

Now That We're Leaving Iraq, What Did We Learn?

Colonel Craig A. Collier, U.S. Army



ON 19 AUGUST 2010, the last combat unit—the 4th Stryker Brigade of the 2nd Infantry Division—left Iraq as Operation Iraqi Freedom became Operation New Dawn. Already our troop strength is below 50,000 in Iraq. It's premature to say that we have *won*, but we are leaving an Iraq that is “not perfect, but good enough to leave,” as the *Washington Post*'s chief Iraqi correspondent Ernesto Londoño put it recently.¹

This is a remarkable turn of events from just a few years ago. Yet, we do not clearly understand just what we did that pulled a potential victory from the jaws of defeat. Conventional wisdom claims that we prevailed because of the American surge between 2007 and 2008 and an aggressive shift in tactical operations to effective counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine. These COIN principles included changing our focus from killing and capturing insurgents to protecting the population and liberally funding economic development projects plus essential services.

The additional manpower of the surge and placing small combat outposts among the population were critical to our success. The “Awakening” in 2006 removed a large pool of Sunni insurgents. Partnering with Iraqi Security Forces and the “Sons of Iraq” militia was also very effective. However, our nonlethal effects were far less important than is usually credited. This is especially true of the billions of dollars we spent on projects and services.

The most important requirement for protecting the population was removal of the criminals and insurgents who were causing the problems. The most effective means to remove them was through combat operations designed to kill or capture them. To defend the Iraqi people, we built thousands of barriers and berms to separate the insurgents from the population. “Good fences make good neighbors,” was how one battalion commander put it.² We conducted relentless lethal operations against the insurgent enemy. For a time, we sustained high casualties as the price of eliminating a much greater number of insurgents. The Iraqi Security Forces slowly became more professional, not as good as us, but good enough to handle their enemy. Economic incentives were useful to reinforce success, but not before taking down the insurgents. Our experience in Iraq verified

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PHOTO: The sun sets behind a C-17 Globemaster III as Soldiers wait in line to board the aircraft taking them back to the United States, 17 November 2009 at Joint Base Balad, Iraq. C-17s can carry payloads up to 169,000 pounds and can land on small airfields. The C-17 is deployed from the 437th Airlift Wing at Charleston Air Force Base, S.C. (U.S. Air Force photo/TSgt Erik Gudmundson)

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Ever since the release of Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, in 2006, official and unofficial military publications have been filled with articles extolling the virtues of nonlethal operations—the “lines of effort” of governance, economic development, essential services, reconciliation, and so forth. Many COIN enthusiasts advocated an immoderate focus on economic development over combat operations—more Greg Mortenson and less Curtis LeMay. Very quickly, the legitimate need to consider other lines of effort shifted to a primacy of nonlethal operations. The emphasis on COIN turned a popular philosophy into a reigning, almost myopic, orthodoxy. A field commander’s competence became a perception of his mastery of the nonlethal aspects of COIN, not his effectiveness in reducing violence in his area of operations. Those officers who did not demonstrate enough enthusiasm for nonlethal operations were often dismissed as not “getting” COIN.

We seem reluctant to admit that killing the enemy actually worked. Author and frequent Iraqi embed



A U.S. Soldier on patrol with a local Iraqi Army unit at Baghdad’s thriving Shorja Market, the largest in Iraq and the scene of several devastating suicide attacks before improvements in security made it a safe place for Iraqis to shop.

Bing West noted this reluctance and suggested a reason for it. In the March-April 2009 edition of *Military Review*, West wrote—

The theories espoused in FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, persuaded the mainstream media that General Petraeus’s forthcoming [surge] campaign in Baghdad was righteous. The FM appealed to liberals because it posited the concept of war without blood. Enemies were converted rather than killed. It was the only FM ever accorded a *New York Times* book review, written by a Harvard professor.³

However, FM 3-24 did not restrict lethal operations. Instead, it broadened the Army’s horizons by explaining that other potentially effective strategies, both lethal and nonlethal, were available to defeat an insurgency. A commander was free to choose from a smorgasbord of options to achieve success in his assigned area. Lethal operations were still on the menu.

Projects and Services Overrated

In the summer of 2008, my Jordanian-American interpreter told me that a few years earlier the American unit to which he was assigned had spent more than \$6 million to build a student union for Mustansyriah University in Baghdad. He had served with several American units over a five-year period and he knew the recent history of the area better than anyone in the squadron. I asked him what the U.S. got for its money. Without hesitating, he replied, “IEDs” (improvised explosive devices).

