

The 2003 Battle of Baghdad

A Case Study of Urban Battle during Large-Scale Combat Operations

Maj. Nicolas Fiore, U.S. Army

History instructs that for a variety of reasons, cities have always been targets for attack by adversaries.

—Gen. Donn A. Starry

Cities have been the dominant focus of military operations for most of human history, and a fundamental purpose of armies has been defending or attacking cities. Attacking defended cities has been one of the most difficult and potentially costly military operations. ... Unfortunately, although strategists have advised against it and armies and generals have preferred not to, the nature of war has required armies to attack and defend cities, and victory has required that they do it well.

—Lt. Col. Louis DiMarco

The 2017 *National Security Strategy* and the U.S. Army's updated Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, formally reintroduced the context in which the U.S. Army anticipates large-scale combat operations (LSCO) against a peer adversary to seize or defend a major city in order to control its globally connected, regionally dominant concentrations of power, people, and resources.¹ Large cities may constitute essential LSCO campaign objectives in a limited war to liberate friendly populations, threaten an adversary's control of its own state, or dislocate an adversary who finds urban battlefields attractive as part of a cost-imposing strategy to deter U.S. land forces and disrupt U.S. joint fires.² Although



the scope of LSCO does not include battle for a megacity, a U.S. joint task force (JTF) could campaign to control the capital of a buffer state.³ Buffer states are often organized around one dominant, globally connected large city that contains the only operationally convenient infrastructure for joint logistics (see figure 1 on page 129 for a map of potential LSCO campaign urban objectives).⁴

The U.S. Army has a long history with urban warfare, from the Continental army's 1775 inaugural campaign to besiege British forces in Boston to the 2017 liberation of Mosul from the Islamic State. Since World War II, sweeping improvements in operational reach, mass urbanization, and the proliferation of irregular warfare increasingly compelled modern armies to fight in cities despite strategists' aversion to the high casualties and collateral damage that characterize urban combat.⁵ Most recently, the major battles of the Syrian Civil War and the war against the Islamic State clearly demonstrate that neither the Russian nor American armies can avoid urban battle. Although both forces achieved their strategic objectives, visual media from Aleppo and the liberation of Mosul reminded the world how destructive urban battles can still be.⁶ American military strategists questioned whether American voters, policy makers, and military leaders would continue to accept such high levels of casualties, collateral damage to infrastructure and the environment, and the concomitant reconstruction expense to U.S. taxpayers.⁷ From a historical perspective, the devastation of Mosul's urban center was quite normal, but LSCO doctrine expects U.S. Army and allied land forces to replicate the exceptionally low destruction of the 2003 Battle of Baghdad, even when fighting peer adversaries.⁸

For Context: LSCO Adversaries May Prefer Urban Battles

In an urban battle, LSCO peer adversaries can contest and even dominate domains in an effort to defeat and destroy U.S. forces who could not be effectively resisted in the field.⁹ Adversaries defeated in the field will likely retreat into the nearest city and attempt to regroup, and the U.S. commander may not be able to spare enough combat power to operationally fix and strategically isolate bypassed urban adversaries.¹⁰ An

adversary who is determined to fight an urban battle against U.S. forces has already accepted the risk to its forces and civilians on the battlefield, and also to the high collateral damage associated with urban combat. Ruthless adversaries may even seek a high-attrition, high-destruction battle to deliberately inflict harm on concentrations of politically unfriendly civilians and destroy their cities as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad destroyed Aleppo from 2012 to 2017.¹¹

Recognizing historical U.S. policy restraints, even adversaries with a vital postconflict interest in a theater's cities are likely to seek urban battles as legitimate ways to improve the correlation of forces and achieve their strategic objectives. U.S. commanders, bound by law and military ethics to establish rules of engagement that minimize noncombatant deaths and wanton destruction, should expect to fight LSCO urban battles with the dual objectives of defeating a peer-adversary force while protecting the city from civilian casualties and collateral damage.¹² Ever since the introduction of precision munitions, commanders in LSCO concentrated their use of firepower to seize urban objectives intact and manage damage to the city's population, physical structures, ecology, and life-sustaining interstitial systems.¹³ In this context, a framework to structure the combat in an urban battle can help U.S. Army commanders win LSCO urban battles without accepting asymmetric risk to the mission, force, and nearby civilians.

