Commander's Assessment: SOUTH BAGHDAD

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THE CHALLENGES a battalion commander faces in Iraq are as great as any U.S. battalion commanders faced in other wars. After a year of combat, from March 2005 to March 2006, I developed an assessment of my Area of Operations (AO) in southern Baghdad that, based upon discussions with my peers, encapsulates many of the challenges other battalion commanders face elsewhere in Iraq. This article attempts to explain those challenges and my conclusions about them, as well as my perspective of what we need to do to win, at least in my former AO.

To prepare myself and my unit, the 3d Squadron (Thunder Squadron) of the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment for combat in Iraq, I read historical descriptions of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, the draft field manual on COIN (FM 3-7.22), and all the lessons-learned I could find. I discovered that counterinsurgency is almost universally defined as the combined military, paramilitary, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat an insurgency. In such a fight, the host country's population is the strategic and operational center of gravity; thus, winning the people's confidence and support is the centerpiece for operations at those levels. Although there aren't any centers of gravity at the tactical level, gaining the local population's confidence and support is just as important as in the higher echelons of operations.

The Problem

The Army's Military Decision Making Process (MDMP) offers a template for solving problems. The first step in the process is to conduct mission analysis in order to scope the military problem and identify its components. Subsequent steps in the MDMP seek to solve the military problem by leading to the execution of activities according to a plan or order. Although I began my tour using only a few components, or bullets, to outline my military problem, the number of bullets increased as my tour wore on. By the end, I had 16:

- The enemy blends into the population.
- The enemy learns and adapts and is usually about a week behind us tactically.
- The enemy rapidly reseeds its leadership and is diverse—there are multiple different groups operating in the AO with multiple cells.
- The enemy uses Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) as an offensive weapon.

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PHOTO: SGT Michael Olivas, 3d Squadron, 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment (Thunder Squadron) provides security during a battalion command visit to a squadron patrol base, September 2005. (AFP, 2005)

- The terrain does not easily support tracked movement and forces the use of predictable routes.
- The AO is an enemy support zone with caches, meeting places, training, etc.
- There are no large population centers in the AO.
- The population is at best neutral, but seems to support the insurgents.
- The majority of the population is Sunni, with small enclaves of Shi'a spread throughout the AO.
- Wahabbists/Salafists are operating along the Tigris River.
- There are five different tribes in the AO, each with multiple sheiks.
- Coalition engagement with the AO's population was spotty prior to our arrival.
- Unemployment is high.
- We have multiple Iraqi Security Force (ISF) partnerships.
- There are effectively no funds to buy and use informants.
- We are fighting a fight the squadron did not train for.

I anticipated that the number of components defining my problem would initially increase as I conducted operations and learned more about my AO, but I thought that by the end of my tour they would be dramatically reduced. Not only did they increase, but even with a much greater understanding of the complexities of my area, I was unable to solve my problem prior to being relieved by my successor. The fact is that we could have continued to fight the war in my area for the foreseeable future. Everything was contingent upon the population allowing the conflict to exist and their continued willingness to replace the insurgents we killed or detained.