This interpreter had experienced our economic development endeavors close-up and over time. Like others with lengthy experience working with Americans, he admired our efforts but lamented that we were hopelessly naïve when it came to spending money in Iraq. He was particularly appalled with the hundreds of millions of dollars spent in the Baghdad slum of Sadr City. He explained that there was no letup in the violence and the militias took both the money and the credit for the projects anyway.

Just because we provided, for example, a micro-power generator to an impoverished community and put its grand opening “storyboard” into a local newspaper does not mean the project was effective. It just meant that we spent a lot of money, completed a project, and perhaps felt good about it. As another battalion commander commented, “200K gets you a



Photo courtesy of author

The author and his interpreter talking to local “sheikhs” in East Baghdad at the grand opening of a micropower generator, summer, 2008.

roof and paint job on a school house and a few *Stars and Stripes* pictures.”²⁴ Did violence drop as a result? Did we get more tips or more involvement from the local government? Did we provide more jobs for the local population? Was the generator even working a week or a month later? Those would be much better indicators of a project’s effectiveness. The only “metrics” monitored, however, were the amount of money spent and the number of completed projects. These statistics gave the illusion of progress. The prevailing wisdom of nonlethal primacy is based on a kernel of truth: the intuitive connection between completed projects and drops in violence. The problem is that we have accepted the theory without reviewing the results that are right in front of us.

As a general rule, the further one is from executing such projects and services, the more enthusiasm one has for the effort. This largely explains the eagerness many think-tank intellectuals outside of the Army, and even some senior officers within it, have for this aspect of COIN. They rarely, if ever, encountered the frustration that those of us executing this line of effort experienced. Indeed, when we first arrived in Iraq the squadron staff officer responsible for coordinating our projects and microgrants was a true

believer. However, midway through our 13-month rotation he became thoroughly disillusioned with the way we were wasting money and energy on pointless projects.

Too often, the feeling at a project’s grand opening was not satisfaction for doing something worthwhile for the Iraqis but frustration at being badly ripped-off by contractors. In spite of inspections over the course of the project, often by other Iraqis vetted by us, the quality of most Iraqi projects fell short of expectations. We heard repeatedly that Iraqi contractors took advantage of the lack of oversight to pocket a handsome profit.

Our interpreters, our informants, our Iraqi Security Force and Government of Iraq counterparts, and our own intelligence officers told us that our project money was funding the insurgency. The question was not whether it was happening but how much of our money found its way into the insurgents’ pockets.

Occasionally we witnessed this firsthand. During one mission outside Samarra in the spring of 2006, an Iraqi soldier handed his American partners a wad of hundred dollar bills and pointed to a captured insurgent being held in a temporary detainee holding area. The insurgent gave him the bribe in exchange

for his freedom. We traced the bills' sequential serial numbers (\$10,000 still in the wrapper) to an adjacent unit's civil-military operations center. The unit had apparently given the money to an Iraqi contractor for some project or service.

Nonlethal enthusiasts of COIN orthodoxy claim that combat operations, even if successful, bring only a temporary dip in violence. They contend that projects and services provide more long-term benefits. The problem with that claim is twofold. First, there is no actual proof that it is true, other than anecdotal evidence and some polling results. Second, it rests on the assumption that Iraq has an endless supply of potential enemies waiting to be recruited by deep-pocketed insurgents.

This endless supply of potential enemies was not my experience. Although few Iraqis wanted us there, only a very small minority of the population were willing to attack us, at any price. Even if there were such limitless numbers of potential insurgents, removing the small number of insurgent recruiters was far more effective than trying to eliminate the much larger pool of potential recruits.

Lethal Missions Effective

Combat operations are often cast in the worst possible light, with images of killed innocents, damaged property, and detained military-age males. However, most of the combat operations we executed by 2006 were "soft-knock" missions. We only conducted "hard knock" operations on those occasions when we had particularly good or fleeting intelligence about the location of known, dangerous insurgents. While executing combat operations did entail some risk, the payoff—capturing or killing an insurgent—outweighed the risk of alienating the population. The drop in violence was often profound and permanent after we removed a criminal from the population he was terrorizing.

The overwhelming majority of missions we conducted were nonlethal: patrolling in markets, visiting potential project sites, etc. Many commanders dutifully conducted nonlethal operations but often preferred to execute lethal missions. Killing or capturing an insurgent consistently and quantifiably had a more positive impact than anything else we did.

A few examples follow. In May 2008, a group of insurgents ambushed one of our platoons during a mission just east of Sadr City. Our Soldiers fought back, called in other platoons, and chased the insurgents through several neighborhoods. Eventually we cornered them in a house, which we destroyed with the help of Apache gunships. The firefight killed 15 to 20 insurgents. Afterward, the owner of the destroyed house approached the unit commander and actually thanked him for eliminating the gang that had been terrorizing the community for months. Shortly after that event and other successful lethal operations in the area, local community leaders approached us about getting assistance. Since the neighborhood gang of thugs had been removed, they felt safe coming to both us and the Iraqi government, something they had never done before.