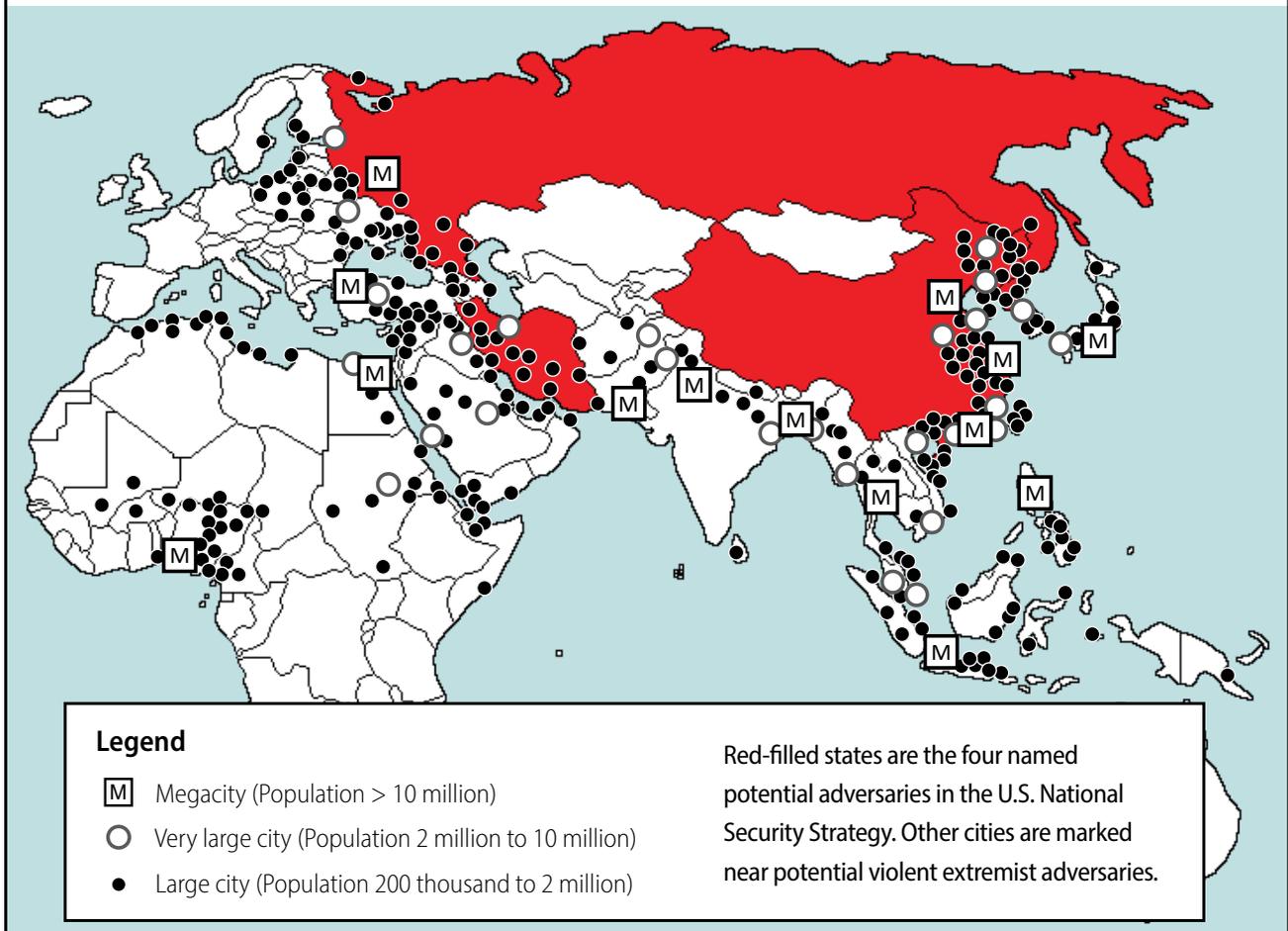
A Historical Framework to Study Urban Battles

Urban battles typically follow a historical campaign pattern that begins with fighting in the field and ends with one of the combatants consolidating control of the city to enable follow-on operations.¹⁴ In the classic Jominian formulation of an offensive expeditionary campaign, the line of operations leads from a base of operations toward a decisive objective—often the adversary's capital.¹⁵ The adversary deploys from that base, and the defender accepts a decisive field battle in the frontier to protect the threatened city. If the attacker wins the field battle, then the defender should concede the war and negotiate the terms of peace to avoid further battles. During

Previous page: A car burns on a bridge over the Euphrates River 31 March 2003 in Al Hindiyah, Iraq. U.S. Army Task Force 464, part of the 3rd Infantry Division, seized the bridge as part of its campaign to move north toward Baghdad. (Photo by John Moore, Associated Press)

Expeditionary large-scale combat operations land campaigns are likely to center on large cities.

In a limited war with the aim of returning the conflict to competition, the Army would probably avoid adversary capitals, megacities, and force projection deep inland.



(Figure by author; adapted from visualization by *The Economist* and the UN's annual *World Urbanization Prospects*)

Figure 1. Large Cities in Potential Large-Scale Combat Operations Conflict Areas

Operation Desert Storm, the U.S. Army executed this type of field-centric operational approach to dislocate the Iraqi army from Kuwait and avoided fighting an urban battle for Kuwait City and its surrounding oil infrastructure. The successful conclusion of the war depended on a credible U.S. capability to continue the attack on Basra and Baghdad. In 1991, President Saddam Hussein reframed the U.S. decision to refrain from such an attack as a strategic victory for Iraq.¹⁶ In 2003, the U.S.-led coalition resumed the offensive line of operations to defeat Hussein and forced him to fight defensive battles from his border rearward to Baghdad, his capital city.

Synthesized from U.S. Army doctrine and historical examples, the table (on page 130) shows an attacker-centric, chronologically arranged conceptual structure for an urban battle within a campaign's line of operations. The concept starts with the defeat of the adversary field army and culminates with decisive exploitative actions designed to defeat the defender's military cohesion and prevent it from preserving control over any portion of the city that would be sufficient to reestablish defense in depth. First, U.S. joint forces can operate in a position of technological advantage outside of the city, which will help land forces dislocate the peer adversary from

Table. Historical Event Template for an Urban Battle

	Attacking a large city	Defending a large city
Phase 0, Open the Campaign	<p>Defeat defending field army</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure line of operation to the city • Neutralize adversary army-in-being to prevent relief of city's defenders 	<p>Prevent urban battle</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If suitably advantageous, attempt to defeat attacker away from city • Or, trade space for time, withdraw to the city to preserve combat power
Phase I, Approach	<p>Invest the city</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encircle adversary forces in the city to interdict their lines of communication (LOC) • Establish consolidation area, basing, and durable LOC for prolonged siege • Negotiate to avoid siege and assault 	<p>Concentrate forces within the city</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disrupt and harass attacker's approach • Remove all available terrain-and population-sustainment into city • Maintain proximity to population for protection • Negotiate for time and external relief
Phase II, Siege	<p>Prepare an assault</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain encirclement and LOC • Reconnoiter to gain understanding • Shape the battlefield to prepare for the assault, degrade adversary resistance, and influence civilian support 	<p>Prepare to defend</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect and conserve military capabilities to sustain duration of resistance • Disrupt attacker's preparation; attrit offensive capability when economical • Negotiate for time and external relief
Phase III, Assault	<p>Assault to breach perimeter</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliberate breaching operations • Maintain command and sustainment of forces that enter the city • Establish a foothold to sustain reach 	<p>Attrit attacking forces</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use kill zones reinforced by obstacles • Maintain integrity of obstacle system • Counterattack to stop penetrations and restore defensive depth
Phase IV, Exploit (Decisive)	<p>Destroy adversary cohesion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seize essential objectives • Destroy defender's interior lines • Create information effects that defeat adversary's credibility and confidence 	<p>Preserve control</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reestablish a perimeter to maintain unit cohesion and interior lines • Trade space for more opportunities to attrit the attacker
Phase V, Consolidate Gains	<p>Consolidate against remnants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear city of organized defenders; prevent transition to insurgency • Impose control and order on city, disrupt population support to adversary • Follow-on forces assume stability role • Consolidate gains and combat power to resume and sustain offensive operations 	<p>Minimize losses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capitulate: negotiate for protection of combatants, civilians, and property • Denial: obliterate value from the city to degrade the attacker's prize • Insurgency: transition to irregular defense; disrupt consolidation of gains but not enough to invite obliteration