The Enemy

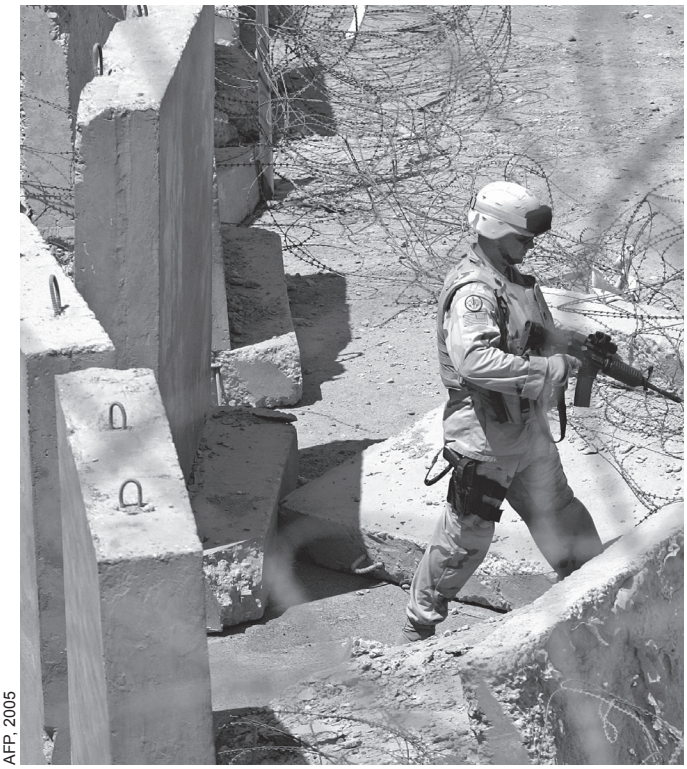
When we left our AO, we were fighting multiple known insurgent groups, the most infamous of which was Al Qaeda in Iraq. In terms of battlefield geometry, I defined the *battle zone* in Multinational Division-Baghdad's (MND-B's) area of responsibility as central Baghdad. The capital is the strategic focus for the enemy in MND-B and where he benefits his cause the most by killing civilians and ISF. His mayhem there undermines the credibility of the government, spreads fear, sows the seeds of a sectarian divide, and generally attracts the most international interest. The areas that surround central Baghdad, particularly my AO in the south, are best characterized as *support zones* where the enemy lives, trains, plans, and prepares for operations. While the enemy did conduct operations against my cavalry squadron, I characterized these as tactical operations, lower in priority to the strategic operations in central Baghdad and the more beneficial tactical operations against the ISF. Although the insurgent groups we faced had different political objectives, I concluded that there was some synchronization between them since attacks were not sporadic and tended to following discernable trends from month to month. I also came to believe that the groups were linked logistically, and we attempted throughout the year to disrupt all the groups' activities by limiting their logistical support.

The People

Understanding the history, language, customs, and traditions of the people among whom you are fighting is essential in a counterinsurgency. Most of the cultural preparations for our operations in Iraq amounted to a few classes on Iraqi customs and one on basic language. Our officers worked through the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment's recommended reading list, designed to broaden our understanding of the Iraqi people and their country, but there were few discussions about the readings—there simply wasn't much time available after regular predeployment training and maintenance. The relative lack of cultural training wasn't critical, however, because 60 percent of the Soldiers in my squadron had served in Operation Iraqi Freedom I. Having returned from Iraq only 11 months before, my Soldiers already had a working knowledge of Iraq's customs and language.

I concluded that the people in our AO would allow the insurgents to move freely through them and live among them unless we or the ISF were physically present 24 hours a day. I also believe that the people are withholding their loyalty to both the newly elected government and the insurgents until they think they know who is going to win. From my perspective, the majority of the people have survived by "going along to get along" throughout the years, and they are convinced that to commit to either side too early could cost them their lives.

In my dealings with the Iraqi people, I was struck by their penchant for interpreting everything



AFP, 2005

SFC Kim Bradshaw, NCO in charge of the author's personal security detachment, inspects one of the patrol bases the squadron used to control its area of operations, September 2005.

through the lens of individual self-interest. This applied to both the civilians and the ISF. The concept of putting community or country first was less important than individual best interest. I also had the sense that they didn't care much what kind of government they'd ultimately have, whether it would be a democracy, theocracy, or autocracy. The people's priority was to ensure that their basic needs were satisfied, and the government or group that could best do that would gain their favor. Throughout my year in Iraq, I used this premise of "satisfying basic needs" to allocate funds and prioritize projects. In the end, Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" was a very applicable tool for understanding the people's requirements and prioritizing civil-military projects. It also led to my minimizing discussion on the benefits of a democracy. If you drink the same water as your cows, you're likely not interested in a U.S. Soldier explaining the advantages, theory, and practice of Jeffersonian democracy.

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It is important to understand the tribal structure of Iraq and your AO, and I knew little about either when I first arrived in Baghdad. What I learned over time was that first and foremost, tribes will protect their own. Individuals willing to provide information about insurgents or criminals would do so about members of other tribes, but never about members of their own. Another thing I learned was that despite a forest of satellite dishes pumping popular Arabic media into every home and hut in my AO, word of mouth was the most trusted form of communication within the tribes. It became something that I would try to influence in my discussions with sheiks and tribal elders. I also came to realize that sheiks had no real power and therefore, I didn't spend too much time wooing them. A trusted sheik told me that he could influence the perspective of those 40 years and older, but had very little influence over younger tribe members. Since the vast majority of those I was fighting were younger than 40, the sheiks couldn't help me much.

