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Irregular Warfare and Adaptive Leadership

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First, I'd like to thank the leadership and staff of the Command and General Staff College for putting this event together. It's an honor to speak to this class; I'm told that 78% of you are veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Before going further, I'd like to thank you for your service to our country and acknowledge the sacrifices your families have endured to make that service possible. I'd also like to acknowledge that your class is broadly representative of the war effort itself, including every service in the Department of Defense, as well as our allies and our interagency partners. I'll keep my comments short; given your experiences, your questions comments are likely to be far better than my responses.

I'd like to open our dialogue today on the subjects of irregular warfare and adaptive leadership. When I was a battalion XO in Iraq in 2003, I served with a company commander whose vehicle was struck by an early version of an IED. The fragmentation shattered his windshield and severed his antennas, the smoke and dust obscured his vision and the blast temporarily deafened him. In the first critical seconds after the blast, the commander saw the ubiquitous white pickup leaving the blast area, but didn't pursue it. His battalion commander was furious, and later harangued the captain for his failure to act. The company commander was crushed; he felt the battalion commander was questioning his courage, and in fact he was.

The battalion commander later complained to me about his company commander's inaction. He was right on the tactics – in those rare moments when we make contact with insurgents, if indeed this truck contained insurgents – we must capture or kill them. I was less certain about his methods of leader development, so I asked about the company commander's preparations for deployment. For example, prior to deployment, who had the authority to cancel PT in the event of an electrical storm? He answered, 'the brigade commander had that authority.' I then asked him, who had the authority to change the PT uniform, if for example it was warmer than expected? That decision was at the battalion level. This company commander, who only a few months ago lacked the authority to tell his troops to come in out of the rain or take off their hats, was now expected to pursue the enemy unto death.

Officers conditioned to conformity in peacetime cannot be expected to behave boldly and flexibly in combat. This phenomenon is not new. Writing in the late 19th century, Archduke Albert observed:

There are plenty of small-minded men who, in time of peace, excel in detail, are inexorable in matters of equipment and drill, and perpetually interfere with the work of their subordinates.

They thus acquire an unmerited reputation, and render the service a burden, but they above all do mischief in preventing development of individuality, and in retarding the advancement of independent and capable spirits.

When war arises the small minds, worn out by attention to trifles, are incapable of effort, and fail miserably. So goes the world.

As field grade officers, our most important tasks are to anticipate events and empower our subordinates to act wisely and boldly on the decentralized battlefields of the 21st century. The world has changed a great deal in the last fifty years, but the Department of Defense has not. Despite some remarkable accomplishments by those parts of DoD closest to the battlefield, especially here in Iraq, the institutional military has proven incapable of internal reform on the scale necessary to provide for our security. If change comes, it must come through political intervention from the outside in and innovation from the bottom up. The post-911 generation is the most reliable source of that bottom up innovation, if only we will listen to their experiences and invest in their education.

The Global Security Environment

The threats faced by the United States at the dawn of the 21st century are unprecedented in the history of great power politics. In previous eras, great powers feared for their survival only from other great powers. Today, the United States has more to fear from weak states than strong ones, and the greatest danger we face is nuclear terrorism. Four factors contribute to this change – nuclear proliferation, radicalized terrorism, globalization and America's relative economic decline.

First, the emergence and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction have at once made great power war less likely and made weak states and non-state actors more dangerous. Nuclear weapons deter direct military conflict among great powers by raising the risks and costs of such conflict beyond any conceivable benefit. The Cold War confirms this observation - despite crises in Berlin (1948, 1963), Korea (1950), the Middle East (1956, 1967, 1973), Cuba (1963), Vietnam (1961-1973), Afghanistan and Nicaragua (1979), the two superpowers never fought directly. Instead, they relied on proxies, many of whom fought as insurgents in these same hotspots. Nuclear deterrence is cheap and reliable even when dealing with tyrants and zealots. However, nuclear deterrence is of little use when dealing with non-state actors such as terrorist organizations. Such organizations find sanctuary in weak states, but do not have a homeland of their own that we may hold hostage. A nuclear armed terrorist organization could inflict unprecedented harm on our society with near impunity. Unlike nuclear armed states, terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda are immune from the logic of deterrence.

Second, the emergence of radicalized terrorism has provided an ideological basis and a willing source of recruits to carry out such attacks. Al Qaeda and other extremist organizations are

attempting to hijack one of the world's great faiths, twisting it into a justification for killing innocent civilians around the globe. The scale of Al Qaeda's malevolence is limited only by the instruments available for killing. On September 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden and his followers killed 3,000 innocent people with civilian airliners only because they lacked the means to kill 3 million with nuclear weapons. Al Qaeda's most important safe haven is located in northwest Pakistan, in terrifying proximity to one of the world's least secure nuclear arsenals.

