the initiative and reestablish security.¹⁵ With some variations, most senior military officials favored the first option.¹⁶ In the case of

the Joint Chiefs of Staff, their views were undoubtedly colored by their Title 10 responsibilities to preserve a force weakened by years at war as well as concerns about readiness to meet other contingencies should they erupt. Other senior commanders genuinely believed that more U.S. troops would only inflame local opposition from both sides. In the end, the President elected to surge five Army brigades to the capital and 4,000 Marines to Anbar Province in western Iraq, with a mandate to focus strongly on securing the population.

In so doing, President Bush chose not to adopt the military advice provided by the formal chain of command, opting instead for the Surge option recommended by outside advisors. Moving swiftly, he replaced Secretary Rumsfeld with Robert Gates, installed General Petraeus as his new field commander, announced an increase in the size of the Army and Marine Corps, directed an associated “civilian surge,” and expedited the deployment of the fresh troops. To their credit, senior military leaders supported the President’s decision and its implementation, helping to enable a 95 percent reduction in violence and setting conditions for an eventual transition to Iraqi control. This achievement staved off defeat and a precipitous withdrawal, perhaps the best outcome available under the prevailing circumstances.

Any scholar assessing this period must confront the fact that in this case, the President, as commander in chief, disregarded the best military advice proffered by the Joint Chiefs, combatant commander, and theater commander. (To be fair, President Bush encountered opposition from the State Department, Congress, and his own party as well.) Plumbing the depths of this paradox requires more space than we have here, but a true understanding has many dimensions. Many of the three- and four-star generals engaged in Iraq in 2006 spent most of their careers focused on conventional warfighting and not on counterinsurgency; indeed, the debate on the efficacy and applicability of COIN doctrine continues to this day. Most of them had specific responsibilities and frames of reference that did not encompass the President’s wide field of view. It is also worth noting that by late 2006, the President had been engaged and focused on Iraq for at least 4 years and was by then experienced, highly knowledgeable, and possessed of his own firm views.¹⁷ The recommendations of senior military leaders can be seen as grounded in their particular backgrounds, sets of experiences, and personal perspectives, none of which mirrored the President’s.

A fair rendering of this episode might conclude that at bottom, the system worked as it should. For his part, President Bush was careful to solicit the views and inputs of his most senior military and civilian advisors and weighed them carefully. This give-and-take was clearly helpful to all concerned. Yet he also went outside the circle of formal advisors to ensure that all points of view were brought forward. His ultimate decision was clear and unambiguous, and he generously supported the requests of his military commanders. Against strong opposition in Congress and much criticism in the media, he displayed a persistence and determination that proved most helpful to the theater commander and chief of mission charged with implementing his strategy. In his time in office, much went wrong in Iraq, and observers have found much to criticize. By any standard, and the ultimate outcome in Iraq notwithstanding, this decision and its implementation must stand as a high point in President Bush's administration and a successful example of civil-military interaction.

Three years later, President Barack Obama found himself in a similar quandary in Afghanistan. For several years, a resurgent Taliban had pressed U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces. This prompted an increase in troop strength in 2008, bringing the full contingent of coalition forces to 68,000. As U.S. troop numbers in Iraq came down and as the security situation in Afghanistan worsened, the new administration authorized another 21,000 U.S. troops in February 2009 and in June replaced General David McKiernan with General Stanley A. McChrystal, who was thought to be a commander with greater skills in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency.¹⁸ After conducting his own strategic review, McChrystal requested a further 40,000 troops, warning that "failure to provide adequate resources risks . . . mission failure."¹⁹

This episode provoked serious debate and discussion in the interagency community and has been widely covered in the memoirs of senior officials. At issue was the split between White House officials who opposed a large increase and military officials who supported it. (Secretary Gates found himself somewhat in the middle, straddling the divide and attempting to manage an increasingly fractious process.)

