Lt. Col. Michael Flynn of Task Force Restore Iraqi Oil deployed to Iraq in 2003 for the initial U.S. Army assessment of the oil wells damaged during the attack by Saddam Hussein's forces after Operation Enduring Freedom began. (Photo by Luke Waack, U.S. Army)

On Lesson Learning and Wisdom

Rethinking the Failures of the Early Phases of the Iraq War

David Fitzgerald

For the more than twenty years after the invasion of Iraq, scholarly opinion on the war has been remarkably stable: as the failures of occupation became starkly apparent, an agreement quickly emerged among journalists, analysts, and scholars that both the decision to invade and the subsequent attempt to stabilize the country were disastrous. And, despite some disagreements about what motivated the Bush administration to choose war, that consensus has not moved very much since then.

The purpose of this article is not to quibble with these broad judgements. Indeed, it is remarkable that despite widespread agreement that the occupation of Iraq was calamitous, few of the architects of the war have faced much in the way of consequences for what is widely acknowledged to be one of the gravest unforced errors in the history of American foreign relations. What I do want to suggest, though, is that the relative stasis in the scholarship, which can be explained more by structural issues than a lack of intellectual interest in the Iraq War, is a problem, and the fact that the historiography of the war is surprisingly undeveloped is something that has negative consequences for both scholars and military professionals alike.

The history of the U.S. Army suggests that, as much as the institution wants to focus its doctrine and training on mid- and high-intensity conflict, it will inevitably find itself conducting stability operations or low-intensity conflict.[1] Equally, that same history suggests that treating these wars as aberrations or as contingencies that can easily be adapted to on the fly—an attitude most famously expressed by Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Decker's quip to President John F. Kennedy that "any good soldier can handle guerrillas"—does not tend to lead to good outcomes.[2] If these wars are likely to occur again, then it is imperative that military professionals more fully understand them, and to do that, they will need to able to grasp the range of political, diplomatic, social, and transnational factors that shape these conflicts.

If we look to how scholarship emerged on another war widely regarded as a disastrous—the American War in Vietnam—then the relative paucity of work on Iraq is apparent. Three years after Saigon fell, political scientist Guenter Lewy published his revisionist account of that war, *America in Vietnam*.[3] A year later, George Herring published his still canonical text, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*.[4] These two works were the first trickle of an outpouring of historical work on the Vietnam War, one which shows no signs of abating. If the historical debate on the Vietnam War was "argument without end," then it was also an issue that politicians wanted to argue over.[5] Five years after the end of the war, Ronald Reagan was already trying to reclaim it as a "noble cause" in his speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars in 1980.[6] Ever since then, there has been on ongoing scholarly and public struggle over the collective memory of the Vietnam War.[7] Almost every facet of the war, from presidential decision-making to domestic politics in both the United States and Vietnam, to military operations, to its broader international impact, has been pulled apart and explored by a large and international group of scholars, leaving us with a body of scholarship that is not only rich and textured but also dynamic and constantly evolving.[8]

Scholarship on the Iraq War has not followed the same pattern. For good reason, few politicians have attempted to rehabilitate the war's reputation and, as Marjorie Galelli has argued, historians have been much slower to produce work on Iraq than they were on Vietnam.[9] The war has produced plenty of journalistic accounts and memoirs, but serious scholarly histories have been much slower to emerge. We can speculate as to the reasons for this: a clogged-up declassification process that means that the records on which historians rely have not been forthcoming, the perilous state of the humanities in general and the discipline of history in particular means that there are fewer scholars around with the resources to take on the task, and the fact that this

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Pfc. Alejandro Esparza of Company B, 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division (Stryker Brigade Combat Team), scans an open field through thick underbrush that conceals him from suspected terrorists during an operation in the western Ninevah Province city of Avgani, Iraq, on 2 August 2004. The unit was searching for weapons caches and terrorists suspected of living in the area. (Photo by Sgt. Fred Minnick, U.S. Army)

war was fought by an all-volunteer force has meant that it has not haunted the imaginations of the college-going population in the way the war in Vietnam did during the draft era.[10] Moreover, students rarely encounter these wars in the classroom. Whereas a generation ago most history departments in the United States had someone who could teach a course on the Vietnam War (and many still do), the same is certainly not true of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[11] Whatever the causes, we have yet to see the sort of flowering of work that one might expect for a conflict that had such profound consequences for the region, for U.S. domestic politics, and of course for the military that was sent to fight the war in the first place.[12]

