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The Counter-Revolution In Military Affairs

Iraq has transformed the Army in ways that Donald Rumsfeld never envisioned.

By James Kitfield

Armies rise and fall on the fortunes of war, and Gen. Martin Dempsey can remember the exact moment that the U.S. Army tripped on the New Age assumptions about modern war inherent in the much ballyhooed 1990s concept called the "revolution in military affairs." The high point had come less than a year earlier when Operation Iraqi Freedom validated the Army's transformation into a lean, high-tech force for the digital age. In just three weeks, a relatively small U.S. force had invaded a large Arab country and toppled the government, moving faster, seeing farther, and fighting more decisively than any army in history. From that pinnacle of victory, the Army seemed poised to challenge the very "fog of war," even as the unfamiliar sands of Iraq began to swirl around it.

The inflection point where that Army began to disappear into the storm came on April 4, 2004. Then-Maj. Gen. Dempsey was commanding the 1st Armored Division in Baghdad, trying, with just 40,000 troops, to keep a lid on a largely ungoverned megatropolis of more than 7 million people. Seemingly spontaneous uprisings began to ignite across Iraq, first in the Sunni stronghold of Fallujah, west of Baghdad, and then in the southern Shiite cities of Najaf and Karbala, where armed followers of firebrand cleric Moktada al-Sadr held sway.

The rapidly escalating violence threatened to spark a countrywide uprising. At the same time, Qaeda terrorist bombings were spooking Spain and other allies to withdraw their troops from the war, further rattling a shaky coalition. Iraq was in danger of spinning out of control.

"April 2004 in Iraq is when the light bulb really went off for me," Dempsey, now the four-star commander of the Training and Doctrine Command, said in an interview. "Here we were, an Army that prided itself on being on the absolute leading edge of technology, of being able to see first, understand first, and if necessary shoot first; and suddenly we were facing these simultaneous uprisings that *none of us saw coming!* We all had this moment like, 'Wow, I just didn't see that coming!' That didn't mean we should abandon our constant search for new technology to enable us, but it did suggest that relying too heavily on technology in this era was dangerous. In April 2004 in Iraq, technology was less important than understanding anthropology and sociology and what was on the minds of Iraqis on the street."

No organization as large and as steeped in culture and doctrine as the U.S. Army shifts direction quickly. The service can be fairly criticized for being slow to adapt to the realities of Iraq. Yet the Army has long prided itself on being a learning organization, and what the officers and troops learned in the crucible of Iraq beginning in April 2004 has indeed fundamentally transformed the Army, and in ways never envisioned by former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his team of civilian revolutionaries in the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

The Counter-Revolution

After the initial success of the Iraq invasion, Pentagon civilians in OSD steadfastly denied the existence of a growing Iraqi insurgency, resisted calls for more troops or a larger pool of U.S. ground forces, and disparaged nation building in a country where U.S. forces had destroyed the government. They squabbled publicly and privately with senior Army generals, at least five of whom turned down the promotion to chief of staff, an unprecedented rebuke to Rumsfeld and his team. Rumsfeld finally called Gen. Peter Schoomaker, a career Special Forces officer, out of retirement to take the job in 2003.

Rumsfeld and Schoomaker set out to shift the Army from a mass-mobilization force to an expeditionary one, breaking down its huge, multifaceted divisions into more modular, smaller, and readily deployable brigade combat teams. Ironically, that reform created a base of smaller units that could be rotated to sustain armed nation-building operations in Iraq and later in Afghanistan. Rumsfeld and OSD, however, continued to largely ignore and even dismiss nation-building efforts as merely a drain on their high-tech transformation of the Army.

Meanwhile, following the 2004 spring of its discontent, the Army began quietly promoting those senior commanders who had adapted best to the fluid demands of counterinsurgency operations in Iraq. Most notably, after distinguishing himself commanding the 101st Airborne Division in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus went on to the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., the Army's doctrinal ivory tower. There in 2006, he developed the Army counterinsurgency field manual, FM 3-24.