(Table by author; applied concepts found in FM 3-0, *Operations*. This event template can frame tactical actions when studying or planning for urban battles.)

the field, isolate remaining adversary forces inside the city, and shape the urban battlefield to create favorable conditions for an assault. Then, the JTF's supremacy in integrated joint firepower will help land forces dominate a small portion of the defender's perimeter to penetrate, but the decisive point of the battle occurs after that successful breach, when an assault element inside the city must destroy the adversary's defensive cohesion through synchronized action in multiple domains. Finally, consolidating the attack requires continuous operations to protect civilians and isolated adversary remnants using the four stability mechanisms.¹⁷

The urban battle begins in Phase I (Approach) when the defender abandons the field to consolidate its main force within the city to defend its perimeter. Once the attacker identifies that only a disruption force remains in the field, the attacker will deploy a division to approach and invest the city while other forces deploy to protect the siege against external relief. If the attacker can encircle the city, it will gain the operational initiative by monopolizing the ability to deploy additional capabilities to the battlefield, and the attacker can leverage the city's suburban transportation network to gain movement and distribution advantages.

In Phase II (Siege), the attacker develops a siege that shapes the battlefield, the adversary, and friendly forces by improving the terrain, targeting adversary capabilities, and preparing maneuver units for the eventual assault.¹⁸ The defender prepares to repel that assault by constructing shelters that protect and sustain combat power for the duration of the siege as well as tactical obstacles in engagement areas to attrit the attacker's assault forces. The defender can also use regular and irregular spoiling attacks in the attacker's close and consolidation areas to disrupt its preparation activities, influence negotiations, and even shift the correlation of forces until it is so unfavorable that the attacker must quit the siege.

Phase III (Assault) begins when the attacker assesses that conditions are most favorable to assault the city. This decision is influenced by mission considerations (including policy, time available, and weather) and by the success of both friendly and adversary shaping operations in altering the correlation of forces. Although a prepared defense will significantly attrit the assaulting force, as long as the attacker enjoys external freedom of maneuver, it can deliberately concentrate overwhelming force at any

breach site and will penetrate the defender's perimeter. However, modern urban density creates depth in large cities that enables defensive delaying tactics, so it is more difficult for the attacker to completely penetrate the defensive perimeter in a way that automatically defeats the cohesion of the adversary's defense. The attacker must resource the assault for rapid and sustainable follow-on operations to exploit the breach; otherwise, the defender can use protected internal lines to concentrate combat power to counterattack the penetrating force, establish a new defensive perimeter, and force the attacker to prepare another costly deliberate assault.

The fight to control the interior of the city in Phase IV (Exploit) is the operationally decisive phase of the urban battle. When the attacker finally breaks the defender's interior lines and seizes essential objectives, the previously integrated defense will fragment into several unsupported positions without purpose, which the attacker can reduce at leisure. Conversely, if the defender can consistently withdraw and establish a new cohesive defense, then it can trade depth for fresh opportunities to attrit the attacker until the costs of successive assaults force the attacker to quit the siege or until an external force can come to the defender's relief.

Phase V (Consolidate Gains) is the conclusion of the battle. Whoever controls the city must consolidate gains in order to enable follow-on operations and translate the outcome of the battle into the campaign's desired strategic effect.

Whoever loses the urban battle could choose to capitulate and negotiate with the attacker as in Beirut (1982), or the loser could choose to destroy the city to deny it to the attacker as in Hue (1968) or Mosul (2017). In recent U.S. Army urban battles in Iraq and Afghanistan, the attacking force decisively defeated adversaries in Phase IV (Exploit), only to conduct years of Phase V (Consolidate Gains) stability operations

Maj. Nicolas Fiore, U.S. Army, is an armor officer and battalion operations officer for 1st Battalion, 67th Armored Regiment, 3rd Brigade, 1st Armored Division. A graduate of the School of Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, he holds a BS from the U.S. Military Academy and an MBA from Dartmouth College. He has served in command and staff positions in Iraq, Germany, Afghanistan, Fort Hood, the Army Staff, and Fort Bliss.



against insurgent adversaries who continued to contest the Army for control of the city and its people.

