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Why did the U.S. military perform so spectacularly on the Iraqi battlefield and then make such a mess of the occupation afterwards? Why is it now tied down, at enormous expense, in a relatively small country, abandoning one original objective after another with little hope in view? My field of “armed forces and society” offers some answers.

Military sociologists look at where military organizations come from and why they behave the way they do. We study how they reflect their societies and also how they change those societies. The study of military organization can address such currently relevant questions as how to staff the military without a draft and how to construct military society so that it is distinct from civilian society. We examine the circumstances necessary for the public to support military operations. We look at how new forms of organization are needed to employ new weapons technologies.

To understand both what has gone right and what has gone wrong in the current Iraqi conflict, we need to look backwards, to the Vietnam War and to the Cold War. In many ways, those two conflicts changed the World War II American military and set the stage for what we are seeing today.

The Vietnam War explains why the American military has become so small in numbers. Social turmoil surrounding Vietnam triggered an end to conscription. Paying soldiers instead of drafting them meant hiring far fewer. It also meant relying much more on the reserves, who provide many of the needed specialists such as medics, military police, and supply personnel.

Relying exclusively on volunteers has greatly diversified the military. Many more women, married people, ethnic and racial minorities, and immigrants people the armed services. Educational diversity has increased because the age distribution of the force has broadened and because the military has emphasized civilian education for its career personnel.

If the experience of the Vietnam War accounts for smaller and more specialized armed forces, the Cold War helps explain America’s technological superiority over the rest of the world, which is without historical precedent. The Cold War created an ideal situation for military innovation. For decades the American military has had big

## My View

# Go for Al Qaeda, Not Iraq

by Louis Hicks, Associate Professor of Sociology



The American military is the greatest fighting force the world has ever seen. It is not, however, designed to handle long occupations.

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budgets for equipment, but, because nuclear weapons have prevented wars from actually being fought, there was no need to actually replace equipment lost on the battlefield. The money, therefore, went into developing the best equipment possible.

Computers, space flight, cell phones, the Internet, the Global Positioning System, and modern medical imaging are just a few of the technological innovations that grew out of the long struggle to achieve absolute superiority over the armed forces of the USSR. American weapons literally cost more than their weight in gold, and they perform like something out of a Star Trek episode.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the overwhelming combat advantage that the

armed forces of the U.S. have over other armed forces. American tanks are all but invulnerable to enemy fire. They can fire as accurately while moving as other countries’ tanks can fire while standing still. American warplanes flew with impunity over Iraq for the last ten years, despite vigorous efforts by Iraq’s air defense. American warships could sink any other fleet in existence in a matter of days. American sensors can find any significant military formation anywhere on land almost as soon as it appears. Americans kill terrorists by hitting their SUV’s with missiles launched from loitering unmanned aircraft in the middle of foreign deserts. No country in history has ever achieved the ability to deploy victorious conventional forces anywhere, anytime.

But it is a rule in history that people learn more from defeat than from victory, at least when the defeat is not total. In the 1991 Gulf War, the Iraqis made a foolish and terrible error by standing their ground against the American military. In 2003, they did the only smart thing they could do—they ran away from their equipment. Since then they have resorted to a different kind of warfare that puts

them on more even ground.

Iran, North Korea, and other countries that feel the eye of Washington upon them have also learned from Iraq’s defeat. Their accelerated efforts to deploy nuclear weapons make sense because that is the only conceivable hindrance to American combat power.

If armies learn from defeat, they can also be lulled into complacency by victory. The U.S. ignored the fact that victory over conventional formations on the battlefield is a radically different task from successful occupation of a hostile country. Occupation is low-tech, people-intensive, very political, and slow. Successful occupation is measured by what does not happen. The American military is high-tech, quite small in numbers of personnel, apolitical by design, and has built its doctrine around the fastest possible execution of combat tasks. It is precisely unsuited to occupation.

A medical analogy captures the situation. Imagine asking a modern high-tech emergency room to take on responsibility for public health for a large metropolitan area. Most of the high-tech equipment will be useless. The small number of highly specialized personnel will be spread so thin as to be almost invisible. Sophisticated surgical skills will not be needed. Far more critical will be tasks like mass vaccinations, water purification, and food safety in restaurants. These jobs must be performed by large numbers of local civilians, whose cooperation is therefore absolutely required.

The strategic situation facing the U.S. is changing at a rate not seen since the beginning of the Cold War over half a century ago. All over the world, the weapons, tactics, personnel policies, and deployments of actual and potential enemies are changing at a dizzying pace. The U.S. response to these changes has not been coherent. Put charitably, the so-called “war on terror” reflects strategic confusion, an inability to focus clearly on the different elements of strategy. “Terror” is not an enemy; it is a tactic used by enemies that dare not risk open battle for fear of destruction.

A better mission for the U.S. military would be a relentless effort to destroy Al Qaeda. This mission would generate gratitude rather than hostility, garner considerable third-party support, strengthen U.S. alliances, cost less money, and inflict less damage on the U.S. military than the current mission in Iraq. Most important of all, destroying Al Qaeda would give great pause to those who are planning future attacks on the United States. Unlike occupying Iraq, destroying Al Qaeda is a mission that the U.S. military can be readily adapted to accomplish.