After President Bush fired Rumsfeld in December 2006 and replaced him with Robert Gates, a man determined to focus the Pentagon on winning the wars at hand, Petraeus assumed top command in Iraq and successfully executed his counterinsurgency campaign during the troop surge of 2007. Fellow travelers such as Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Chiarelli, top Iraq commander Gen. Ray Odierno, and TRADOC commander Dempsey all had successfully led divisions in Iraq before rising to higher echelons of command and institutional influence.

Taken together, these generals and their band of trusted subordinates represent the vanguard of the counter-revolution in military affairs. Buttressed by President Obama's embrace of a counterinsurgency strategy and a troop surge in Afghanistan based largely on the template of the Iraq surge, this post-Vietnam, post-Cold War generation of officers has essentially won the argument about how the United States will fight today's wars. Perhaps equally important, these officers are grooming and testing on the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq the next generation of officers, the Army's future.

"The Army is definitely in the midst of a transformation into more of a counterinsurgency force, partly because of the demands of the times and the accomplishments of change agents like David Petraeus," said Andrew Krepinevich, a noted defense expert and the president of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments in Washington. "But also because Petraeus and other three- and four-star generals now in charge are cultivating and promoting subordinates who think like they do, so that the lessons of this period are institutionalized. That's how big organizations like the U.S. Army change."

Today's officers with 20 years of service, he notes, have experienced an era marked by persistent, irregular conflict in places such as Panama, Somalia, the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan. "As the Cold War generation of officers fades from the scene and these younger leaders rise through the ranks," Krepinevich said, "I think you will find the Army's transformation gain momentum."

High-Tech Dominance

In times of tumult and soul-searching such as these, the Army traditionally looks for guidance from its Training and Doctrine Command, the epicenter of the institutional force. TRADOC was created in the 1970s in the dismal aftermath of the Vietnam War, and it was designed from the start to fix the fundamentals that had been neglected -- enticing good recruits, educating them in the warrior arts, honing their skills at hyper-realistic training centers, and developing a war-fighting doctrine to help them triumph.

After the Army and the nation decisively turned their backs on counterinsurgency warfare following the defeat in Vietnam, TRADOC schools crafted an attack doctrine that emphasized flexible maneuvers on the battlefield and synchronized air and ground strikes, tactics that helped deter the Soviets and proved so devastating in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. The "Air-Land Battle" doctrine arguably found its purest expression in the three-week invasion phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.

Primarily conceptualized in the 1990s, the "revolution in military affairs" that Rumsfeld and his team so eagerly embraced was meant to sharpen that high-intensity doctrine to a transformative edge by further leveraging digital and space-age technologies with creative new tactics. The emphasis was on seeing over the horizon, launching precision strikes from afar, and maneuvering rapidly on the ground. The revolution rested on the assumption that technology had changed the fundamental nature of warfare in ways that did not play to the strength of large ground forces.

"I worked on the Joint Staff beginning in the late 1990s, and I saw firsthand how OSD was driving all the services to accept this idea that future wars could be fought with specialized weapons and forces, without any need for traditional land-power dominance," Lt. Gen. William Caldwell IV, until recently commander of TRADOC's Combined Arms Center, said in an interview. During the post-Cold War period, he noted, the Army shrank from 18 to 10 divisions, with serious discussions during Rumsfeld's 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review of reducing it further, to eight or even six divisions.

The same discounting of ground forces resurfaced in the run-up to the Iraq invasion, when the secretary's office pressured Central Command, which oversees U.S. forces in the Middle East, to whittle down its classified battle plan calling for at least 380,000 troops to an invasion force of just 140,000. In a fit of micromanagement that infuriated the generals on the ground in Kuwait, Rumsfeld even pored over the service's time-phased force deployment data, or "Tip Fid," the carefully drawn, day-by-day plan to flow forces into the war theater. He was determined to cut "fat" out of the Army's logistics tail and require a lean invasion force to adopt the more efficient just-in-time delivery model made famous by FedEx and UPS.