Third, the emergence of a globalized economy has rendered free societies such as the United States uniquely vulnerable to such attacks. America's economy relies on the relatively free movement of goods, services, people and ideas across political boundaries. Such freedom has been the engine of unprecedented economic growth around the globe, but it also represents a unique vulnerability. A free society has literally hundreds of thousands of points of access; defending each vulnerability would be both cost prohibitive and contrary to America's ideals regarding freedom and personal privacy.

Fourth, the erosion of America's economic primacy has limited the resources available to cope with these dangers. At the end of World War II, American industrial output accounted for nearly one-half of the world's total. Throughout the Cold War, America's gross domestic product was twice that of the Soviet Union. At the turn of the 21st century, our enviable economic position is in decline relative to the rest of the globe. If current growth rates continue, China may supplant the United States as the world's largest economy in the next ten years. While this transition will not necessarily result in armed conflict, it will translate into reduced American influence in many parts of the world. If current budgetary trends continue, entitlement spending and interest on the national debt will constrain funds available for national security. These trends were in place before the economic crisis that engulfed the US economy in 2008. The deficit spending required to remedy this crisis will add to already substantial constraints on public credit and discretionary spending. This weakened economic position constrains both the means available for our defense and our freedom of action in the international arena.

Unlike previous eras of great power politics, the United States now has more to fear from weak states than strong ones. The form of conflict that General Sir Rupert Smith terms 'war among the people' will be fought in the most remote corners of the planet. Ungoverned spaces around the globe – in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere – provide terrorists with the freedom of maneuver necessary to attack free societies. Weapons of mass destruction give these groups the means to do unprecedented harm. Radicalized terrorism supplies the motive for attacks, and globalization provides the opportunity. America's economic decline limits the means available to respond to these threats.

The Failure of the Armed Forces to Adapt to Irregular Warfare

The challenges the United States faces are very different than those of the past, and we need a very different national security apparatus to cope with these challenges. While a whole of government approach is vital, in the interest of time I'll limit my comments to military reforms. The most important task for military forces in the 21st century will be to assist partner states in exercising sovereignty in accordance with international norms, including denying sanctuary and support to terrorist organizations. Many of you have already taken on these challenges in Iraq

and Afghanistan, including serving in the vital role of combat advisor for host nation security forces. Given these challenges, the most important role for the institutional military is building intellectually creative, morally courageous leaders capable of solving complex problems across the spectrum of conflict. Many of these tasks have been labeled ‘irregular warfare;’ a poor choice of words given the regularity with which our forces face these challenges.

The prevalence of so-called irregular warfare has been evident for more than fifty years, but the Armed Forces of the United States have largely failed to adapt to this form of conflict. This failure cannot be explained in terms of the security environment – our vulnerability to irregular warfare has been evident since the late 1960s. This failure is best explained in terms of the military’s organizational culture – one that suppresses innovation, rewards conformity and advances narrow parochial interests at the expense of the public good.

You are all familiar with the history, and painfully familiar with the recent history, so I’ll review it only briefly. In Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. military leaders failed both to prepare their forces for war and advise civilian policy makers on the application of force to achieve the aims of policy. In Vietnam, we fought the conflict on conventional terms, focusing on an attrition strategy to bring North Vietnam to terms. Even when members of the Joint Chiefs recognized that we lacked sufficient forces to achieve this aim, they failed to advise the president of their views. Following Vietnam, the Armed Forces purged nearly everything it knew of irregular warfare. Our focus, with the exception of the Special Forces community, was primarily on conventional interstate conflict. This focus continued throughout the 1980s and 90s despite American involvement in irregular warfare in Lebanon, Latin America, Somalia, and the Balkans.

In Iraq and Afghanistan this pattern of treating an irregular conflict in largely conventional terms repeated itself. In Iraq, the United States drove Saddam from power in 2003 but failed for the next four years to improve the security of the Iraqi people. Our 2007 change in strategy, the surge, came neither from the Joint Chiefs nor the combatant commander, but over their objections. In Afghanistan, after driving the Taliban from power in 2001, the United States failed to improve security and essential services for the Afghan people. Our strategy there is under review, after seven years of fighting we have determined the need to substantially increase our forces there. In both cases, U.S military leaders and the elaborate and expensive apparatus designed to advise policy makers and prepare forces for war failed to perform their intended functions.

We’ve had some important successes, mostly from those parts of DoD closest to the battlefield. In late 2006, five years after the 911 attacks, the Army and Marine Corps published a counterinsurgency doctrine, and a pretty good one at that. We’ve also changed our tactics and training to ensure security, develop security forces and provide essential services for host-nation populations. These adaptations have produced a remarkable turnaround in security conditions in Iraq, and I’m hopeful that it’s not too late for success in Afghanistan.

The institutional military, responsible for organizing, training and equipping the Armed Forces, has proven far less adaptive. Our system of senior leader development remains essentially unchanged since the Cold War – the same system that produced the officers who for the last

generation failed to prepare for irregular warfare. Our organizational structures have changed only slightly since 911, and still lack sufficient intelligence, civil affairs, linguist, special operations, military police and security force development capabilities required by combatant commanders. Our procurement priorities have deviated incrementally from their pre-911 patterns only after the Secretary of Defense publicly pleaded with the services to “fight the wars we’re in.”