In July 2008, the squadron sniper team shot an insurgent laying an IED in downtown Baghdad. He fit the description of a bomb-maker we were tracking who built and laid his own explosive devices. Through attrition, he was the last remaining member of his cell. After his removal, we never saw evidence of that particular roadside bomb technique again.

There are many more examples of the effectiveness of lethal operations and the ineffectiveness of focusing on economic development. The theory that economic development money poured into an area will effectively dry up the insurgent swamp remains a theory without empirical verification.

The best indicator of whether an operation was successful usually came from the Iraqis themselves. Businessmen overwhelmingly credited improved security for their increase in commerce and profits. Iraqis frequently thanked us and our Iraqi Security Forces counterparts for removing criminals from their midst. The locals rarely called the bad people "insurgents." "Gangsters" was the preferred local term, and it was a precise description of the type of adversaries we faced.

The best way to understand much of the violence in Iraq was through the lens of a mob boss. It was mainly about money, influence, and power. The enemy were insurgents when it was convenient to be insurgents: when it paid better and the payoff was worth the risk. They almost always refused to stand and fight, preferring to attack us with roadside bombs or the occasional sniper. They were not going to be dissuaded from their lifestyles by offers of economic



Photo courtesy of author

A military transition team offering advice to an Iraqi National Police officer during an Iraq-led mission in East Baghdad, 2008.

assistance. They were only interested in our projects and services for the money they extorted from contractors. Since we carpet-bombed Iraq with economic development money and little oversight, we provided a lucrative environment for corruption and extortion.

Until we eliminated the insurgents causing most of the problems, success in the other lines of effort was limited. Remove the cancer, don't just treat the symptoms, was how one former successful brigade commander put it. A more effective use of the \$9 million spent by 3-89 Cavalry in 2008 on projects and microgrants would have been to take half the money and use it to train and equip another sniper team. The amount of money we spent on projects and the number of cups of tea we drank with local leaders was irrelevant as long as the ruthless neighborhood gang remained at large.

The majority of casualties we suffered occurred while traveling on Iraqi roads. It did not matter whether Soldiers were going to inspect a project or raid an insurgent hideout. Combat operations were actually safer by comparison. Soldiers spent a great deal of time and put themselves at considerable risk accomplishing nonlethal missions. It would be interesting to know if the risk and expense were worth the effort.

The Army takes pride in its self-assessments and ability to adjust quickly. Virtually every officer in the Army has been on the receiving end of a brutally honest, "no thin skins" after action review (AAR) at one of our Combat Training Centers. The value of learning after each mission is so much a part of the Army's culture that we routinely conduct AARs after real missions while deployed. That is why it is so disappointing that this type of AAR is missing for our economic development efforts in Iraq.

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We do not know how much of our economic development aid was effective and how much was lost to corruption or funded the insurgency. We could have spent far less money on projects and essential services because removing insurgents and criminals from the environment *by itself* led to dramatic improvements in security and economic development. Regardless of the current popularity of the nonlethal approach, we have to be willing to thoroughly examine the possibility that a significant amount of the money we spent in Iraq found its way to the insurgents. Perhaps the billions of dollars we spent on economic development in Iraq was, in the final analysis, counterproductive.

It was certainly far less important to our success than our 2007-2008 refocus on killing and capturing the enemy.

A strategic AAR identifying what really worked in Iraq is overdue. The prevailing narrative is that a holistic effort emphasizing nonlethal effects led to our tentative success. Economic development may have played a role, but our lethality was the most important factor.

In the final analysis, attrition matters. We should not feel ashamed that traditional combat operations worked in Iraq. After all, we put an awful lot of effort into ensuring that our Soldiers are the most lethal on earth. **MR**

NOTES

1. Ernesto Londoño, "Was the Iraq War Worth It? A Divided City Tries to Answer," *The Washington Post*, 15 November 2009.

2. Author's personal conversation with LTC Tim Watson, commander, 2-4 IN, 2008.

3. Bing West, "Counterinsurgency Lessons from Iraq," *Military Review* (March-April 2009): 2.

4. Personal email from LTC Dan Barnett, commander, 1-2 IN (Stryker) (1 September 2009).



DOD, SGT Kimberly Johnson

A convoy of Stryker fighting vehicles on its last patrol in the early morning hours of 16 August 2010. The 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team of the 2d Infantry Division was the last combat brigade to leave Iraq.