The exception to this trend of relative scholarly neglect has been the military itself. In addition to commissioning research from external bodies such as the RAND Corporation, the Army has now published three major historical studies of the war: *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (2004); *On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom, May 2003-January 2005* (2008); and the two-volume *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War* (2019).[13] While all three of these studies represent serious efforts to capture lessons from the war, it is the last one, commissioned at the behest of the Army's then–Chief of Staff Gen. Ray Odierno, that represents by far the most comprehensive effort at offering a detailed historical account of the war. Relying on a large trove of documents declassified specifically for the study, the book's authors are unflinching in their criticism of the Army's errors, especially in the initial phases of the war. In his foreword to the book, Odierno's successor as chief of staff, Gen. Mark Milley, spoke about the institution having "a professional and moral responsibility to learn the relevant lessons of the recent past," a charge that the study's authors clearly took seriously as they synthesized huge volumes of archival and interview material to produce a wide-ranging study that examines the war as it was experienced by American soldiers in Iraq.[14] Similarly, the Marine Corps has produced a wide array of studies that focus on issues as diverse as small-unit actions,

urban warfare, Marine aviation, and combat service support, all of which provide fine-grained analysis of lessons learned.[15]

So, if the military is forging ahead with producing historical scholarship on the war, why does it matter that the historical profession has not kept up the same pace? Why should military professionals be concerned that civilian scholars are not yet producing the volume of work that one might expect for such an important war? The answer to this question is clear when we look at the crucial early months of the war and the planning process that led to it. At first glance, this is something that we already know a lot about. Assiduously detailed journalistic accounts such as Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor's *Cobra II*, George Packer's *The Assassin's Gate*, Tom Ricks's *Fiasco*, and Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* have given us detailed analysis of what went wrong and why.[16] Moreover, the Army's own study, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, makes full use of declassified documents to produce a scathing analysis of some of the blithe assumptions undergirding the planning process for the invasion, the poor interagency cooperation that dogged efforts to think about what the occupation of Iraq would entail, and the lack of operational guidance as things began to fall apart in the spring and summer of 2003.

Yet books by journalists, compelling as they are, are necessarily incomplete, as they relied heavily on interviews with protagonists, published documents, existing reporting, and the occasional leaked memo or report. Even historian Melvyn Leffler, whose recent book *Confronting Saddam Hussein: George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq* has been lauded in some quarters as the first serious academic account of the war, is heavily reliant on oral histories, a small tranche of papers declassified by Donald Rumsfeld, and the Army's own official history for his account of the malfunctioning planning process for the postinvasion occupation.[17] Perhaps not surprisingly, Leffler's book, conditioned as it is by access to members of the Bush administration, is somewhat more sympathetic to their predicament than earlier accounts had been.[18] Meanwhile, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War* is much more grounded in careful archival research, but inevitably (and understandably) concentrates on the Army's own shortcomings in the build-up to the invasion and the early months of the war and has less to say about political failures. Reading these works, one might be left with the impression that the problem with the invasion of Iraq was one of poor execution rather than of disastrous assumptions that undergirded the whole effort.

This dearth of scholarship as well as the partiality of the archive has led to a situation where all we have is an impressionistic understanding of what was happening inside the Bush administration in the crucial months between late 2002 and the summer of 2003 and a very detailed, almost forensic account of what the war and the planning process looked like from inside military command posts. Such imbalance greatly impedes our understanding of the precise dynamics that could explain the disastrous outcome in the spring and summer of 2003. In the language of political science, the failure of the occupation of Iraq was overdetermined: there were clearly multiple serious breakdowns in the process, any one of which may have been enough to produce catastrophe on their own. But by relying so heavily on historical work produced by the Army alone, we can only have a detailed understanding of some of these problems. We have a relatively clear picture of how debates over the number of troops needed for Phase IV (stability operations) played out to produce an undersized invasion force; of how Eclipse II, the plan for postinvasion stabilization, was disseminated too late to make a difference; of how the aggressive drawdown of troop and the transition from the four-star Coalition Forces Land Component Command to the much smaller three-star Combined Joint Task Force 7 soon led to an overwhelmed chain of command; and of how different division commanders were essentially left to their own devices during the summer of 2003 without much in the way of operational guidance, producing results that were decidedly mixed.