A deeper question was the approach adopted by senior military officials during policy deliberations. At the time and later, the President, his senior

staff, and other civilian officials expressed dismay at apparent attempts to influence the military's preferred course of action, partly by making the case outside normal policy channels and partly by a failure to provide a range of feasible options.²⁰ Several events fueled this perception. A September 4, 2009, *Washington Post* article quoted General Petraeus as stating that success in Afghanistan was unlikely without many more troops. In a presentation given in London on October 1 to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, General McChrystal affirmed his recommended COIN strategy and his request for troops, publicly airing his preferred course of action and refuting others in advance of any Presidential decision. More damaging, however, was the leak of McChrystal's strategic assessment to the media, which essentially predicted the war would be lost if ISAF was not heavily reinforced.²¹ In his memoir, Secretary Gates described the President as "infuriated."²² Though neither saw any calculated plan, both Gates and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, expressed frustration at these media missteps.

Understanding this period requires a grasp of a number of dynamic interactions. The Obama administration was new, with its national security team still shaking itself out. The President, Vice President, Chief of Staff, and Secretary of State had just come from Congress, where aggressive questioning in committee was the norm, a sharp contrast to the previous 8 years. As most new administrations are, the Obama team was keen to assert civilian control. In contrast, the Secretary of Defense, Chairman, and U.S. Central Command commander had extensive experience, their views shaped by years of involvement in the Long War and particularly by the perceived success of the surge in Iraq. Though a new four-star, General McChrystal had served extensively in both Iraq and Afghanistan and probably believed he had been given a mandate to move in a new direction as McKiernan's replacement. These and other factors contributed to quite different frames of reference and at times a clash of perspectives that proved difficult for all concerned.²³

The final decision, to add an additional 30,000 troops to ISAF to resource a population-centric COIN strategy, was announced by the President at West Point on December 1. With NATO force additions, the total surged coalition force was 140,000 personnel. This gave General McChrystal much of what he had asked for, albeit with a limited timeline; the Surge troops would redeploy

in only 18 months. However, the bruising contest had lingering effects. When a *Rolling Stone* article quoting McChrystal aides as critical and even contemptuous of White House officials was published 6 months later, McChrystal was relieved and retired, as McKiernan had been, barely a year into his tour. At least in part, the President's decision had its roots in the civil-military conflict of the previous fall.²⁴

As with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Iraq Surge in 2006, these events represent policy- and strategy-making and civil-military relations at their most complex and challenging. We ascribe no unworthy motives to any of the key players. What seems clear, however, is that a perception formed in the minds of senior White House staff that the military had failed to bring forward realistic and feasible options, limiting serious consideration to only one, and that it had attempted to influence the outcome by trying the case in the media, circumventing the normal policy process.²⁵ These unfortunate developments affected both policy and strategy and fed lingering resentments that would prove deleterious in the months and years to come.

Findings and Observations

In considering from a strategic perspective the key lessons from the Long War, the scholar is almost compelled to say something about America's long history with counterinsurgency. Its roots in the American experience are deep. Where successful, as in the settling of the American West and in the Philippines, the methods used were often brutal and indiscriminate. More recently, in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, our experiences have on the whole been difficult, costly, and indecisive. The ability of the enemy to fight from sanctuary, his unwillingness to present himself for destruction by our superior technology, the incapacity of host governments, and the loss of public support occasioned by protracted and indecisive combat all militated against clear-cut success. The historical record of large-scale, foreign expeditionary forces in counterinsurgencies is a poor one. While small-scale advise-and-assist missions have often been successful, large-scale expeditionary force COIN efforts do not play to American strengths and, if experience is any guide, are not likely to lead to success in securing U.S. strategic objectives.

More broadly, the normal military preference for overmatching force in armed conflict is often right, even as it commonly invokes opposition from

civilian decisionmakers. Strong forces can smother friction, provide options, and avoid long, protracted conflicts that in the end may be far more expensive and casualty producing.²⁶ Yet making this case persuasively may be difficult when political leaders wish to portray lower costs, smaller footprints, more “transformational” approaches, or more moderate courses of action that provoke less violent criticism from either side of the political spectrum.²⁷ Each case is specific, but the lessons of history should not be easily discarded. Clear objectives accompanied by ample resources intelligently applied, with strong congressional and public support, typically evoke success.

