How Tactics Used In Iraq And Afghanistan Can Make The US More Vulnerable In Future Wars

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Question: Do the wars of the last 15 years really prefigure the future? Many people think they do. But, the answer is "Yes" only if all future fighting is done in tribal shatter zones, where we retain air dominance. Meanwhile, additional questions that should haunt everyone in uniform for the remainder of their careers are: What is particular to Afghanistan and Iraq, and what is generalizable? What belongs in the lockbox because it won't apply elsewhere? Or, which lessons are worth retaining versus which will we think we *should* retain, but will make us more vulnerable?

Historically, being able to reach, keep, and smash objectives so that your forces can move forward without you having to fear for your rear was critical. At the broadest level, no war was deemed over until one side conceded defeat. This required killing your adversary's hope and not just his will to continue. When your enemy acceded to the terms you dictated, you had finally succeeded.

The piss poor substitute today, given our inexplicable reluctance to declare war, is to talk about end states instead. Yet, if you stop and think about it, there is no such thing as an end state. Time goes on. More events occur. End states don't end anything. But, repeat "end state" often enough and the term begins to take on a reality of its own.

In my mind, this is similar to invoking "complexity," which everyone now accepts as a description of today's reality. Yet nothing we face today is more complicated than World War II. Instead, the scope of what we *think* we should consider seems to have expanded, thanks to the speed and volume of information flows. On top of that, we think we have the capacity — or will soon develop the ability and/or the software — to help us think through all likely consequences, even though this will only compound paralysis by analysis.

Meanwhile, who are we currently up against? Jihadis, to whom nothing is particularly complex or nuanced, except how long it might take to undermine us. *They* aren't encumbered with our same sensibilities: If you're *of* us, good. If not, you're expendable.

To be clear, I am not advocating that we become more like them. Just the opposite. I want us to tilt war back to a format that advantages us, which means we need a 21st century rethink of Just

War theory, and of who deserves noncombatant status among other things. We also need to give serious consideration to the following lessons that have emerged out of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

1. More technological innovation is not always a better means of warfare.

But along with this, we need to rethink our conviction that if we just keep on technologically innovating we will retain a sufficient edge. Take improvised explosive devices versus drones. Which have had a more profound *psychic* effect on people? With precision-strike, the individuals we target change their tactics, techniques, and procedures, and a lot of them get killed. But the pressure is Darwinist and we are helping *individuals* get smarter faster; drones do not dissuade *communities* from supporting terrorists. With IEDs, on the other hand, the randomness has been pernicious, forcing *us* into rolling fortresses and sowing seeds of not-yet-detonated post-traumatic stress disorder.

Meanwhile, in the who-is-out-innovating-whom sphere, we not only overlook innovations in what people are willing to do with and to other human beings at our growing peril, but we ignore the ways in which future adversaries will be able to take greater advantage of our self-inflicted Achilles' heels. We have quite a few.

2. We are now hostage to the idea of the Golden Hour.

For instance, casualty aversion. Thanks to the skill of military medical professionals, body armor, MRAPs, etc., casualties have been fewer over the past 15 years than in any comparable period of prolonged combat. I do not want to suggest there should be more casualties, or minimize those that have occurred. But we might have become unwitting victims of this success, and may be turning our sensitivities about the casualties we do take into vulnerabilities on at least three counts.

First, over there. Last month in Baghdad, I sat through combined arms rehearsals for an operation during and after which more time was spent on medevac concerns and constraints than on anything else. This was because Americans would be on the ground. If a casualty occurred, everything would be devoted to saving that American life, as the commanding general reiterated several times. Resources would be diverted and casevac would become the main show. Meanwhile, what of our partners' casualties? I will leave that question hanging (as it is left hanging in reality) to pose another: Have we now inadvertently turned the Golden Hour into its own kind of metric-cum-constraint?

When I asked this out loud in a different venue, an incoming commanding general and a surgeon disagreed about whether the Platinum 10 or the Platinum 20 was more critical instead (The first 10 or 20 minutes after someone is hurt on the battlefield, when applying tourniquets and taking other expedient on-the-spot measures saves lives). But both agreed, the military may now be hostage to the *idea* of the Golden Hour.

3. We can only maintain air dominance in so many places.

Moving beyond medevac, look at our other hardwon lessons of the past 15 years. How many are tied to air dominance? Are we now dependent and not just reliant on intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; close air support; and so on? Just by way of example, say we lost our current intelligence and reconnaissance capabilities. How effectively would we be able to conduct find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate without them? In other words, in how many other theaters will we be able to count on owning the sky?

4. We have labelled our service members the victims of these wars.

As for the fourth way in which we are making ourselves more vulnerable: the mental health of our service members and veterans. The syllogism the American public has adopted is that soldiers are heroes, soldiers are victims, ergo soldiers who are victims are now heroes. The public expresses gratitude, but it also wants members of the military to feel conflicted and express at least some angst over what they have seen and done. Yet the more this yearning for wounded souls suffuses society, the more this impels members of the military to internalize this themselves.

That isn't good, since the military needs to harden soldiers for future wars. Nor will simply girding individuals via resilience training suffice. Helping individuals process their experiences after the fact is too reactive. It won't help them, or us, defeat ruthless foes, which instead requires a degree of remorselessness.

For society to send soldiers to war, it has to *want* them to be capable of doing unspeakable (but not criminal) things without then making them drown in remorse, or feel guilty for not feeling remorse. Society has to also then publicly, collectively say to veterans, "Whatever you did, that was there. Here you're back to being 'Us.'"

How this is best done with and for an all-volunteer professional force deserves honest discussion. Although I like to think at least one obvious response should be: If society does not regard the fighting it sends the military to do as sufficiently serious, it shouldn't be sending anyone at all