

IDEAS & ISSUES (FUTURE WAR)

Garbage, Lies, and Uncertainties

Deception versus risk in war

by Bing West



A dishonest assessment risks their lives. (Photo by LCpl Josh Cox.)

This article addresses why assessments were poor in Iraq and what can be done to improve risk assessment in Afghanistan. Seven months after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, retired Marine Gen Anthony C. “Tony” Zinni gave a blistering speech. “My contemporaries, our feelings and sensitivities were forged on the battlefields of Vietnam,” he said, “where we heard the garbage and lies, and we saw the sacrifice. I ask you, is it happening again?”¹ The audience of Navy and Marine of-

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ficers rose in applause, presumably cheering a criticism of civilian officials, and not of themselves.

That was a misleading illusion. In Vietnam, generals as well as policymakers and politicians contributed to failure. In 1966 President Lyndon B. Johnson and Secretary of Defense

Robert McNamara ordered GEN William C. Westmoreland, the commander in South Vietnam, to undertake a strategy to “attrit [sic] . . . [the Communist forces] at a rate as high as their capability to put men into the field.”² Westmoreland enthusiastically championed the attrition strategy. Inside

the military, only the Marines dissented. Overall, the U.S. military command agreed with a strategy that substituted physical for moral determination and led to body counts as the measure of progress. McNamara gradually came to disbelieve the military reports and quietly turned against the war.

Thus there was “garbage” in the form of body counts inflated by the military and “lies” (deception) by a Secretary of Defense who did not believe in his own strategy, plus a Joint Chiefs of Staff that did not demur in a flawed strategy. Generals and civilian officials alike shared responsibility for the conduct of the war.

Similarly, in Iraq the generals weren’t on one side and the civilian officials on the other. Former Secretary of State, retired Army GEN Colin L. Powell, who had served as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said on *Meet the Press* that he didn’t think the preparations for war were adequate. But he went on to argue that both the civilians and the generals knew of the difficulties before invading Iraq. “Those that had experience in war understood,” he said, “that we were taking on something that was going to be a major burden for many years, and I think the president was well aware of that.”³

Then-Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld wanted to turn the war over to Iraqi forces as fast as possible. This was a flawed strategy. But as in Vietnam, the Joint Chiefs were diffident, while the U.S. Central Command (USCentCom) commanders—GENs Tommy R. Franks and then John P. Abizaid, USA—and the U.S. commanders in Baghdad—LTGs Ricardo S. Sanchez and then George W. Casey, Jr., USA—never asked for additional U.S. troops. Indeed, the National Security Council staff in the fall of 2006 bypassed the generals and civilians in the Pentagon in order to gain support for surging more troops.⁴

Some generals blamed Rumsfeld for a flawed strategy, and others defended him. No active duty general retired in protest against the war, and several retired generals who did protest retained

lucrative ties with defense corporations that were profiting from the war. Then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Gen Richard B. Meyer, USAF, forcefully argued that Rumsfeld had indeed listened to his professional advice and that of his colleagues.⁵

In 2008 GEN Powell did criticize the Defense Department for “inventing numbers of Iraqi security forces—the number would jump 20,000 in a week. We now have 80,000, we now have 100,000.”⁶ Although such numbers were factual, they measured only an input—a warm body—and not an output—a determined soldier. Since such quantitative reports proved to be misleading when things later fell apart, they might qualify as the garbage cited by Zinni.

But those numbers were produced by military staffs in Baghdad, not by the civilian Pentagon staff in Washington. For instance, in 2004 then-LTG David H. Petraeus, USA, in charge of training the Iraqi forces, wrote in an op-ed in *The Washington Post*, “164,000 Iraqi police and soldiers (of which about 100,000 are trained and equipped) . . . are performing a wide variety of security missions.”⁷

As for lies, there is no evidence that any general or civilian official was being deceptive. Although Rumsfeld was disliked by many generals and accused of bullying, that did not make him a dishonorable man. He was not issuing his own assessments while concealing those of the military. According to the *Multinational Force Campaign Assessment* written in Baghdad, the outlook in Iraq was bright at the end of 2005. Yet a few months later Iraq disintegrated. Excessive optimism was shared by civilian officials and military staffs alike.

Reports from Afghanistan reflected similar optimism. In 2002 the Taliban were routed, al-Qaeda driven out, and a national government elected. Things seemed good. Yet in 2008 the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs said we weren’t winning and ordered a new strategy. How had the situation deteriorated over 6 years without warning bells

clanging? How could so much garbage and lies—faulty assessments year after year—have accumulated in two theaters of war?

Dishonest military or civilian officials were not withholding bad news. Instead, the staffs, military and civilian alike, were wrestling to assess risk in two fledgling sovereign states wracked by violence. Risk assessment was the art of relating the odds of achieving stability in a foreign country to varying levels of American military involvement.