The assumption going into Iraq was that the Army could dominate the ground primarily with high-tech machines, Caldwell said, "just like you dominate the air domain with aircraft flying at 15,000 feet, or the sea domain with ships operating at great distances. The difference is that people live on the ground, and especially in the [stability operations] phase of Iraqi Freedom, we rediscovered how critically important it is to have soldiers operating among them, with cultural awareness and an understanding of the human dimension of the conflict."

He added, "A lot of us had seen that firsthand in places such as Panama, Haiti, Bosnia, and even during the humanitarian crisis following Desert Storm. But each time, we flushed those lessons out of the system, promised we wouldn't bother with that stuff anymore, and went back to the National Training Center to train for conventional war."

Lost Its Bearings

In recent years, the counter-revolutionaries at TRADOC have devoted themselves to finally correcting the institutional blind spot that dates back to Vietnam and the Army's conscious decision to renounce counterinsurgency and nation-building operations. The result has been a period of intellectual ferment unmatched since the training command's founding.

Incorporating the hard lessons learned by commanders on the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan, TRADOC has produced -- and the Army has embraced in record time -- new documents and doctrines on counterinsurgency operations (FM 3-24), stability operations (FM 3-07), security force assistance operations (FM 3-07.1), and even nation-building operations ("Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction," produced jointly by the Army War College and the U.S. Institute of Peace).

The latest iteration of the doctrinal makeover is the soon-to-be-released "Army Capstone Concept." The document will attempt to tie many of these new concepts together into a coherent operational and philosophical construct, emphasizing an Army that is decentralized, culturally attuned to its theaters of operation, and rapidly adaptable to changing circumstances, rather than a force that attempts to know in advance the exact nature of future threats and conflicts.

The young gun chosen to lead the Capstone Concept is Brig. Gen. H.R. McMaster, the author of the influential book *Dereliction of Duty*, about the Vietnam War, and a highly regarded counterinsurgency commander who led the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in the Iraqi city of Tal Afar in 2004. The ideas reshaping the Army after eight years of war, McMaster believes, are in many ways a direct repudiation of the narrative that dominated the tech bubble 1990s, a period of unmatched U.S. military dominance. That era spawned concepts of war that were elegant in terms of PowerPoint diagramming, arrogant in their abiding faith in the "shock and-awe" predominance of U.S. technology, and fatally flawed in some of their assumptions about the nature of war.

"The Army lost its bearings in the 1990s for a whole host of reasons, beginning with a misinterpretation of the lopsided victory in the Persian Gulf War, when we faced an enemy foolish enough to play to all of our strengths," McMaster told *National Journal*. The Army was also pressured to embrace a lot of the orthodoxy surrounding the "revolution in military affairs"

just to stay relevant in the minds of Pentagon civilians, he said, even though Rumsfeld's team neglected to factor in fundamental differences between war fought in the air and sea, and war fought on land.

"We also relied on a lot of think tanks and defense contractors to validate our concepts, essentially outsourcing our intellectual capital to people who didn't have recent operational experience, and [we] thus embraced an idealized version of future war," McMaster added. "Technology would solve all our problems. We would 'lift the fog of war' and achieve 'dominant battle-space knowledge' that allowed our commanders to apply force perfectly tailored to any situation, with great precision."

Long, Not Short, Wars

The problem was that this "revolutionary" vision of war bore almost no resemblance to what U.S. forces on the ground confronted the day after the remnants of Al Qaeda and the Taliban scurried over the mountains into Pakistan in 2001, or after Baghdad fell in 2003. Certainly, it had little to do with the situation that Army commanders confronted in Iraq in April 2004. In all of those cases, "victorious" U.S. forces found themselves strangers in a strange land, stranded in the murky ground between all-out combat and a shaky peace. They had no clear concept of what constituted success, no cultural awareness to reliably discern friend from foe, and no doctrine to guide them to an exit strategy.