Why is the institutional military so much less adaptive than combat forces in the field? It’s not the people – service members routinely rotate between the institutional military and the operating forces in the field. Instead, I believe it’s the incentive system.

Combat forces operate under a simple, brutal incentive system – adapt or die. Forces in combat are not by virtue of their location intellectually or morally superior to their counterparts in the institutional military. Rather, their priorities are clearer – when the failure to adapt carries a death sentence, every other consideration – service and branch loyalties, core competencies, organizational cultures – pales in comparison.

The institutional military, largely insulated from battlefield realities and powerfully influenced by service cultures, operates under a different incentive system. Those responsible for acquisition operate under powerful incentives to procure expensive, high-tech weapons, even if those weapons are not the ones combat forces need. Those responsible for organizational design operate under powerful incentives to defend existing force structure from claims by other branches and services, even if the existing force structure does not meet the needs of combatant commanders. Finally and most importantly, military officers operate under powerful incentives to conform to senior officers’ views, even if those views are out of touch with battlefield realities. Unlike combat forces, the institutional military operates under an incentive system that rewards conformity and discourages adaptation. These incentives have been only partially suppressed by battlefield realities. As today’s battles fade into memory, the institutional military’s desire to return to so-called core competencies is likely to reassert itself. Our organizational culture of conformity is likely to allow these arguments to go unchallenged. Our senior leaders are not bad people, but they work in a bad system that rewards the wrong behaviors.

Conclusion and Recommendations

I’ll close with some conclusions and recommendations for action, including both those that you cannot affect and those that you can.

First, our Armed Forces are incapable of internal reform on the scale necessary to prepare for the wars of the 21st century. Real reform will require political intervention; preferably by Congress, as statutory reforms are more durable than executive ones. There are ample precedents to demonstrate the efficacy of political intervention in military reform, including the Goldwater-Nichols Act (1986), the National Security Act (1947), the Morrill Land Grant Colleges Act (1862) and the reforms in officer education by Secretary of War Elihu Root in the early 20th century.

Second, the most urgently needed reform lies in our system for developing senior officers. Our senior leadership failures have persisted for decades and are systemic in nature; only systemic reform can remedy these failures. Our current system rewards conformity; senior officers select for promotion those like themselves. It is unreasonable to expect an officer who spends 25 years conforming to institutional norms to emerge as an innovator in his late 40's. If we desire creative intelligence and moral courage from our officers, Congress must create a system that rewards these qualities. Civilian graduate education, especially in the social sciences, humanities, and languages, can strengthen the intellectual caliber and cultural literacy of our officer corps. Three-hundred sixty degree evaluations are more likely than the current system to identify morally courageous and innovative leaders. Our subordinates judge us every day, but we've created a system to make sure that promotion boards never hear those judgments, and our officer corps is worse for it. Some fear that 360 degree evaluations will become 'popularity contests' but in my experience those fears are unfounded. Troops admire leadership and despise pandering, and have a much better record than promotion boards of distinguishing between the two.

Third, you cannot wait on institutional change to build the adaptive leaders needed for the wars of the 21st century. Real reform will require political intervention; even if the reforms I describe were enacted today, it would take a decade or more to change the organizational culture of the military. You can't wait that long; you will lead troops this summer. You can take action right now to build the leaders we need for the 21st century. Our leaders have to be smart; you can create leader development programs that focus on critical thinking and unstructured problem solving. Our units have to be adaptive; you can create unscripted, free-play, multi-role player field exercises that replicate the complexity of the modern battlefield. Our soldiers have to be tough; you can show them what tough looks like – step into the combatives pit against your toughest soldier, ruck up under the same weight you'll carry in combat, and in everything you do soldier alongside your soldiers. Our leaders have to be compassionate; you can create a command climate that recognizes and rewards leaders capable of listening.

You cannot change the institutional pathologies that inhibit reform of our Armed Forces. However, you can and must change leader development in the tactical units that you do control. I cannot promise you that accepting these challenges will be beneficial to your career. I can assure you that taking these measures will build units capable of fighting war as it truly is. Before closing, I'd like to forestall an understandable but irrelevant question: the effects my views have had on my career. When I taught at West Point, I gave my international relations students what I called the 'time capsule' exercise: tell me what the world looks like in 2030, using only the theories you've learned in this course and your imagination. One cadet imagined himself the Superintendent giving the commencement speech of 2030 that began this way: Secretary Nagl, distinguished guests, we are indeed honored today to welcome President Yingling to West Point, as well as her husband, Major (Retired) Paul Yingling. He got an A-plus for creativity and fifty push-ups for insubordination, proof that these qualities are not mutually exclusive.

I recognize these views are controversial; I appreciate your patience in hearing me out and look forward to your questions and comments.

Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling is Commander of 1st Battalion, 21st Field Artillery which recently deployed to Iraq performing detainee operations. He has served two previous tours in Iraq and has also deployed to Bosnia and Operation Desert Storm.

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