Some COIN thinkers believe that civil-military projects can influence the loyalty of the people. I concluded that while the Iraqis in my AO would accept gifts, money, and projects, such perks did little to sway them to our side. As a result, I used the very limited project money I was given to build soccer fields for kids (in the hopes that we'd have better luck with the next generation), to satisfy basic human needs like clean water per Maslow's Hierarchy, and to make it easier to do my mission by, for example, improving roads. In the end, I told my subordinates that all project money would be used for our mission first and the Iraqi people second.

The ISF

During my tour, our squadron was partnered with two Iraqi Ministry of the Interior (MOI) battalions and two Iraqi Army (IA) battalions. While each

unit had different strengths and weaknesses, there were some commonalities among them. For one, very few of the Iraqi officers or NCOs we worked with had had any formal military training. We are currently building a professional education infrastructure with the Iraqis, but in the meantime, U.S. commanders need to know who and what they are working with.

Since most ISF leaders are chosen from within the ranks, sycophancy is valued more than education, effectiveness, or professionalism. The result, at least in our case, was ineffectual units and frustration among those Iraqi soldiers who wanted to lead, fight, and win. Additionally, the units we worked with were either all Shi'a or all Sunni, and there were no Kurds. This led to a bias for or against the populations in which the units were operating. One of our IA partners was a Shi'a battalion whose commanding officer was also sheik of the tribe from which the battalion's soldiers came. His executive officer was his son. He told me that if we left Iraq, he would move his battalion south to defend the community that he and his soldiers were from. Unfortunately, I believe that as long as we have sectarian-based units comprised of soldiers from the same communities, we won't be able to develop a viable national army whose loyalty to country is greater than loyalty to community and religion.

A commander new to theater must also understand the prevailing mindset of his Iraqi partners. While the MOI special commando units we soldiered with were very offensive-minded, our IA partners were more defensively oriented. IA leaders were generally more comfortable establishing checkpoints or working out of forward operating bases (FOBs) than conducting raids. Nevertheless, we found that when we had Iraqis under our command during U.S.-initiated offensive operations, they proved to be tough, capable soldiers.

Another challenge was that our ISF units had very limited planning, command and control, and logistics capabilities. Our internally generated military transition teams (MiTTs) focused their energy on developing these capabilities at the company and platoon level while my own headquarters focused on the ISF battalion staffs. We introduced our counterparts to the MDMP, helped them create logistics systems, and augmented their very limited and ineffective communications architecture.

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When working with the ISF, Operations Security (OPSEC) is a consideration that shapes all operations. A prudent commander will always keep in mind the fact that some of his ISF partners could be insurgent infiltrators or sectarian sympathizers, and he will take the steps necessary to ensure OPSEC. When we worked with the MOI, all planned targets for an operation had to be vetted by MOI headquarters before permission was given to my partnership unit to proceed. This requirement caused one of my largest and most complex operations to fail when an insurgent spy in MOI headquarters gave the enemy our target list (thankfully, this leak did not result in the loss of life of any of our Soldiers). The Ministry of Defense is more supportive of multinational operations and didn't require permission above the IA brigade headquarters for our operations.

When I left Iraq, the ISF in my area were clearly incapable of providing security or conducting operations without our support and guidance. I often wondered whether they were as interested in winning the war as we were or whether they just needed a paycheck. I'm glad to report that, in spite of my apprehensions, the ISF improved consistently throughout our tour of duty.