Baghdad Was the Decisive Point in the Coalition Forces Campaign Plan

In the following case study, we can use the framework depicted in the table to retrospectively structure actions by the U.S. Army's 3rd Infantry Division (mechanized) (3rd ID) to seize the capital city of Iraq in the 2003 Battle of Baghdad. Baghdad is representative of the very large cities shown in figure 1 (on page 129). With a population of five million people, it was large, systemically important to the global energy economy, and composed of modern physical structures serviced by integrated interstitial systems. In a LSCO context, the U.S. Army attacked with an expeditionary division of combat power to execute the campaign's decisive battle. The defending Iraqis began the campaign with near-peer land and air forces but were overmatched in the field so they incorporated irregular forces into a hybrid-capability

A Bradley Fighting Vehicle from Company A, Task Force 1-64 Armor, attacks up Highway 8 into Baghdad on 5 April 2003. The task force executed what were called "Thunder Runs" raids into Baghdad to assess Iraqi defenses. (Photo courtesy of Fort Stewart Museum, U.S. Army)

organization to defend the decisive capital city using a cost-imposing strategy. The defenders' hybrid tactics were similar to U.S. Army opposing forces doctrine, and in the dense urban environment, the Iraqis were able to strongly contest the attacker in multiple domains, so they offered the U.S. forces a decisive urban battle for control of Baghdad.¹⁹ The battle is most famous for 2nd Brigade's Phase III (Assault) "Thunder Run," but the divisional effort to shape in Phase II (Siege) and to sustain maneuver in Phase IV (Exploit) to exploit 2nd Brigade's breach were just as essential to winning the battle without obliterating the city and its people.

The seven-day long Battle of Baghdad was the decisive battle of the U.S. LSCO campaign to remove

Hussein from power and eliminate the risk that he would use weapons of mass destruction to destabilize the Middle East.²⁰ Baghdad is a city of five million people, divided roughly in half by the Tigris River, with a generally radial pattern of modern roads. During planning, American strategic and operational commanders in the Combined Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) agreed that seizing

destructive assault into Baghdad (Phase III, Assault and Phase IV, Exploit).

At this point in the war, Hussein feared a military coup as much as he feared a U.S. attack, so he organized hybrid groups of regular army and paramilitary organizations to ensure his control, even at the cost of undermining the coordinated defense of Baghdad (Phase I, Approach).²⁵ For weeks the Iraqi military deployed

“ Hussein feared a military coup as much as he feared a U.S. attack, so he organized hybrid groups of regular army and paramilitary organizations to ensure his control, even at the cost of undermining the coordinated defense of Baghdad. ”

the “regime district” in western Baghdad was one of the campaign’s military objectives because control of those key government headquarters in the heart of the city could defeat the adversary regime without requiring U.S. forces to clear every city block.²¹ Unwilling to execute a deliberate, firepower-centric, attritional approach to seizing the city, the CFLCC directed 3rd ID and 1st Marine Division (1 MARDIV) to attack Baghdad—but avoid house-to-house fighting—and seize only the critical nodes and infrastructure that might weaken the regime and hasten its collapse. To reinforce the campaign’s strategic restraint on the use of force, neither division was augmented with additional forces to clear and hold the large city’s urban terrain and would not receive the replacements required to support high-attrition tactics.²² Instead, the preinvasion plan to seize Baghdad envisioned U.S. forces invading from three different directions (Phase I, Approach), then directed 3rd ID and 1 MARDIV to establish a loose cordon of operating bases outside Baghdad to invest the city (Phase II, Siege).²³ Over several weeks, mechanized forces would then conduct raids into the city, interdict Iraqi units trying to escape, and eventually, follow-on divisions would clear the city once the Iraqi army was defeated (Phase V, Consolidate Gains).²⁴ Strategic planners expected that pressure by land forces combined with airstrikes would force the Iraqi regime to capitulate and accept U.S.-led regime change without an expensive and

in concentric perimeters for a long siege and deliberate clearance by U.S. light infantry (Phase II, Siege). After studying the battles of Mogadishu and Grozny, Iraqi military planners did not expect the U.S. Army to expose its tanks to street fighting inside the city. In the absence of a cohesive central command, Iraqi commanders used couriers to establish the city’s defenses, constructed hasty barriers, and demolished the eastern Diyala River bridges to block the vehicular approaches to eastern Baghdad.²⁶

U.S. 3rd Infantry Division (Mechanized) in the Battle of Baghdad, April 2003

After the initial fighting to cross the Iraqi border, two U.S. corps invaded along parallel axes leading to Baghdad.²⁷ From 3 to 6 April, each corps led with a mechanized division that destroyed two Iraqi Republican Guard divisions during the approach to Baghdad (Phase 0). As expected, Iraqi forces withdrew into cities, which the U.S. forces largely bypassed. A three-day operational pause to refit 3rd ID also allowed the CFLCC to set conditions for the urban battle by first defeating Iraq’s mobile forces, attriting the Republican Guard divisions outside of Baghdad using joint firepower, and securing 3rd ID’s ground supply lines back to the theater port of entry before ordering 3rd ID to approach Baghdad from the south (Phase I, Approach).²⁸

The 3rd ID commander, Maj. Gen. Buford C. Blount III, expected to face a sophisticated city-defense strategy

in which elite Republican Guard units and Fedayeen paramilitaries would block the approaches to key facilities in western Baghdad's riverside regime district. From 3 to 4 April, however, 3rd ID's 1st and 2nd Brigades attacked from the south and the northwest against ineffective resistance over intact roads and bridges to seize Baghdad International Airport and surrounded the city from the south, west, and north (Phase II, Siege). On the other side of the Tigris River, 1 MARDIV was still several days away from eastern Baghdad.

Intelligence and imagery reported that there were no integrated obstacles on the major highways, and coalition airstrikes were so effective that Iraqi soldiers were deserting in large numbers. Blount concluded that the Iraqi defense of Baghdad was much weaker than anticipated, and with control of the international airport as a secure operating base, 3rd ID could sustain offensive operations with unexpected freedom of maneuver.²⁹ He also realized that a long siege might not be necessary to set conditions for a successful assault. Blount preferred to retain the initiative and not give Hussein weeks to conduct an information campaign to inflame global public opinion against the blockade of Baghdad's five million civilians. Blount decided to depart from the campaign plan and conduct a "Thunder Run"—in doctrine what is called a reconnaissance in force—on 5 April to assess if it was possible to penetrate Baghdad's defenses with minimal risk.³⁰ On the other side of the Diyala River, 1 MARDIV had not yet invested the eastern half of the city, but Blount could still order 3rd Brigade to attack north on the following day, 6 April, to complete the operational isolation of western Baghdad.³¹