The authors in this volume have attempted an assessment of strategic decisionmaking in Iraq and Afghanistan, but it will be years before a full accounting is possible. Many key issues, such as the gradual evolution of command and control structures, use of Provincial Reconstruction Teams, challenge of coalition partner caveats, and many others, deserve a fuller and more comprehensive assessment. The foregoing discussion, supported by interviews with a number of prominent civilian leaders and four-star officers, nevertheless sheds light on U.S. successes and failures and suggests the following as concluding thoughts for consideration.

Military involvement in national security decisionmaking at the best of times carries an element of tension inherent in civil-military relations. At times during the Long War, this tension was compounded unnecessarily. Civilian decisionmakers can benefit from a better understanding of the complexity of military strategy and the military’s need for clear planning guidance. For example, strategy often founders on poorly defined or overly broad objectives that are not closely tied to available means, and here military leaders could and should play a key role.

Senior military officers for their part require a deep understanding of the policy/interagency process, an appreciation for the perspectives of civilian counterparts, and a willingness to embrace, and not resist, the complexities and challenges inherent in our system of civilian control. Vigorous debate and a clear presentation of military perspectives are essential for informed and successful strategy. Best military advice should be provided, nested within a larger appreciation of the strategic context and its political, economic, diplomatic, and informational dimensions. This conversation must be carried on

in confidence, respecting the prerogatives of civilian leaders with whom the ultimate decision rests.

In most cases, civilian leaders look for a range of feasible options from the military, framed by clear cost and risk estimates, each of which could achieve the policy objective. In cases where the objective is unclear or unachievable, military leaders should press for clarity or state clearly that available resources could not support a successful outcome. Pressing for a commitment to success, defined as achieving sustainable political outcomes worthy of the sacrifices made, does not abrogate the civil-military compact. Rather, it reflects the gravity of any decision for war and the need for a determined commitment to prevail.²⁸ In so doing, it is helpful to consider that, in general, civilian policymakers do not come from a military planning background and that formulating specific goals and objectives is often an iterative process based on discussion and consensus.²⁹ In this regard, domestic political considerations often intrude and should be expected by military leaders.

In crafting policy and strategy, well-considered ideas matter and could often carry the day. Though time is scarce and resources precious, prior preparation and rehearsal are always good investments. Informed and articulate advocacy has a quality all its own, and skilled communicators with a convincing message are more likely to win acceptance. Department and agency cultures and interests are real, and they matter. But their positions could change through discussion and persuasion.

Policy and strategy take place in an operating universe that is highly sensitive to budget, election, and news cycles. They set the rhythm, the cadence, and the pace of political life. Career military officers are not always attuned to these realities, whereas civilian policymakers are. Awareness and flexibility with respect to this reality improve the quality and utility of military advice.

The art of generalship at the highest levels must also encompass an ability to understand and adapt to different Presidential and secretarial leadership styles and modes. Within a general interagency framework, each constructs decision settings composed of personalities and processes they find most helpful and congenial. These may, and often will, vary significantly from one administration to the next. At the four-star level, the ability to adapt to different civilian leadership styles is critical and may spell the difference between success and failure.

Four-star generals and admirals are practically by definition masters of Service and joint warfighting, but at the most senior levels, other attributes are necessary. These include interagency acumen, media savvy, a detailed understanding of congressional relations, a strong grasp of the defense planning, programming, and budgeting system, and skill in multinational environments. Normal career development patterns do not always provide opportunities to build these competencies. Sustained tenure in high-level command positions may also be a significant consideration.³⁰ In a number of the examples discussed in this volume, gaps in these skill sets contributed to poor outcomes that might have been prevented either by having different professional development and military and civilian education opportunities or by applying more refined selection criteria for specific, very high-level positions.³¹

At its core, strategy is all about making hard decisions, potentially raising issues of great moral or ethical significance. While the ultimate power of decision rests firmly in civilian hands, senior military officials have a duty to support effective and successful policy and strategy and to offer their best military advice and, if necessary, respectful dissent to help preclude strategic failure. As one senior four-star officer put it when interviewed for this study, “We have a sacred responsibility to provide best military advice. If we fail we concede that right.”³² Admirals and generals do not, of course, set aside personal and professional core values when they reach the pinnacle of responsibility. A strong moral compass is imperative when considering questions of war and peace.