And yet we know far less about other deeply significant issues: the Bush administration's refusal to seriously countenance the realities of what an occupation would entail; the seeming assumption among the joint staff that a multinational peacekeeping force made up of units from Europe, India, and the Middle East would happily take over occupation duties from the United States; and the fatal decisions by Paul Bremer, the leader of the Coalition Provisional Authority, to disband the Iraqi army and implement a de-Ba'athification process that severely handicapped efforts to restore security and governance in post-Saddam Iraq.[19] For many

Soldiers from Troop C, 2nd Squadron, 14th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division (Stryker Brigade Combat Team), and Company F, 425th Infantry, provide security in the streets of Tal Afar, Iraq, on 11 December 2004. The soldiers were searching homes in the city to root out terrorists and confiscate weapons. (Photo by Spc. Blair Larson, U.S. Army)

of these questions, we are reliant on dueling accounts in memoirs and journalists' investigations for what insight we have. The point here is not that Army official histories shy away from talking about these issues, but rather that as their focus is on the efforts of the Army and its own shortcomings, they can, at best, only give us a partial understanding of the political processes that dictated the environment in which the Army operated. By relying so much on memoirs and journalistic accounts rather than the thousands of documents created by the administration and Department of Defense at the time, we can only scratch the surface in understanding the dynamics of some of the most consequential decisions of the war.

Moreover, this unevenness in historical accounting also has the potential to exacerbate one of the most serious problems revealed by planning for the invasion and its aftermath: the disconnect in the American military mind between the technical business of warfighting and the fundamentally political act that is war. The best illustration of this tendency to try to cordon off military activities from policy can be seen in the attitude of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) commander Gen. Tommy Franks toward postwar planning issues. In his memoirs, he revealed his belief that "while we at CENTCOM were executing the war plan, Washington should focus on policy-level issues." Franks was happy to know that "the President and Don Rumsfeld would back me up, so I felt free to pass the message along to the bureaucracy beneath them: *You pay attention to the day after, and I'll pay attention to the day of* [emphasis in the original]."[20] For Franks, it was clear that his job was essentially about fighting battles and destroying targets; more complex questions could be left to others.

Reviewing Franks's memoirs, Andrew Bacevich pointed out that while Franks was fond of quoting Carl von Clausewitz: "When it comes to the relationship of war and politics, he rejects the core of what Clausewitz actually taught. And in that sense, he typifies the post-Vietnam American officer."[21] As Bacevich notes, whenever Franks meant to discuss strategy, he ended up talking tactics instead. In the book, Franks describes sketching out his "template" for "decisive victory" in Iraq: a matrix containing seven "lines of operation" representing American capabilities; nine "slices" representing Iraqi centers of gravity; and thirty-six intersections between the two where the Americans would focus their efforts.[22] As Bacevich observed, Franks's "operational matrix" was not so much a strategy as a collection of tactics. Rather than, as Franks termed it, "your basic grand strategy," the plan was nothing like strategy; it had so many "centers" of gravity that there was no real center to speak of, while it focused relentlessly on operational matters without any clear vision of what an end state would look like.[23] The matrix sketched out on Franks's legal pad represented a vision of warfighting as a technical science, not something that involved the complex and unpredictable interplay of violence, chance, and reason.

Franks may have been exceptionally ill-equipped to oversee the occupation of Iraq, given that he was one of the few Army generals with no experience of peacekeeping operations in the Balkans and clearly had one

eye on retirement as soon as Iraqi resistance collapsed during the initial invasion, but he was also unmistakably a product of American professional military education. Bacevich's charge that his thinking on the relationship between war and politics typified that of a post-Vietnam officer is surely an accurate one. The contrast between the operational excellence on display as the U.S. military fought its way up the Euphrates and the strategic incompetence witnessed during the long summer of chaos in 2003 may have been stark, but it's also possible that those two phenomena were interrelated. Scholars such as Hew Strachan and B. A. Friedman have critiqued the very concept of an "operational level of war" that informed planning for the invasion and much of U.S. doctrine.[24] The idea that there was an operational level that connects strategy to tactics was an attractive one to a generation of soldiers who felt that civilian authorities had micromanaged the conduct of the Vietnam War because it promised a realm where the military could operate untrammeled and that the politicians, once they had defined the strategic goals, could be kept out of the actual conduct of the war. In Strachan's telling, though, the operational level of war is less a healthy clarification of the proper responsibilities of generals and more of a misguided invention that has inserted itself between strategy and tactics to produce a "policy-free zone, in which military expertise was unfettered and where armies reasserted their authority over war's conduct."[25] Friedman put it slightly differently, arguing that the "adoption of the operational level by Western militaries especially has amputated tactics from strategy, with tragic effect."[26]