In both countries, risk assessment (does the situation require more Americans in combat?) was poor due to three factors. The first was the culture of large guild organizations. Military officers had spent their careers preparing for battlefields where they were expected to prevail. If they didn’t have enough forces, that was no excuse. The divisions and battalions charged with winning were asked to evaluate themselves. Every commander believed he could get the job done with the forces he was allocated. Officers at all levels of command and staff knew one another; they had served together and come up the ranks together. Given that cultural context, it was unreasonable to expect evenhanded candor from the commanders charged with controlling a battlespace. The military rewarded progress.

The problem was not unique to the military. Risk assessment is a systemic challenge for all large institutions. The current recession, for instance, occurred because financial institutions ran wildly imprudent risks. Citigroup, for example, traded exotic instruments that concealed mountains of bad debt. When investors recognized this, Citigroup’s value fell from \$244 billion to \$20 billion, and 100,000 workers lost their jobs. Why did alarm bells not go off inside Citigroup as toxic debt rose? It turned out that the bank’s director of risk assessment and its director of trading were close friends who commuted to work and took vacations together. *The New York Times* reported they “saw no red flags because they had climbed the bank’s corporate ladder together.”⁸

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Similarly, military commanders, determined to overcome all obstacles, loathe failure and rarely criticize each other, lest unit morale suffer. Although driven from Long Island and New York City in mid-1776, Washington's report to the Congress greatly understated the disaster. Frustrated by resistance to change in German tactics prior to World War II, GEN Heinz Guederian, who went on to achieve fame as a brilliant commander, complained that "tacticians tell lies too, but the lies only become evident after the next war has been lost."

In Iraq, setbacks were often met with silence, a blank page, or were deferred to be dealt with later. For instance, in 2005–06 there weren't sufficient forces in Ramadi, while huge swaths of Diyala Province went unpatrolled. But in the command chronologies and assessments of the campaign plans, those glaring defects weren't addressed. It was not that commanders didn't know the score. At one point, a senior general told me, "the issue was in doubt." He asked me not to write that, and it was not included in the campaign assessment because he was concerned about the political and morale effects. Although I have no doubt that he verbally informed Rumsfeld about the tenuous situation, he was determined to succeed. That is why our military is the best in the world. Yet that same organizational culture causes a dilemma in candidly assessing risk.

The second systemic problem was the diffusion of risk management responsibility. In Iraq the system lacked an independent risk assessor reporting to the President. In wartime a Secretary of Defense must decide what his chief role is. Melvin Laird as secretary in the early 1970s performed the role of skillfully extracting U.S. forces from Vietnam. James Schlesinger in the mid-1970s took the role of moral leader, bucking up the Services as Vietnam fell apart.

Mr. Rumsfeld sought to transform the Services into an agile, high-tech force, a role quite different from the

plodding tasks of nation building that he consistently opposed. He used logic rather than direct orders to align his views about quickly getting out of Iraq with those of the top generals. But logic inside the Pentagon had little impact in Iraq. In substituting debating skills for indepth study, Rumsfeld overlooked his role as risk manager. In the 1970s Secretary Laird had an analytical office that critically assessed the military reports from Vietnam. Rumsfeld set up no such independent office. In addition, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs or the Commander, USCentCom, or both, should have provided risk assessments, independent of the coalition commander in Baghdad.

In early 2007, after taking over for Rumsfeld at the Pentagon, Robert M. Gates demanded evaluations of Iraq from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and USCentCom. The USCentCom commander dispatched an admiral to Baghdad, where his lack of on-the-ground expertise and suspicions about his agenda fueled antagonism. USCentCom's approach to risk assessment was seen as a hatchet job to undercut the new commander in Iraq, LTG Petraeus, who had already directed his staff to provide candid trend analysis. Eventually, the USCentCom commander lost the confidence of his civilian superiors and resigned. The lesson is that risk assessment must be conducted in a collegial but arm's length manner by acknowledged experts.

In addition to organizational culture and the assignment of single command responsibility, the third problem bedeviling risk assessment is irrelevant or flawed measures. Again, the 2008 financial crisis provides an analogy. Financial traders issued unrepayable loans that were so complicated that senior bank officials did not know how much of their own capital was involved. The mathematical risk models were based on gobbledygook that Zinni would rightly call garbage.

Iraq assessments suffered from similar fuzziness. Because the mission in Iraq was nation building, slogans, such as "the military is only 20% of the

problem," emerged, and plotting progress became as fuzzy as the mission itself. Each 6-month assessment had a different format, a new set of staff writers, and an idiosyncratic selection of subjects that encompassed governance, politics, polling, economic development, electricity production, unemployment rates, civilian casualties, improvised explosive device explosions, fuel production, elections, and the rule of law. It was hard to distinguish between the trivial and the important.

