



U.S. Army/Sgt. Edwin Bridges



# From Baghdad to Detroit:

By Maj. Jaron S. Wharton

**U**nlike many academics who venture to post-major conflict zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan, both of which are critical to our national security, I experienced the inverse as a military officer visiting Detroit, a city critical to our nation's economic vitality. Traversing a key transit route linking the northern and southernmost portions of Detroit, I found myself experiencing a visceral reaction I had felt before—in an armored vehicle patrolling cities in Afghanistan and Iraq. I do not intend to oversimplify the cities' respective challenges. Instead, I offer that there are many noteworthy parallels and assert that development principles are not relegated to geopolitical boundaries or combat zones.

Indeed, there are many metropolitan areas that can be compared to war zones. I readily admit that Detroit does not have more than 100,000 troops battling a mosaic insurgency, but the city's downward spiral has been amazingly awful. The precipitous decline of the automotive industry, the most renowned asset in Detroit's rather nondiversified economic portfolio, was a silent disaster less visible than the deposition of a despot or even Hurricane Katrina. Urban blight is systemic in the shrinking city as more than a quarter of a million people have left since 2000. Further-







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*Clockwise from left: Arson added to the decay of an abandoned commercial building in Detroit; a derelict family home contributes to the city's squalor; Sgt. Beu Saldana, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, pulls security in Baghdad; other soldiers from the unit patrol a market area.*

more, severe policy challenges hold citizens' livelihood at risk. These challenges are exacerbated by fissures among power brokers, including wealthy foundations, the City Council, the mayor's office and the governor. These are the sheikhs, shura and the weak central government of Detroit.

### Clear-Hold-Build

In the military lexicon, enduring security and stability can be attained in less-than-permissive environments through a "clear-hold-build" paradigm. In Detroit, the *clear* objective is achieved only by investing in police, fire and emergency service assets—the local security forces. *Hold* refers to reducing blight and ensuring services are provided by credible government institutions, namely in the form of public transportation (one-third of Detroit's buses are not in operation due to mechanical problems or staffing issues) and public lighting (60 percent of 88,000 are not functioning). *Build* is rather intuitive, but without re-

# Are We So Different?



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*Graffiti mars an abandoned automobile factory in Detroit.*



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ducing the rate of violent crime—a leading indicator of Detroit’s dire straits—this phase is unlikely to occur as private capital is unlikely to flow to the city. Despite recent gains, Detroit’s homicide rate exceeds that of Kabul’s. Forward momentum must be definitive in order to attract future investment and pull either city out of its rut.

Back in November 2011, then-Mayor of Detroit Dave Bing announced austerity measures to make up its \$45 million shortfall and avoid bankruptcy by April 2012. Despite a slowly recovering automotive industry, the city had an emergency education manager (mainly to address the \$100 million deficit and rampant dropout rate), yet the government struggled to provide services to the shrinking city. There was little course correction, and these challenges led to the state appointment of an emergency financial manager for Detroit, an imposed solution most locals wanted to avoid. This mechanism immediately brought to mind the ineffectiveness of the Coalition Provisional Authority and the impact of its key decisions in Iraq: “de-Baathification,” disbandment of the military and mass conversion to a new dinar (main unit of currency). Social experimentation in a vacuum typically does not work out for the home team.

### **‘You’re Definitely Not From Here’**

During my weeklong “battlefield circulation” of Detroit, I heard this repeatedly. Detroiters are a resilient people showing signs of what makes the human spirit amazing. They are

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a proud people who are largely tired of outside-imposed solutions. Nothing tangible can be done for them without their support. Resilient people typically despise big ideas from the outside—whether it is foreign troops on their soil, expatriates or federal officials “here to help.” In order to achieve enduring security and stability, we must institutionalize a mindset of doing “nothing about them without them.”

To assist the city, the Obama administration in July 2011 selected Detroit as one of six pilot locations for the Strong Cities, Strong Communities (SC2) initiative. As part of this initiative, the equivalent of an interagency task force convened through the White House Domestic Policy Council was deployed to create new public and private sector partnerships as well as to bolster local government by providing necessary technical assistance and access to federal agency expertise. This task force is essentially a domestic provincial reconstruction team (also an amalgamation of intergovernmental entities) without the language barrier or requirement of assets from its local brigade combat team for transit.

The most critical assistance the SC2 team or any viable power broker can provide is to help the city become secure, but also to greatly assist in the *hold* and *build* phases. This requires an investment of both time and money—always a political football for war zones.

### **Find Tipping-Point Issue**

To do so, it is imperative to find the tipping-point issue. In my own experience, I found that rebuilding a bank in a small Iraqi-Syrian border town resulted in a reduction in violence levels. Locals no longer had to travel long distances on dangerous roads to get paid; in time, the cost of goods stabilized; and access to microloans was expanded. One seemingly small action had cascading effects.



*Soldiers from the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, patrol past a Baghdad building.*

In Detroit, the first priority might be the expanded support of projects such as the M1 light rail system. Midtown Detroit is a key corridor that is being rebuilt block by block as part of a larger, locally driven consolidation strategy. The light rail project might unlock private investment and provide a conduit through Midtown for sustained growth (akin to the Ring Road's benefit in Afghanistan).

In the absence of private investment, the city government also might leverage existing government funding mechanisms to revitalize targeted portions of the city. Revitalization projects currently require creativity in balancing funding streams in the absence of additional private capital (akin to the disbursement of economic support funds, Commander's Emergency Response Program funds and so on). Detroit requires assistance in determining what federal funds are available—and how to best put them to use. If local absorption capacity remains a challenge, the local government might work with Congress for the authority to spend funds in out years. A failure to alleviate the pressure to spend, whether in Kandahar or Detroit, creates space for both waste and corruption to occur.

Finally, and perhaps most controversially, the ethno-sectarian divide must be addressed. This conflict exists in Detroit, mainly in the form of a burgeoning wealth gap exacerbated by race, dividing wealthy suburbs from blighted urban sprawl. This is perhaps most evident in rather regressive enforcement of immigration policies. Former New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg once offered that Detroit could repopulate with immigrants. Detroit's unique location as a trade corridor with Canada and low property costs should give it a comparative advantage. Essential to implementing Bloomberg's recommendation, however, is ensuring police do not hover around schools and churches, and

eliminating predatory bondsmen who seek to profit from this activity. This dynamic directly contributes to the dropout rate as youths are forced to provide for their undocumented families, many of whom have been in the U.S. for 20 or more years, at the expense of education. Regardless of how you feel about *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace One School at a Time*, author Greg Mortensen's exaggerated efforts to build schools in the Afghanistan and Pakistan border areas, the premise is prescient: Education (especially among girls) is essential to reducing the cycle of despair in populations worldwide. Disenfranchised, uneducated and impoverished youth will always be a flashpoint in communities.

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To be clear, I'm not saying Detroit is exactly like Kandahar City (although some portions of Detroit look much worse). It is relative in size and population, and has access to trade corridors, but Detroit is not populated with underresourced security forces and at the nexus of corrupt activity, violent crime, narcotics trafficking and unemployment. Or is it?

I would like to emphasize Detroit's major impact on our nation's economic security. During my trip, I left the city optimistic that in the medium term there will be a return to prominence. Young volunteers from organizations such as City Year and Motor City Blight Busters form an empowered "civil society" that is often lacking in post-major conflict zones. This is indicative of Detroit's resilience. These organizations, along with a few passionate community leaders and government officials, provide hope for the future. Perhaps the military should augment the SC2 teams with counterinsurgency experts from its own ranks to assist. Perhaps Ford, General Motors or Chrysler could just fix those buses.