How to Lose

As a result of suffering casualties and, at one time, feeling as if we were losing the war, I came to several conclusions about how a unit can lose in Iraq. The surest way to lose is to be predictable. Leaving the FOB at the same time every day, using the same routes or vehicles, reacting to attacks or events in the same way—all offer the enemy predictable behavior that he can then target. Closely related to being predictable is failing to learn and change. To be effective, units must create an environment in which initiative is rewarded and everyone is committed to learning and changing in order to maintain the initiative. I set up weekly skull sessions in my squadron

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battle-rhythm during which commanders and staff sought to solve the problems we were facing. The sessions were free-wheeling, combative—and productive. There is no place for group-think in combat and particularly in counterinsurgencies. I am most proud of the fact that the organizational energy of my squadron was focused on winning by seizing the initiative and creating as many problems for the enemy as possible. It's not easy to do this, but the battalion commander can begin by creating an environment that leads to a learning organization.

Another way to guarantee that you will lose is to conduct U.S.-only operations and presence patrols. Putting an Iraqi face on all operations reinforces the legitimacy of the government and the ISF while also making it easier to identify foreign fighters and conduct effective tactical questioning. The Iraqis can quickly discern different Arabic accents, and they can get the most out of potential detainees and locals through tactical questioning. The people feared the ISF much more than U.S. Forces and were generally more willing to talk to their countrymen and provide information about the enemy. Sometimes we used this to our advantage by threatening to allow the ISF to talk to potential detainees in our place. The Iraqi people in my AO knew that our treatment of them was guided by the Law of Land Warfare and our rules of engagement, but they weren't sure if the new Iraqi Army had transitioned from Saddam's Army and its abusive treatment of the people.

All patrols in Iraq are combat patrols. I told my leaders in Kuwait that if there was no military necessity for a patrol or no clearly defined purpose for an operation, then we wouldn't do them. To conduct a presence patrol and lose a Soldier's life was grounds for relief or worse in my view. I gave patrol leaders the authority to cancel a patrol until they and their Soldiers clearly understood what their objective was and what was expected of them during and at the end of the patrol. Although only one patrol was cancelled by a patrol leader during our year in Iraq, I believe the empowerment my subordinates felt ensured that our combat patrols had the proper focus and value in defeating the enemy.

Senior-level commanders in Iraq have stated that U.S. forces will increasingly operate from large FOBs. To do so without also establishing patrol bases in the AO would have caused our squadron to lose and to suffer far more casualties than we did. Not only do we provide the enemy predictability by operating from large FOBs, but we are also unable to establish or maintain a secure environment in the AO if we are constantly moving in and out of it. The U.S. Marines in Vietnam, the British throughout their recent military history, and my own squadron in Iraq proved that living among the people is the most effective way to establish a secure environment and to protect our own forces.

Mass and its application in a counterinsurgency is probably worthy of an article in and of itself. My own conclusion is that the sequential application of mass along all lines of operations (LOOs) in an AO will fail. Unless the enemy is planning to attack, he will move to other, safer, places once a friendly offensive operation is communicated or initiated. We have only to look at the results of operations in Fallujah and Tal Afar for examples of this. While some insurgents decided to stay and fight in both of these cities, others left to fight another day in another place of their own choosing. To be effective in my AO, I had to spread resources equally among my subordinate units and then conduct precision offensive operations based upon intelligence from informants. Had I massed in one area and then sequentially massed in another with the expectation that once clear an area would remain clear, then we would have lost in our AO. We simply can't mass and "win in the west" and then, based upon a decision point, mass and "win in the east" if we are to be victorious in a counterinsurgency.

There is a requirement, then, to mass simultaneously along all LOOs throughout an AO. We had four lines of operation in our area: combat operations, ISF

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operations, information operations, and civil-military operations. To be effective, we couldn't just focus on one or two LOOs; we had to integrate all four lines into each of our operations and the overall campaign, and we had to apply them simultaneously. As an example, when we executed a raid, we included our ISF partners, used tactical psychological operations teams and our own Soldiers to ensure the public knew what our intent was, and then followed up the raid the next day by making goodwill gestures to the population, such as distributing soccer balls, repairing roads, or providing clothing and food. The integration and simultaneous application of all four lines in each operation during the campaign prevents the enemy from focusing on one line. Over time, it creates depth along each line of operation.