National security decisionmaking is a highly personal endeavor relying heavily on trust relationships. These may take years to build but can be lost overnight. In this regard, General Colin Powell’s admonition is useful: “Never let your ego get so close to your position that when your position goes, your ego goes with it.” The interagency community at its apex is no place for hot tempers or the easily annoyed. A calm and steady temperament can be a real advantage. Today’s policy adversary may be tomorrow’s policy ally. As much as possible, senior leaders will find it advantageous to maintain good working relationships with civilian partners, even—or perhaps especially—when they find themselves on opposite sides of the issue.

If Afghanistan and Iraq are any guide, future wars will present national security decisionmakers with problems that will challenge their minds and souls. A lesson here for future senior officers is that there is no substitute for lifelong

learning. The study of history, a broad grasp of all the instruments of national power with their strengths and weaknesses, confidence and a decisive character, and a fair portion of prudence and humility are all helpful when dealing with future commitments and challenges. There are no easy days and few simple problems for four-stars. Ultimately, they must deal with life-and-death decisions on a big stage. And while history does not repeat itself, there are age-old patterns that senior officers and politicians will always face. Sir Winston Churchill, writing in the years between the world wars, leaves us with this cautionary reminder:

*Let us learn our lessons. Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on the strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. The Statesman who yields to war fever must realize that once the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events. Antiquated War Offices, weak, incompetent or arrogant Commanders, untrustworthy allies, hostile neutrals, malignant Fortune, ugly surprises, awful miscalculations—all take their seats at the Council Board on the morrow of a declaration of war. Always remember, however sure you are that you can easily win, that there would not be a war if the other man did not think that he also had a chance.*³³

Notes

¹ Estimates of civilian dead in Iraq vary widely, with the low end at approximately 133,000. See “Costs of War,” The Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, May 2014.

² United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), *Afghanistan: Annual Report 2014—Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict* (Kabul: UNAMA, February 2015), 1–2, available at <<http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/human%20rights/2015/2014-Annual-Report-on-Protection-of-Civilians-Final.pdf>>.

³ Costing Iraq and Afghanistan is imprecise because methodology can vary widely. For example, future interest payments and veterans’ care in the out years are counted in some estimates and not in others. A detailed accounting of the costs related to the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan is found in annex A of this book.

⁴ Highlights include an increase in adult life expectancy from 42 to 64 years, a decrease in maternal mortality from 1,600 to 327 per 100,000, a more than 10-fold increase in school attendance (including a 36 percent increase for girls), an increase in 1-hour access to health care from 9 percent to 60 percent, an increase in reliable access to electricity of 12 percent, and a growth in mobile phone subscribers from zero to 19 million. Statistics provided from various sources including Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, available at <www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>; U.S. Agency for International Development, “Afghanistan Country Profile”; Ian S. Livingston and Michael O’Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, February 10, 2015), 20–23; “Afghanistan,” *InternetWorldStats.com*, available at <www.internetworldstats.com/asia/af.htm>; and Jonathan Foreman, “Good News from Afghanistan,” *Commentary*, July 1, 2014.

⁵ James Kitfield, “Flynn’s Last Interview: Iconoclast Departs DIA with a Warning,” *Breaking Defense*, August 7, 2014, available at <<http://breakingdefense.com/2014/08/flynn-s-last-interview-intel-iconoclast-departs-dia-with-a-warning/>>.

⁶ “In the next century few things will matter more than the battle for the soul of Islam; should fundamentalist brands triumph and become mainstreamed, the destabilizing effects throughout the Islamic world and the community of nations itself will be almost incalculable.” R.D. Hooker, Jr., “Beyond *Vom Kriege*: The Character and Conduct of Modern War,” *Parameters* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2005), 11.

⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976 and 1984), book one, chapter one, 80.

⁸ David Petraeus, interview by Joseph J. Collins and Nathan White, March 27, 2015.

⁹ “[O]n politico-military issues . . . military officers may have little background and no strong views of their own.” Douglas J. Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: Harper, 2008), 371.