"In mistakenly thinking that technology had changed the nature, rather than just the character, of war, we neglected some continuities of conflict such as the human dimension; the fact that war is an extension of politics, and we still needed to achieve political outcomes; and the reality that, over time, thinking enemies will always respond to your actions and develop countermeasures to your strengths," McMaster said. "We also discovered that our overreliance on technology had built some structural and cultural weaknesses into our forces."

The Army's heavy emphasis on space-based, airborne, and electronic surveillance tempted commanders to lead from the rear and micromanage subordinates through a computer or video screen. By contrast, operations in Iraq made "mayors" of captains and lieutenant colonels, empowered soldiers down to the "strategic corporal," and required a granular understanding of the situation on the ground.

Similarly, the revolution's ideal of "perfect situational awareness" led to over centralization and risk aversion at the top, as commanders waited for the last piece of the information puzzle that would complete the picture. Meanwhile, complex and violent situations on the ground forced junior officers to constantly make decisions on the fly in response to an ever-changing kaleidoscope. An emphasis on a just-in-time supply chain that equated war with efficient package delivery failed to recognize that efficiency in the life-and-death realm of war meant just barely winning, or winning ugly, in a way that no Fed Ex driver caught in traffic could comprehend.

The idea that war could be conducted over the horizon and experienced primarily through bomb-camera videos fostered insensitivity to the "collateral" deaths of civilians -- carnage that could

alienate the population and derail counterinsurgency operations. Perhaps most important, the sanitary and surgical concept of modern war also bred a Pentagon culture that did not adequately prepare officers, or the revolution's civilian advocates, for the true brutality of war.

"The assumption that we could 'see first, decide first, engage from a distance, finish decisively' -- all that led to a belief that future wars would be short, rapid, and decisive, which would be a good thing," McMaster said. "No one wants long, indecisive wars. But the reality is that the enemy gets a vote, and over time it adapted to our capabilities. And long, indecisive wars are just what we got in Afghanistan and Iraq."

Rebooting The Revolution

Dempsey knows that many of the technologies and concepts developed in the 1990s are still relevant, especially on the high-intensity, combined-arms maneuver end of the war-fighting spectrum. He also understands that as long as the Army is involved in difficult counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, the institutional temptation will be to overinterpret the lessons of those conflicts. He does not underestimate the Army's challenge to rebalance itself into a full-spectrum force once those wars' end.

"The tendencies of big armies is to overcorrect, and I'm not prepared to say that everything we did in the 1990s was nonsense, so I'm looking for the sweet spot between winning the current fights we're in and using those lessons to help the Army's senior leadership understand how we get to the Army of tomorrow," he said. "That's TRADOC's principal responsibility."

The overriding lesson that the Army has drawn from the past eight years is that for all its vaunted transformative power, technology has not changed the fundamental nature of war or the fundamental character of the United States. "In the last two decades, the U.S. military came to widely believe we could prevail by identifying and striking targets from standoff ranges, but when you talk about warfare among peoples, that just doesn't work," he said. "The United States will never be a nation willing to go in and shoot everything up and beat the hell out of everybody, and then just leave. That's not who we are as a nation. So the U.S. Army had better be able to mix it up close and influence events on the ground, whether through combat, stability operations, or nation building."

Finally, far from making the U.S. military invincible, technology has leveled the field of conflict in a way that will increasingly prompt terrorists and other nonstate actors to challenge American power, Dempsey said. He notes Hezbollah's use of advanced anti-ship missiles and long-range rockets in its 2006 war with Israel Defense Forces in southern Lebanon, and the devastation wrought by a handful of terrorists armed with box cutters and jetliners on 9/11.

"If I'm right, we're going to confront a lot more competition from hybrid threats such as terrorists, insurgents, militias, and criminal cartels, and that means the likelihood that we really are in an era of persistent, protracted conflict is very high," Dempsey said. "So if my generation of officers is remembered for anything, I hope we're remembered for turning the Army increasingly into an adaptive and learning organization. I don't think it overstates the case to say

that in this era of rapid change, the future of our national and military power will be measured by our ability to adapt."