The consequences of this particular approach were starkly apparent in Iraq in 2003–2004, when the "the war's conduct proceeded on two parallel tracks which (by definition) never converged, the first run by Ambassador Paul Bremer and the second by General Ricardo Sanchez."[27] An intellectual schema that was manufactured in part by the "selective use of military history," the operational level of war, as it existed in the minds of the planners of the Iraq War, produced a scenario where both policymakers and generals alike could relieve themselves of the burden of thinking about strategy.[28] Ironically for a concept that was designed to simplify war and put its conduct back in the hands of "warfighters," the operational level robbed soldiers and commanders of clarity and purpose, as the broken relationship between policy and operations meant that the immediate relevance of tactical tasks was often ambiguous. As *The United States Army in the Iraq War* makes clear, in the absence of any strategic guidance, division and brigade commanders were largely left to their own devices to figure out what they were supposed to do.[29]

This disconnect was clearly not just a military problem. Much as Franks's attitude toward strategy was lackadaisical, it was matched by that of civilian policymakers within the Bush administration. We can see this quite clearly in the February 2003 controversy over troop numbers. In a public display of tensions over the invasion plans, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki admitted during testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, when questioned by Sen. Carl Levin, that "something on the order of several hundred thousand soldiers" would be required for any occupation of Iraq. "We're talking about post-hostilities control over a piece of geography that's fairly significant, with the kinds of ethnic tensions that could lead to other problems," Shinseki claimed. "It takes a significant ground force presence to maintain a safe and secure environment, to ensure that people are fed, that water is distributed, all the normal responsibilities that go along with administering a situation like this."[30] Despite Shinseki not giving a response to Levin until he was pressed on the matter and his vague reference to "several hundred thousand" troops rather than a specific figure, he was nonetheless excoriated both by his superiors, who fired Secretary of Army Thomas White for not rebuking him, and even subsequently by some civil-military relations scholars, who believed that his remarks crossed the dividing line between politics and military responsibilities.[31] Within days, Shinseki's comment was publicly admonished by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, with Rumsfeld claiming that those figures were "far off the mark," and an exasperated Wolfowitz testifying before the House Budget Committee that "we have no idea what we will need until we get there on the ground," and claiming that Iraq had no history of ethnic strife, which meant that it wasn't comparable to the Balkans peacekeeping operations that Shinseki had based his analysis on.[32] Moreover, Wolfowitz expected that countries like France would pitch in with peacekeeping and

Members of Joint Task Force 7, the interim formation that led U.S. efforts in Iraq, and Iraqi army service members survey the damage caused by an improvised explosive device planted by insurgents and detonated during the morning rush hour at Baghdad's "Assassin's gate" on 11 December 2003, killing six Iraqi civilians. After the downfall of Saddam Hussein's government, an insurgent movement composed of former Iraqi soldiers with the assistance of several different foreign insurgent groups emerged that conducted a highly effective and widespread campaign of terror throughout Iraq aimed at U.S. personnel and civilians cooperating with the interim provincial government. (Photo courtesy of Joint Task Force 7 Public Affairs Office)

reconstruction efforts, a belief that not only turned out to be misguided but that also betrayed a profound ignorance of how the American march to war was being perceived around the world.[33] Wolfowitz's insouciance in the face of questioning both denotes a worldview where historically grounded strategic thinking was entirely absent and calls out for more work that unearths the origins of this worldview and traces its consequences.

This brings us back to history. For all its strengths, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War* was consciously written "mainly from the perspective of the theater command in Baghdad and the operational commands immediately subordinate to it."[34] Indeed, its authors specifically refer to their focus on the "operational level of war," a construct that, as we have seen, has the potential to evacuate politics from warfare. The decisions that four-star and three-star generals made in Baghdad were of course consequential, but we need to do much more to understand the war in its political context, both in terms of domestic and bureaucratic politics in the United States, and international politics on the world stage. Without that fuller picture, it is too easy to focus on the tactical level and to ignore questions of strategic importance. Clearly, then, we need many more studies to explore the war from these different perspectives that, together, might add up to a more comprehensive picture. A richer corpus of work that integrates the political and military histories of the war can only be of help to military professionals who want (and need) to understand the interplay between policy, strategy, and tactics.