The northern encirclement attack on 6 April was also successful but against tougher—if still ineffective—Iraqi resistance. The two attacks validated that Blount could change his operational approach from a deliberate siege to a series of rapid penetrations to physically and psychologically dislocate the regime. If Thunder Runs could continue to penetrate western Baghdad's defenses with minimal casualties, the psychological effect of Hussein not being able to control his own capital would be devastating to the regime. Instead of waiting for reinforcements and allowing the Iraqis to improve their paltry engagement areas, Blount ordered a second, much larger raid to attack a little deeper along a different axis on 7 April (Phase III, Assault).³²

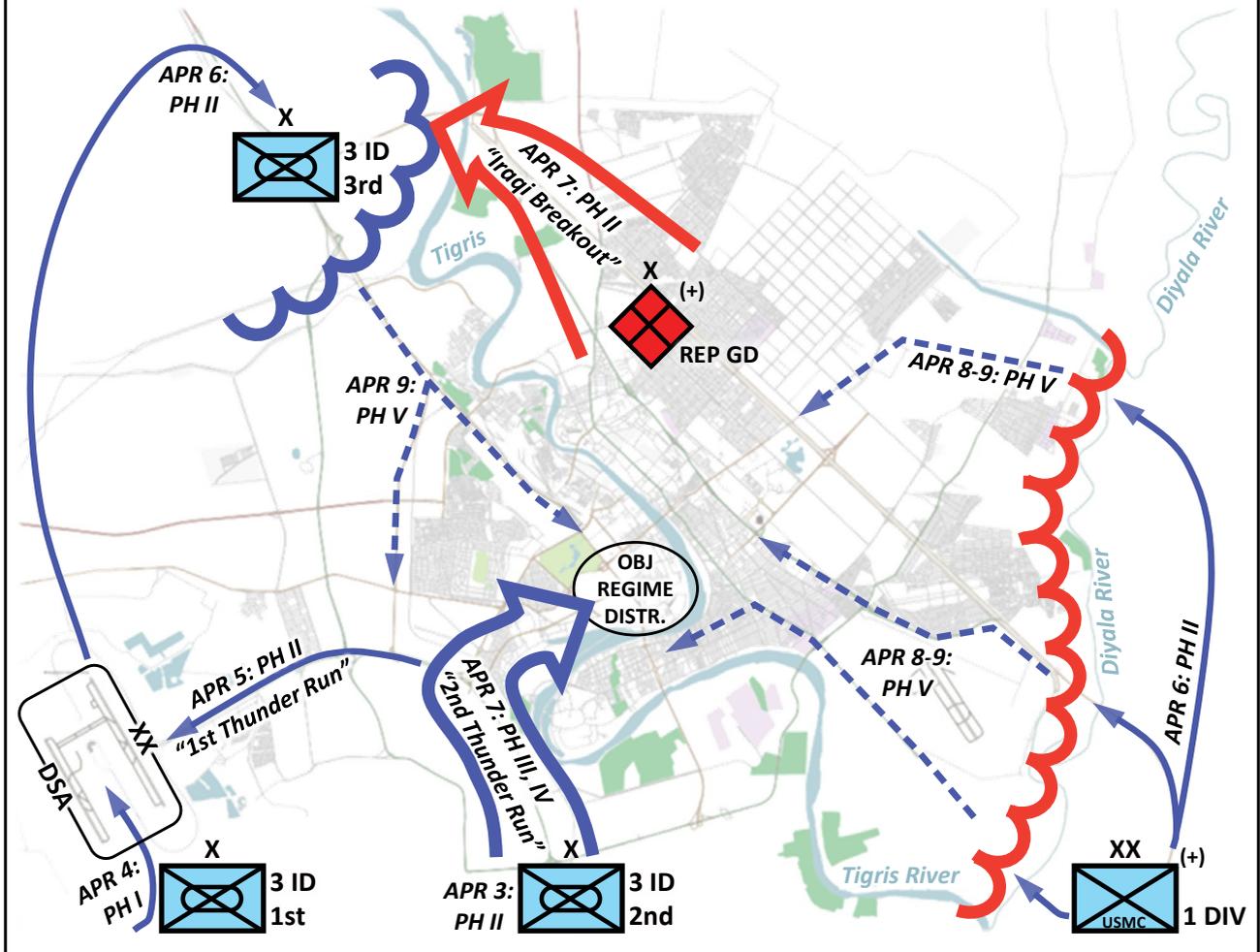
Col. David Perkins, the brigade commander who commanded both Thunder Runs, decided to further modify the division's operational approach. If it were feasible, Perkins not only wanted to attack deeper into western Baghdad than Blount intended, but he also wanted to seize and hold his objective instead of conducting a raid and withdrawal. During the first Thunder Run, Perkins assessed that the Iraqi defense of western Baghdad was ill-prepared and uncoordinated. Iraqi forces were not systematically organized into integrated, obstacle-supported kill zones, and counterattacks were small and sporadic. This time, his brigade could penetrate the Iraqi defense without a deliberate breaching operation and sustain at least ten hours of combat in central Baghdad. If resupplied on the objective, the second Thunder Run could even retain the regime district where most of the essential government buildings were located. The psychological effect could cause Hussein's regime to collapse, and without those key facilities, the defenders' ability to command and sustain the defense of Baghdad would disintegrate (Phase IV, Exploit).³³

In response to 3rd Brigade's 6 April attack to isolate Baghdad from northern Iraq—and unaware that 2nd Brigade was preparing for another Thunder Run—the Iraqi Republican Guard concentrated a combined-arms brigade in northwest Baghdad and counterattacked 3rd Brigade at dawn on 7 April in an attempt to reopen the Iraqi line of communication to reinforcements north of the city (Phase III, Assault). 3rd ID responded with massed artillery and airstrikes to support 3rd Brigade's effort to block the Iraqi breakout at a bridge over the Tigris River. Both sides struggled to control the essential bridge, until the second Thunder Run began and inadvertently spoiled the Republican Guard's ability to reinforce its breakout attempt.³⁴

The second and decisive Thunder Run commenced on 7 April with a predawn breach to clear lanes through a hastily laid minefield (Phase III, Assault). Although dismounted sappers removed the mines covertly and the attack began as planned at dawn, the minefield indicated that Iraqi generals anticipated a second raid and had improved their perimeter defense of western Baghdad.³⁵ The division used long-range rockets to target high-payoff targets, such as Iraqi fire support and air-defense artillery, and massed fires from a self-propelled howitzer battalion to suppress each key intersection along 2nd Brigade's route ten minutes ahead of the

3rd Infantry Division sequenced brigade attacks to undermine Iraqi responses.