Risk assessment and measures of effectiveness were addressed interchangeably, when in fact the two factors were quite different. Measures of effectiveness answered the question: what's going on in this country? Data included the amount of free electric power distributed, sewers dug, civilian deaths, enemy attacks, fuel delivered, political parties registered, elections held, prisoners released, etc. Most were lagging indicators that told you what had happened, not why it had happened or what was likely to happen.

Risk assessment, on the other hand, looks at the future. It should focus on the odds of succeeding, given a constrained number of American forces and resources. In the planning before invading Iraq, Vice President Richard Cheney told *The News Hour*, "We underestimated the ability of the Iraqi population" to organize and to govern itself after Saddam was removed.⁹ This fundamental error in assessing how Iraqi society would respond occurred despite the efforts of the world's best intelligence service.

Once we were in Iraq the critical variable in assessing the risk of subduing the insurgency was gauging the intensity of the Sunni solidarity with the insurgents. There was no reliable method for measuring that. For instance, after the battle for Fallujah in late 2004, the on-scene senior American commander said, "We've broken the back of the insurgency."¹⁰ Instead, the war intensified.

All military staffs analyze alternative "courses of action." The tricky aspect is deciding at what point to change from



One staff should be held responsible for conducting the risk assessment so deployed forces know the variables they face. (Photo by Sgt Ray Lewis.)

one course to another. In 2005 the Multinational Force-Iraq headquarters developed an assessment tool that combined several measures into a single bar chart that changed from red to green according to the trends. In 2006 the bar was shifting from orange into red. I asked a senior general what would happen if the current strategy didn't work. "We'll have to muddle through," he replied.

By mid-2006 Iraq was falling apart due to rampaging al-Qaeda and Shi'ite death squads. To reverse the rising risk of failure required two changes. First, the sectarian Iraqi Government had to permit U.S. special operations forces to strike at the Shi'ite death squads. Under pressure, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki allowed such strikes. Second, the support or quiescence of the Sunni population toward al-Qaeda and other irreconcilable insurgent groups had to be reversed. But the U.S. command in Iraq, the USCentCom commander, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs

agreed with one another that the Sunnis viewed U.S. soldiers as irritants and not allies. More U.S. soldiers doing the job of Iraqi soldiers would result in more U.S. casualties, without reversing the downward spiral. American soldiers could not protect a Sunni population that viewed them as hostile occupiers.

But just when the trends were most dire in Baghdad, the war had already turned around in western Al Anbar Province, because the Sunni tribes had changed sides. That set the groundwork for the success of the surge strategy in eastern Iraq, although it wasn't anticipated by the surge planners. According to a senior adviser on the Multinational Force staff, the "pattern we are seeing (in 2007) runs counter to what we expected in the 'surge'."¹¹

At that critical juncture from mid-2006 to mid-2007, an independent risk assessment team would have added value. The belief that U.S. soldiers exacerbated the insurgency was based on a 2005 study supervised by a major

general, with the concurrence of the division commanders. But by the fall of 2006 numerous parties—the brigade commander in Ramadi, the senior civilian analyst for the Marine expeditionary force (MEF), American advisers out in the countryside—were reporting that a sea change in Sunni attitudes contradicted the 2005 study. Indeed, the MEF was busily organizing tribal militias.

A risk assessment team would have picked up those signs of precipitous change. Instead, the USCentCom commander testified to Congress in 2006 that Anbar was not under control.¹² Although a "tipping point" critical to the war's outcome had been reached, it was not placed within a strategic framework that would inform all interested parties, including the White House, Congress, the press, and military staffs outside Iraq.

While risk assessment can be expected to identify and highlight such tipping points, it cannot predict when

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Operations conducted based upon comprehensive risk assessment permit the eventual transfer of responsibility from our forces to host-nation security forces. (Photo by LCpl Grant T. Walker.)

they are about to occur. That's as impossible as predicting the high or low point in the stock market. I asked Sheik Abdul Sattar Abu Risha, who led the Sunni Awakening until he was assassinated by al-Qaeda, why the tribes had not swung over in, say, 2005 and avoided needless bloodshed on both sides. He said, "We Sunnis had to persuade ourselves. You Americans did not persuade us."

His reply was a warning about the limitations of analyzing other cultures. War yields defining events, leaders, and movements that assessments cannot predict. As Kenneth Boulding has documented, peace and stability have tremendously varying degrees of tensile strength inside cultures. Colombia, Saudi Arabia, or Indonesia may look worse than Iraq by some measures, and yet they are more stable. There is a dearth of historical models to show how to nation build successfully, while

abiding by the decisions and the goals of prideful leaders in sovereign states that cannot survive unless our soldiers do the bulk of the fighting. As we continue the war in Afghanistan, then, five lessons can be drawn from Iraq in terms of risk assessment.