If academic scholarship has not yet fully probed these questions, then what is to be done? There are deep-seated structural problems relating to a broken declassification process and a dwindling academic job market that means that simply exhorting scholars to write about the Iraq War will not suffice. There are, though, two possible models for studies that might at least begin to offer a holistic portrait of American

strategy in Iraq in its fullest sense. The first of these possible templates harks back to the aftermath of the Vietnam War, when the Army commissioned the Braddock Dunn and McDonald (BDM) Corporation to write an official analysis of that conflict.[35] As Eric Michael Burke wrote in *Military Review*, the BDM analysts were unsparing of their criticism of both Military Assistance Command-Vietnam and the policymakers in Washington.[36] Crucially, the report's mandate had called for an assessment of the *strategic* lessons learned from Vietnam, so the eight-volume report was able to consider issues as diverse as domestic political factors, military morale and demographics, coalition relations, diplomatic negotiations, and war planning. Given that the United States turned away from counterinsurgency and toward the "operational level of war" in the aftermath of defeat in Vietnam, the report largely fell on stony ground, but nonetheless, it offers a useful model of how to conduct a nuanced appraisal of failure that doesn't confine itself to theater-level command.[37]

A more ambitious model can be found across the Atlantic. The United Kingdom approach to learning lessons from Iraq has been far from perfect—the Ministry of Defence suppressed its own lessons learned report due to its embarrassing content and ensured that another critical report remained classified—but the political process there has led to a much more rigorous examination of the high-level planning for and conduct of the war.[38] The Iraq Inquiry, popularly known as the Chilcot Inquiry after its chairman, Sir John Chilcot, is a comprehensive and damning assessment of the actions of the British government and military.[39] Across twelve volumes consisting of more than 2.6 million words and drawing on extensive access to government documents and statements from more than one hundred witnesses including two prime ministers and several defense and intelligence chiefs, the report offers a blow-by-blow account of Britain's role in the war in Iraq. The report considers questions of law, politics, diplomacy, military planning, and execution, and it gives readers a clear sense of how interactions not only between Whitehall, Permanent Joint Headquarters in Northwood, and commanders in Baghdad and Basra, but also between the UK and the United States, shaped outcomes on the ground. While the inquiry took more than seven years to issue its report and was the subject of fierce legal and political battles over the declassification of documents and the question of whether its proceedings would be held in public, the report, even with its limitations, remains the fullest account available anywhere of the buildup to invasion and the initial months of the war.[40] Crucially, the vast trove of detailed witness statements and the range of declassified documents have allowed scholars to begin probing strategic decision-making in detail. Indeed, such is the breadth of its analysis that even scholars of American decision-making on the war have come to rely on its materials, even if many of the more sensitive records relating to conversations between Tony Blair and George W. Bush remain unavailable.[41]

The opportunity for a Chilcot-like inquiry in the United States may have passed, but some broader accounting of responsibility for the war remains vital. The fact that few historians have yet managed to offer anything close to a comprehensive account of the early months of the war in Iraq means that our understanding of events, especially in Washington, D.C., and in diplomatic channels, is partial at best. Commendable and rigorous as they are, Army studies that focus on theater-level command simply cannot fill that gap on their own. Moreover, this imbalance in the historiography risks perpetuating a focus on operational and tactical issues in a way that makes the politics and ethics of the war disappear. The British military historian Sir Michael Howard once argued that any officer who wanted to study military history as a guide to their profession needed to study in context, as "campaigns and battles are not like games of chess or football matches, conducted in total detachment from their environment according to strictly defined rules." For Howard, "Wars are not tactical exercises writ large. They are, as Marxist military analysts quite rightly insist, conflicts of *societies*, and they can be fully understood only if one understands the nature of the society fighting them."[42] Howard was speaking in 1961, in the shadow of the Cold War, but his advice is clearly as relevant now as it was then. In that same lecture, he noted, "It must never be forgotten that the true use of history, military or civil, is … not to make men clever for next time; it is to make them wise forever."[43] More than twenty years on from the invasion of Iraq, we clearly still have much work to do to produce scholarship that will help us to have the sort of complete picture that produces wisdom. ■

Notes

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11. I am grateful to Dr. Ruth Lawlor, Cornell University, for this observation.

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25. Strachan, "Strategy or Alibi?," 160.

26. Friedman, *On Operations*, 1.

27. Strachan, "Strategy or Alibi?," 166.

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