

## The Army We Need

John Nagl

### Maneuver Captain's Career Course

17 December 2008, Fort Benning, GA

Gentlemen,

It is a huge pleasure for me to be back at Fort Benning. My last visit here was more than 20 years ago, during the hot summer of 1986, when Sergeant Airborne pinned silver wings to my bony chest with a vigor that would today result in a court martial. Something has been lost and something gained since the demise of that particular custom, which was perhaps more important in a peacetime army than it is in one that is at war, as ours is today.

You know that better than do I. Most of you have two tours in Operations Iraqi Freedom and/or Operation Enduring Freedom, as do your instructors. Your story is the story of the United States Army over the past seven years. You have had to adapt units that were designed for a different kind of war to conduct counterinsurgency operations. You succeeded—but, as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates noted in a speech at NDU three months ago that I was privileged to attend, your job was harder than it had to be. On September 29<sup>th</sup>, Secretary of Defense Gates said:

In Iraq, we've seen how an army that was basically a smaller version of the Cold War force can over time become an effective instrument of counterinsurgency. But that came at a frightful human, financial, and political cost. For every heroic and resourceful innovation by troops and commanders on the battlefield, there was some institutional shortcoming at the Pentagon they had to overcome. Your task...is to support the institutional changes necessary so the next set of colonels, captains, and sergeants will not have to be quite so heroic or quite so resourceful.

I am confident that you gentlemen will be heroic and resourceful on your next combat tour in Iraq, in Afghanistan, or wherever the nation may call you to serve. I am confident because I know that you volunteered to serve our nation after the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, in the full knowledge that doing so meant that you would go to war. And I am humbled because I know that, having gone to war as leaders in our Army, you have volunteered to go back to war again, to lead our soldiers once more in battle.

But I have another mission that I will ask you to fulfill today, another rock to put in your rucksack, another burden for you and for your families to carry. Knowing full well the weight of the responsibility you already bear, I respectfully request that, when you are fighting in Baghdad or Bagram, that you do more than take care of your men and their families, and even that you do more than accomplish your mission. I ask that you help us build the Army we need to fight the wars of today and tomorrow.

In between combat patrols and meetings with village elders and local security forces, I'm asking you to think about what you need to do your job better. What can we back here do to help you build strong local and provincial governments that meet the needs of their people and gain their support? What organizational changes should we implement to give the companies on the ground what they need to understand and influence the local situation, from a company intel section in the TO&E so that you don't have to make one out of hide to a battalion Political Advisor to help with negotiations and tribal dynamics? What doctrine or training did you not receive here in the training base that would have helped you more effectively build the Afghan National Army into a force that can secure Afghanistan on its own, so that my son and yours don't have to do so?

Your nation needs you to lead soldiers into harm's way to fight a determined and often invisible enemy who knows no laws of war or man. Your nation needs you to be a diplomat as well as a warrior, because we can't kill or capture our way to success in this fight; victory comes from building local institutions that can stand on their own. But your nation also needs you to tell us what you need to fight your fight better, to build an Army that is truly a learning institution able to defeat adaptive insurgent enemies.

So don't throw your books away at the end of the course. Take 'em with you—your Galula, your FM 3-0 and 3-07 and yes, your FM 3-24--and tear 'em apart. Tell us what we got right and what we got wrong. Tell us over email distro lists that you send to everybody in your small group and by blogging at Small Wars Journal, that gift to the American military that every soldier should read every day, and by publishing in your branch journals and in Military Review. Think and read and publish, when you're in the fight and, in some ways even harder, when you're back here after the fight, once the kids are in bed.

Because these will be long wars, and when you're back, you're getting ready for the next tour—for yourself, or for one of your buddies standing here next to you. And something you learned—something you realize our Army could do better—may make the difference between whether he comes back from the next tour, or whether he doesn't; whether his unit accomplishes its mission in Wardak, or whether the enemy gains strength instead. It's your Army, gentlemen, and we need you to help make it better—through your heart, and your soul, but also through your brains.

Let me close by saying a few words about the hardest job in the Army—being married to it. Not long after I got back from Al Anbar, my baby brother deployed to Al Anbar himself with the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division. It was much harder for me worrying about my brother when he was deployed than it was being deployed myself, and during his tour I began to understand what our families go through while their soldiers are in harms' way. My brother has just signed up for Officer Candidate School and will become an Armor officer in 2009—and will deploy in 2010,

probably under the command of one of you fine Captains of Infantry or Armor standing here today. That's one more reason to do your homework, gentlemen—because my baby brother will be one of your platoon leaders, and you don't want to have to deal with my MOM if anything happens to him.

I'm going home on Friday for Christmas, and I'm going to be able to tell my Mom that my brother will be in good hands—led by Captains who are smart, and experienced, and dedicated to our nation. If you didn't bleed when you got their airborne wings, many of you have given your blood in the streets of Anbar and the mountains of Afghanistan, and because of those sacrifices, our nation is safer.

On behalf of that nation, from all of the civilians in Washington and all across this great country, I thank you and your families for the sacrifices you have made, and for those still to come.

*Dr. John Nagl is a Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security. A retired US Army officer, his last assignment was as Commanding Officer of 1st Battalion, 34th Armor at Fort Riley, Kansas. He led a tank platoon in Operation Desert Storm and served as the operations officer of a tank battalion task force in Operation Iraqi Freedom. A West Point graduate and Rhodes Scholar, Nagl earned his doctorate from Oxford University, taught national security studies at West Point, and served as a Military Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Defense. He is the author of Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam and was on the writing team that produced the Army's Counterinsurgency Field Manual.*

[SWJ Magazine](#) and [Small Wars Journal](#) are published by Small Wars Journal LLC.

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