The Iraqi army could not react effectively to the daily change in 3rd ID's direction of attack. The decisive 7 April "2nd Thunder Run" spoiled the Iraqi breakout attempt and turned their defense of the Diyala River against 1st Marine Division east of Baghdad.



(Figure by author)

Figure 2. 3rd Infantry Division's Daily Attacks Spoiled the Iraqi Army's Defense of Baghdad

moving armored column.³⁶ The division artillery denied the Republican Guard's use of these key terrain features as defensive roadblocks and forced Iraqi infantry to harass the column with ineffective small-unit ambushes from bunkers and buildings near the road. The Iraqis launched uncoordinated counterattacks with light weapons, but without a well-prepared combined-arms defense supported by integrated obstacles and artillery, the Iraqis had no hope of stopping the mechanized formation. 2nd Brigade penetrated twenty kilometers

in two hours to seize the regime district at the heart of Baghdad and then fought all day and night to defend its foothold against Iraqi counterattacks. Blount had to commit his reserve battalion to reinforce Perkins and resupply the 2nd Brigade so it could retain the regime district until morning. At dawn, international media reported that the U.S. Army had defeated the Iraqi Republican Guard inside its own capital, and Hussein's regime began to collapse (Phase IV, Exploit).³⁷ Figure 2 is a map of the battle with heavy lines showing the actions

on 7 April, the decisive day of the battle. Solid lines show the attacks that set conditions for the decisive Thunder Run by seizing the airport for a division support area and isolating the northern and eastern sectors, and dotted lines show consolidation actions afterward.

Thousands of Iraqi soldiers and militiamen counterattacked in small groups until the morning of 8 April, but 3rd ID retained both the encirclement of western Baghdad and the decisive foothold in the central regime district.³⁸ The Iraqi military command

Baghdad, reestablish order, and prepare for the next combat operation (Phase V, Consolidate Gains).³⁹ In a seven-day urban battle, two U.S. divisions dislocated Hussein's regime from Baghdad and rendered the Iraqi regular military irrelevant. 3rd ID exploited the "Thunder Run" penetrations and made it clear to Hussein's regime, the Iraqi people, and international audiences that American forces controlled Baghdad and had won the LSCO phase of the war.⁴⁰ Hussein was not captured, however, and his regime never



Soldiers from Company A, 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment, search one of the presidential palaces 8 April 2003 in Baghdad. The palace was the second that the U.S. Army had secured in as many days; both lavish buildings were heavily damaged by U.S. Air Force bombing. (Photo by John Moore, Associated Press)

proved unable to reestablish a perimeter to defend the rest of the city (Phase IV, Exploit), and as early as 7 April, some Iraqi units began disbanding to pursue guerrilla warfare. Iraqi forces continued to melt away on 8 and 9 April when 1 MARDIV crossed the Diyala River into eastern Baghdad and linked up with 3rd ID at the Tigris. On 10 April, the U.S. Marine Corps and 3rd ID began consolidation operations to clear

formally capitulated. The regime's key leaders reorganized the surviving soldiers for a guerrilla campaign that soon returned him to strategic relevance.⁴¹

Conclusion: Using the Framework to Analyze the Battle of Baghdad

The framework in the table is a way to understand the seven-day Battle of Baghdad by arranging tactical

actions sequentially into phases. The Phase III (Assault) penetration into the heart of the regime district was preceded by weeks of joint fires and shaping attacks to isolate the regime inside Baghdad, and it was decisive because it created opportunities that the division exploited at tempo. The phases may not have firm transitions;

Historically, Phase IV (Exploit) is decisive in urban battles because after penetrating the defensive perimeter, the attacker gains an opportunity to destroy the defenders' interior lines and cohesion and prevent the establishment of a new perimeter. Blount recognized that the tactically successful Phase III (Assault) attacks

“It is obvious that the Iraqi defenders were explicitly unprepared to defend Baghdad inside the city's urban environment and did not transition well between the phases.”

for example, in the Battle of Baghdad, the coalition was still fighting to surround the city (Phase II, Siege) when Perkins's brigade executed the 7 April Thunder Run. However, actions can still be arranged by purpose to understand the relationship between the phases, especially once 3rd ID approached Baghdad and began to isolate the Iraqi defenders from external assistance.

During Phase II (Siege) and Phase III (Assault), Blount sequenced his brigade attacks for maximum effect; every day, a different brigade seized a new objective in Baghdad from a different direction than the day before. This sequencing maintained pressure on Hussein's regime and spoiled the defenders' response to the previous day's attack by creating a new dilemma each morning. 3rd ID's measured tempo also ensured that the headquarters could concentrate divisional resources in support of that day's main effort and maintain a mechanized battalion as the division commander's maneuver reserve at the airport. The reserve could respond to any threat in western Baghdad within two hours, and this mitigated the risk that an element of 3rd ID could be cut off deep in Baghdad the way Somali militia concentrated to defeat the U.S. mobile column in the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu. Blount's reserve proved essential on 7 April when it escorted 2nd Brigade's logistical resupply convoy into central Baghdad to exploit the penetration's tactical success. Without that resupply and the extra battalion of reinforcements, Perkins's brigade could not have stayed in central Baghdad and the second Thunder Run would have had no more strategic effect than its Phase III (Assault) predecessors.

to encircle Baghdad and to seize its airport, and even the first Thunder Run inflicted heavy casualties but did not significantly impact the regime's will to fight.⁴² LSCO penetrations have proved effective at destroying adversary capabilities but ineffective at convincing adversaries to negotiate a resolution to the conflict. The second Thunder Run toppled Hussein's regime because it was nested with a global information and psychological operation that convinced enough Iraqis that continuing to fight to defend Baghdad—and the regime that claimed to control it—was futile.