First, do not scapegoat. Don't blame garbage and lies on a single group like the military, civilians in the Pentagon, or the State Department. The blunders in Iraq weren't confined to one group. On the positive side, Iraq stabilized due to a learning curve and persistence shared by all groups.

Second, one man must be charged with risk assessment, separate from the operational commander in Afghanistan. There are three candidates for that job—the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the NATO commander, or the USCENTCOM commander. A triumvirate can provide input, but assessing risk cannot be assigned equally among three entities.

One commander must have the responsibility. In 2007 President George W. Bush pushed aside the chain of command and went directly to GEN Petraeus, the operational commander, for assessments about Iraq. That worked, but it's a bad model.

Third, ensure that the goal of risk assessment is to identify and track the critical variables leading to future success or failure. Agree on a campaign assessment format and a set of measures to be applied consistently, year after year. Examine the assessments from Iraq in light of what we now know actually happened, extract the best measures, and discount the rest. Distinguish between measures that are backward looking and record what has already occurred versus trends that point to future developments. As was the case with the Sunni Awakening in Iraq, we lack in Afghanistan a reliable means for predicting tribal fortitude against the

Taliban and tribal commitment to a distant and corrupt central government. This will require special concentration of analytical effort.

Fourth, assess what works at the operational and tactical levels and apply it across all battalions and advisory teams. The extent of individuality in determining goals and tactics among the units in Iraq was extraordinary. Every battalion cannot be correct when the variance in patrol frequency, duration, and style is extreme. Amalgamate operational wisdom and provide standards and expectancies about performance.

Fifth, hedge the strategy. Our current strategy is to employ sufficient U.S. troops and money, together with modest aid from some NATO allies, to build a modern nation in a vast, backward country with a subsistence economy, an uneducated work force, a flourishing drug trade, and loyalty to subtribes rather than to a functioning central government. The "new" operational approach is to drive out the local Taliban, deploy small American units among the population, and dole out local funding to gain popular support, while raising local militia and training Afghan police and soldiers to take over the protection task.

Although this operational approach reflects standard counterinsurgency doctrine, a Defense official told *The Washington Post* it was not employed in Afghanistan before 2009 because:

... we have been under-resourced ... This will be the first time we will have the capacity to hold key areas, protect the population and start bringing in projects. That's what will make all the difference.¹³

According to this view, the basic problem has been mechanistic; that is, an inadequate U.S. troop density. This view does not address other factors, such as a chaotic U.S. and NATO command and control system, a European unwillingness to take risk, and a badly flawed host-nation government. It does not explain why the situation deteriorated in locations where there were ample troops, or why risk assessment by a succession of generals never made it clear to the White House that

three more brigades would provide the tipping point to move from gradual failure to gradual success.

Perhaps an additional three U.S. brigades will make "all the difference." But 60,000 U.S. soldiers is still a tiny number compared to the size of the country, with a gigantic sanctuary stretching along the eastern frontier. And given a severe global recession that will last for years, a continuous flow of copious funds from the United States and Europe to occupy and rebuild Afghanistan is unlikely.

Risk assessment demands a hedge strategy in case funds are insufficient to build a modern nation, to include a sound economy, eradication of drug trafficking, an uncorrupt civil service, elected officials in place of tribes, and the Western concept of the rule of law. Our enemy, al-Qaeda, has been severely weakened and operates from bases in western Pakistan. The Taliban, as a heterogeneous ally of al-Qaeda, is a secondary target. A fallback military strategy with fewer resources would focus on training and supporting Afghan police and soldiers, plus sufficient U.S. combat units to destroy any large gathering of enemy forces.

In sum, garbage and lies reside inside any large organization in the form of optimistic forecasting. A healthy human mind accentuates the positive. Thus, we stress that a particular surgery has a 90 percent success rate, rather than to admit there's a 10 percent chance of dying. We hold onto our losses when the stock market goes down, because selling is an admission of failure, even when it's the rational choice. Similarly, it's especially tough for a commander to objectively assess his own battlespace.

Hence there is a need in the Afghanistan war for an independent risk assessor who can expertly calculate the rough odds of succeeding in the mission of nation building versus the size of the U.S. force commitment. The variable that most diminishes that degree of risk is the behavior of the Pashtun tribe that recognizes no border between Afghanistan and western

Pakistan. Assessing tribal politics and commitment, however, is the subject area where American technology and warfighting skills help the least. Thus it's not garbage and lies that bedevil us; rather, it's the uncertainties and the unknowns of nation building in an Islamic culture.

Notes

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