¹⁰ John F. Reichart and Steven R. Sturm, ed., *American Defense Policy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 724.

¹¹ Jerome Slater, “Military Officers and Politics I,” in Reichart and Sturm, 750.

¹² General John Abizaid, former commander of U.S. Central Command, refers to the “Heroic Assumption”—the expectation that the liberation of Iraq would resemble the liberation of France in 1944. Chief of Staff of the Army Operation *Iraqi Freedom* (OIF) Study Group, interview of Abizaid (unpublished), September 19, 2014.

¹³ Historian Richard H. Kohn is a primary exponent of this view. See Richard H. Kohn, “Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil Military Relations,” *The National Interest*, no. 35 (Spring 1994); *The Forgotten Fundamentals of Civilian Control of the Military in Democratic Government*, Project on U.S. Post-Cold War Civil-Military Relations, Working Paper No. 11 (Cambridge: John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, June 1997); and “The Erosion of Civilian Control of the Military in the United States Today,” *Naval War College Review* 55 (Summer 2002).

¹⁴ James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report* (New York: Random House, 2006), xiii.

¹⁵ George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown, 2010), 372.

¹⁶ “In retrospect, I believe that I should have directly offered the President a broader range of options for achieving our objectives in Iraq. I had discussed different options for improving the security situation with the Secretary of Defense and Chairman. . . . In the end, I only presented the President the course of action we selected—accelerated transition—and I believe that I should have offered him a wider range of options to meet his policy needs.” George W. Casey, Jr., *Strategic Reflections* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2012), 144.

¹⁷ In addition to weekly meetings of the National Security Council on Iraq, President George W. Bush also received, and read, daily updates produced by the NSC Office for Iraq and Afghanistan.

¹⁸ Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary of War* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 346.

¹⁹ The President eventually ordered a troop surge of 30,000 as recommended by Secretary Gates, announcing his decision at West Point on December 1, 2009. See Bob Woodward, “McChrystal: ‘More Forces or Mission Failure,’” *Washington Post*, September 21, 2009.

²⁰ “During September several events fractured what little trust remained between the senior military and the president and his staff.” Gates, 367.

²¹ See Woodward, “McChrystal.”

²² Gates, 368. The chapter dealing with these events is titled “Afghanistan: A House Divided.”

²³ Douglas E. Lute, interview by Richard D. Hooker, Jr., and Joseph J. Collins, March 10, 2015. General Petraeus also described in some detail the chain of events that led to these misunderstandings. Petraeus, interview.

²⁴ Bob Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 372–373.

²⁵ Lute, interview.

²⁶ *Ibid.* “For the United States, fighting a sustained conflict for less than vital national interests is a waning proposition.”

²⁷ The authors are indebted to Professor Richard Betts for these insights.

²⁸ “Without strategy, there is no rationale for how force will achieve purposes worth the price in blood and treasure.” Richard Betts, cited in H.R. McMaster, “The Uncertainties of Strategy,” *Survival* (February–March 2015), 201.

²⁹ Martin E. Dempsey, interview by Richard D. Hooker, Jr., and Joseph J. Collins, January 7, 2015.

³⁰ Four-star theater commanders in Afghanistan averaged 12.8 months in command, compared to 17.2 months in Iraq and 30.8 months in Vietnam.

³¹ A remarkable number of senior officers who played key roles in the Long War were selected for advanced civil schooling at top graduate schools early in their careers. This opportunity yielded rich dividends in their strategic development. They include Admiral James G. Stavridis, USN (Ret.); General Petraeus; General Peter W. Chiarelli, USA (Ret.); General Raymond T. Odierno, USA; General Dempsey; General Abizaid; and General John R. Allen, USMC (Ret.). Former Secretary of State and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell might also be included. Other officers, most notably General James N. Mattis, USMC (Ret.), enjoy reputations as lifelong learners and self-taught strategists of the first rank.

³² Lloyd J. Austin III, interview by Richard D. Hooker, Jr., April 7, 2015.

³³ Winston Churchill, *My Early Life: A Roving Commission* (New York: Scribner's, 1930, rpt. 1958), 232.