How to Win

By the time we redeployed, I thought we were winning the war in our AO. Although I don't believe we could have completely extinguished the insurgency with the limited resources we had available, we were winning. To get to where we were, we came up with 11 commandments for winning the COIN war in south Baghdad:

- Keep instructions clear and operations simple.
- Constantly modify tactics to maintain the initiative.
- Use civil-military ops for the mission, not the people.
- Mass throughout the depth of the battlespace and along all LOOs—create multiple problems for the enemy.
- Establish patrol bases throughout the battlespace to disrupt, control, project, and defeat.
- Execute continuous and complementary air assault, mounted, and dismounted operations.
- Conduct precision offensive operations based on multi-sourced human intelligence.
- Use Special Forces to complement conventional operations and augment intelligence.
- Engage sheiks to gain intelligence and execute info ops.
- Clear–Hold–Build/Project to create interior lines.

We have already discussed most of the bullets above, but I would like to highlight a few more. I began operations primarily using M1114s (up-armored Humvees). Although the M1114 is a very capable vehicle, our tanks and Bradleys proved to be much more effective in protecting the force and deterring or destroying the enemy. During our year in Iraq, 30 of our combat vehicles were destroyed, to include 6 tanks, 10 Bradleys, and 14 M1114s. Had we not used mainly heavy tracked vehicles, we would have had many more casualties. Some may argue that a tank or Bradley deters effective interaction with the public. My priority was to protect the force first, knowing that once our Soldiers and our Iraqi partners were talking to the people on the ground, their mode of transportation wasn't important. I'd also like to highlight that if we used tracked vehicles for an operation, we always put our Iraqi partners under armor, either in M113A3s or Bradleys, to protect them and ensure they knew that we thought their lives were as important as our own Soldiers' lives.

As our tour wore on, our dismounted operations increased. Although we were a heavy armored cavalry squadron, the demands of counterinsurgency in Iraq require all ground maneuver Soldiers to be physically tough, capable of conducting long dismounted operations in temperatures over 100 degrees Fahrenheit and under body armor. We also executed over 30 air assaults, using anywhere from

AFP, 2005

The author, right, with SFC Kim Bradshaw and CPT Robert Guillen, attempts to identify the position an insurgent observer used to detonate an IED about an hour earlier, September 2005.

For a more detailed explanation of recommendations dealing with convoy operations and IED avoidance, to include schematics and recommended march order, see the 3/3 Armored Cavalry After Action Report, dated March 31, 2006, which can be found on the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) database at the following webpage address:
https://call2.army.mil/focus/pubs/index.asp

2 to 18 aircraft. I concluded that the helicopter is decisive in Iraq. Transports can speed Soldiers to the right locations, and attack aviation can acquire, kill, or otherwise deter the enemy. In the end, the continuous sequencing and complementing of air assault, mounted, and dismounted operations maximized the element of surprise, disrupted the enemy, and ensured we were not predictable.

So how did we know we were winning? Measures of effectiveness are among the most hotly debated issues in Iraq. Everybody has an opinion, but we set stock in the following:

- A decrease in the number of attacks against the squadron and IA forces in the AO.
- An increase in the number of informants offering targetable information.
- An increase in the number of caches located.
- Demonstrated willingness of locals to work on or support projects initiated in our AO.
- An increase in the number of local leaders willing to support our initiatives or start their own (e.g., neighborhood watch with IA support).

As the ISF matured, they increasingly conducted independent reconnaissance patrols and area security operations. Based upon their interaction with the population during these patrols, and after the establishment of patrol bases permanently manned by an Iraqi infantry company (with a small squadron MiTT) throughout the AO, the number of informants increased tenfold. Information from these informants provided the intelligence necessary to gain and then maintain the initiative in our AO.[1]

After receiving information about enemy activities or locations, we would launch a raid to destroy or detain insurgents and their caches. To win, battalion commanders must develop an informant network that will drive their operations. Although a lack of funds to buy informants prevented us from challenging the insurgents to the degree that we wanted, the ISF proved invaluable in developing an informant network that my subordinate commanders, tactical human intelligence team, and intelligence officer could leverage.