Through the lens of the framework, it is obvious that the Iraqi defenders were explicitly unprepared to defend Baghdad inside the city's urban environment and did not transition well between the phases.⁴³ Throughout the battle, routes were intact because Hussein refused to allow his military to deliberately destroy bridges and overpasses during Phase I (Approach).⁴⁴ He forbid his military commanders to coordinate Baghdad's defense, prepare defensive obstacles in depth, or withdraw the Republican Guard armored divisions into the city where artillery and firepower could have engaged American armor at close range.⁴⁵ Instead of fighting a Phase II (Siege) defensive delay to gain time in eastern Baghdad's dense zones of multiple-story residences, the Iraqi military destroyed bridges over the Diyala. The river created a barrier that kept the 1 MARDIV out of eastern Baghdad for two additional days, but the decision also shifted the coalition to focus on western Baghdad where concrete highways and the wide-open regime district were vulnerable to the Thunder Run tactics.⁴⁶

If 3rd ID had followed the preinvasion plan to besiege its half of the city and waited for 1 MARDIV to clear eastern Baghdad in a series of deliberate Phase III assaults, then the Iraqis could have created enough time to organize a better defense of western Baghdad. Baghdad's rivers and canals provide natural terrain for successive defensive perimeters; if the Iraqi military had developed concentric obstacle belts, each canal and neighborhood would have offered a new Phase IV (Exploit) opportunity to attrit the coalition. Weeks of defensive delay operations could have given Hussein the time he needed to strategically exploit collateral damage to undermine the coalition and resolve the conflict along the lines of Desert Storm in 1991.

Hussein did not retain control of Baghdad long enough to deliberately affect the battle's Phase V (Consolidate Gains) activities. For several months, the coalition consolidated control of Baghdad and the rest of Iraq, neither opposed nor assisted by Hussein's former regime. Perhaps the original campaign plan's slower, more-deliberate operational approach to seizing Baghdad would have better mitigated the insurgency that erupted in 2004.⁴⁷ U.S. strategic and operational commanders assumed that risk when they

chose not to forbid the aggressive raids, and Blount and Perkins each took maximum advantage of their respective higher commander's intent when planning and executing the Thunder Runs.⁴⁸ Regardless, no amount of U.S. soldiers would have been sufficient in Phase V (Consolidate Gains) to pursue and process the hundreds of thousands of armed but disorganized soldiers and militia outside of Baghdad who scattered across the country after the Battle of Baghdad and later reconstituted themselves as insurgents.⁴⁹

Even though 3rd ID did not capture enough of the regime's key leaders, remaining military personnel, and equipment in Phase IV (Exploit) and Phase V (Consolidate Gains) to prevent the later insurgency, 3rd ID's Thunder Runs undisputedly won the Battle of Baghdad.⁵⁰ 3rd ID defeated the Iraqi defenders, exploited the mechanized penetrations to dislocate Hussein's regime, and seized Baghdad with less-than-expected civilian casualties and collateral destruction.⁵¹ The historical framework used in this article helps readers analyze the Baghdad Thunder Runs within the battle's larger context and notice the significance of the shaping and exploitation actions before and after the famous mechanized raids.⁵² ■

Notes

Epigraph. Donn Starry, foreword to *Block by Block: The Challenges of Urban Operations*, ed. William G. Robertson and Lawrence A. Yates (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College [CGSC] Press, 2003), vii, accessed 1 May 2020, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Primer-on-Urban-Operation/Documents/BlockByBlock_TheChallengesOfUrbanOperations.pdf.

Epigraph. Louis DiMarco, "Attacking the Heart and Guts: Urban Operations through the Ages," in Robertson and Yates, *Block by Block: The Challenges of Urban Operations*, 1.

1. The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2017); Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2017).

2. FM 6-27, *The Commander's Handbook on the Law of Land Warfare* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2019), para. 1-19. The U.S. Army's manual on the law of land warfare specifically constrains commanders' use of military force in urban battles and exhorts the commander to exceed the minimal requirements of military necessity, humanity, honor, distinction, and proportionality when planning to use military force near civilians and noncombatants.

3. Michael Evans, "The Case Against Megacities," *Parameters* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 33-43.

4. "Daily Chart: Bright Lights, Big Cities," *The Economist* (website), 4 February 2015, accessed 1 May 2020, <http://www.economist.com/node/21642053>; United Nations (UN) Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision* (New York: UN, 2018), accessed 1 May 2020, <https://population.un.org/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2018-Report.pdf>.

5. Roger J. Spiller, *Sharp Corners: Urban Operations at Century's End* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CGSC Press, 2001), v-27.

6. Thomas Arnold and Nicolas Fiore, "Five Operational Lessons from the Battle for Mosul," *Military Review* 99, no. 1 (January 2019): 56-71.

7. Gian Gentile et al., *Reimagining the Character of Urban Operations for the U.S. Army: How the Past Can Inform the Present and Future* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).

8. John Spencer, "The Destructive Age of Urban Warfare; or, How to Kill a City and How to Protect It," Modern War Institute at West Point, 28 March 2019, accessed 4 May 2020, <https://mwi.usma.edu/destructive-age-urban-warfare-kill-city-protect/>; The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 2. The *National Security Strategy* names four adversaries: China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea.