At some point in the rotation, I read an article about Andrew Krepinevich's argument for adopting a "Clear-Hold-Build" strategy in Iraq.[2] While I liked this basic concept, I further modified it and integrated the establishment of patrol bases, which we had used in Ranger school and I had observed the British using in Bosnia. IEDs were our greatest threat, and although we were attempting to kill the emplacers and manufacturers and destroy the means to make IEDs, we knew we would have to deliberately clear routes in the AO before establishing patrol bases. My subordinate commanders together developed a technique that integrated ground-penetrating radar, dismounts, an explosive ordnance detachment, tanks, Bradleys, and aviation. Not a single Soldier was killed or seriously wounded utilizing this technique, and we discovered and destroyed over 50 IEDs.

After the route had been cleared to an abandoned house or one belonging to a known insurgent, we occupied the home and rapidly established security and a permanent traffic control point. We manned the route leading to the patrol base with permanent mounted or dismounted patrols in depth, and we never relinquished control of it. As a result, we severely disrupted the enemy's ability to emplace IEDs. After establishing patrol bases throughout our AO and securing the routes that led to them, we did not lose a Soldier to an IED. Additionally, by securing the routes that led from our FOB to our patrol bases, we effectively created interior lines that allowed us to mass quickly, move relatively securely, and provide logistical support expeditiously.

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Although the interior lines were valuable for defense and logistics, we were offensively oriented, and so we also used the secure lines and bases to project our influence further into the AO. Conducting offensive operations from our patrol bases, we severely disrupted the enemy's lines of communication to Baghdad as well as his ability to plan and prepare for operations against us. Concurrently, we built upon our success by focusing civil-military projects on the locals' quality of life while the continuous security we were now able to provide led to increased, albeit limited, economic activity. The enemy responded to our patrol bases with more ambushes, snipers, and mortar fire, but we met them with massed direct fire and indirect fires. When the Lightweight Countermortar Radar was digitally linked to our Paladin battery, we limited the enemy's ability to fire mortars. At the same time, we created a niche in the COIN fight for our superior firepower and artillery.

Conclusion

As the ISF became more confident and capable, they conducted more independent security operations while we conducted combined/multinational offensive operations. This modus operandi played to both our strengths and, coupled with operations along the other LOOs, severely hindered the enemy's ability to move freely in the population; it put him on the defensive. According to the measures of effectiveness we had compiled, at the end of our tour we were winning the war in our AO. To turn winning into lasting victory, however, we needed additional assets that weren't available.

I used the graphic below to explain our challenges to the sheiks in my AO:

In general terms I told them that an unstable, violent environment all but prohibited economic investment and ensured unemployment, which were the sheik's greatest long term concerns. No long term investment and no jobs then led to a thriving insurgency as the people supported and participated in the fighting to express dissatisfaction with their ineffectual government and the U.S. occupation. The result was more violence directed against the people, their property, the ISF, and our squadron. I suggested to the sheiks that we break this cycle along the lack of stability/security line. I told them that being partners against the insurgency was the only way to establish the secure environment that would break the insurgency's back and deliver the economic benefits their people deserved.

As I look back now, I have to say that the greatest hurdle we had to overcome in our area was the Iraqi people's reluctance to partner with us and the ISF against the insurgency. In the end, we could continue to provide a certain degree of security and to disrupt the insurgency, but without the people's moral resolve and support, any hope of decisive victory was scant. The people's lack of commitment spilled over into the ISF—our military partners were never as committed as we were to building the new Iraq. Our own side is culpable, too. As I stated earlier, we were never really resourced to defeat the insurgency in our AO. Nor was our commitment to victory matched by the other representatives of national power. There was very little if any contribution from the diplomatic, financial, and law enforcement agencies of the U.S. and Iraqi governments. Their help either trickled down in tiny amounts or didn't come at all.

In sum, I was convinced upon leaving Iraq that given the circumstances we faced and the resources that were committed, we would have continued to fight the war in my AO for the foreseeable future. ***MR***

NOTES

1. Almost no reliable information for executing operations came from our higher headquarters. They contributed by fusing intelligence from multiple headquarters in an attempt to identify enemy trends across the larger AO, and by providing resources that helped answer my priority intelligence requirements.

2. Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., "How to Win in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* (September-October 2005), <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20050901faessay84508/andrew-f-krepinevich-jr/how-to-win-in-iraq.html>.