9. FM 3-0, *Operations*, 1-9; John Spencer, "Stealing the Enemy's Urban Advantage: The Battle of Sadr City," Modern War Institute at

West Point, 31 January 2019, accessed 4 May 2020, <https://mwi.usma.edu/stealing-enemys-urban-advantage-battle-sadr-city/>.

10. Russell W. Glenn, *Heavy Matter: Urban Operations' Density of Challenges* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2000), 11. Glenn points out that even bypassed cities can become resource magnets for the operational-level commander.

11. UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/40/70 (New York: UN General Assembly, 2017), accessed 4 May 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/G1902320.pdf>; Amnesty International, *Left to Die Under Siege: War Crimes and Human Rights Abuses in Eastern Ghouta, Syria* (London: Peter Benenson House, 2015), 51, accessed 4 May 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2079/2015/en/>.

12. FM 6-27, *The Commander's Handbook on the Law of Land Warfare*, para. 2-22.

13. Starry, foreword to Robertson and Yates, *Block by Block*, viii. Interstitial systems connect and support life and activity within a city, commonly including water, food, energy, communications, transportation, manufacturing, economic, commercial, and entertainment systems; Michael Batty, "Cities as Complex Systems: Scaling, Interactions, Networks, Dynamics, and Urban Morphologies," in *Encyclopedia of Complexity and Systems Science*, ed. Robert A. Meyers (New York: Springer, 2009), 1042–43.

14. DuPuy Institute, *Measuring the Effects of Combat in Cities Phase I* (Fort Belvoir, VA: Center for Army Analysis, 2002), 5–6.

15. H. W. Halleck, *Elements of Military Art and Science* (New York: D. Appleton, 1846), 56. As translated by Halleck, Baron Antoine-Henri de Jomini's *Art of War* described the standard archetype for an offensive land campaign: win the war by defeating the adversary's army in the field and seizing their capital.

16. Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The General's War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), 480.

17. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2016), 2-3. The four Army stability mechanisms are compel, control, influence, and support.

18. The term "siege" is used here instead of "isolate" to allow for surrounding a city without the intent to psychologically isolate the defenders.

19. Training Circular 7-100, *Hybrid Threat* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010), chap. 4 and 5. The U.S. Army's Training Circular 7-100 series manuals describe contemporary hybrid adversary organization, strategy, and tactics. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss hybrid adversary urban operational approach.

20. Gregory Fontenot, E. J. Degen, and David Tohn, *On Point: United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), xxiii.

21. William Wallace and Kevin C. M. Benson, "Beyond the First Encounter: Planning and Conducting Field Army and Corps Operations," in *Bringing Order to Chaos: Historical Case Studies of Combined Arms Maneuver in Large-Scale Combat Operations*, ed. Peter J. Schifferle (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army University Press, 2018), 6–9.

22. Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, *On Point*, 47–50.

23. Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak, eds., *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War, Volume 1: Invasion, Insurgency, Civil War 2003-2006* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2019), 59.

24. *Ibid.*, 99.

25. *Ibid.*, 69–75. In the week before the invasion, many of the Iraqi irregular and militia forces moved from Baghdad to defend other cities in the south. It is unclear how many returned to Baghdad by the time the 3rd Infantry Division (Mechanized) attacked in April.

26. David Zucchino, *Thunder Run* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 135–48.

27. Williamson Murray and Robert H. Scales Jr., *The Iraq War: A Military History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 89–96.

28. *Ibid.*, 241–45.

29. Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, *On Point*, 331–36.

30. Jim Lacey, *Takedown: The 3rd Infantry Division's Twenty-One Day Assault on Baghdad* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007), 205–6.

31. Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, 100–1.

32. Anthony E. Carlson, "Thunder Run in Baghdad, 2003," in *16 Cases of Mission Command*, ed. Donald P. Wright (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013), 108–9.

33. Zucchino, *Thunder Run*, 72–82.

34. Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, *On Point*, 374–76.

35. Zucchino, *Thunder Run*, 97–101.

36. *Ibid.*, 103–4.

37. Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, *On Point*, 352–54.

38. Zucchino, *Thunder Run*, 195–97. Lt. Col. Stephen Twitty's experience is typical of these small counterattacks by ad hoc platoon- and company-sized groups armed with rifles and rocket-propelled grenades, and sometimes supported by vehicle-borne suicide bombers. Instead of using assembly areas to organize, they often drove or ran indiscriminately into lethal U.S. engagement areas.

39. Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, *On Point*, 377–78.

40. Bing West and Ray L. Smith, *The March Up: Taking Baghdad with the 1st Marine Division* (New York: Bantam Books, 2003), 231–32.

41. Murray and Scales, *The Iraq War*, 252.

42. Zucchino, *Thunder Run*, 72–73.

43. Stephen Biddle, "Speed Kills? Reassessing the Role of Speed, Precision, and Situation Awareness in the Fall of Saddam," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 1 (February 2007): 3–46. Biddle assessed that the U.S. invasion owed much of its success to Iraqi military incompetence. Biddle specifically pointed out that in the Battle of Baghdad, the Iraqi failure to destroy bridges to slow down the coalition and the decision not to use the Republican Guard in an urban warfare environment.

44. Gregory Hooker, *Shaping the Plan for Operation Iraqi Freedom: The Role of Military Intelligence Assessments*, Military Research Papers No. 4 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2005), 70–71.

45. Lacey, *Takedown*, 159.

46. West and Smith, *The March Up*, 190–205.

47. Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, 103.

The campaign originally planned for 70–120 days of combat, including time to negotiate with the Iraqi regime, but the actual fighting took only twenty days.

48. Lacey, *Takedown*, 230–33.

49. Walter J. Boyne, *Operation Iraqi Freedom* (New York: Forge Press, 2003), 161–63.

50. *Ibid.*, 241.

51. Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, *On Point*, xxiii and 378.

52. Boyd L. Dastrup, *Artillery Strong: Modernizing the Field Artillery for the 21st Century* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2018), 150–67; Lacey, *Takedown*, 260–61.