



James A. Russell, *Innovation, Transformation, and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, Iraq, 2005-2007*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies, 2011.

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A standard narrative of America's seven-year war in Iraq is emerging two years after the last combat troops departed in August 2010. It begins with an invasion in 2003

under the pretext of destroying Saddam Hussein's arsenal of "weapons of mass destruction," with the real purpose being the overthrow of his dictatorial regime. While the conventional campaign went well, President George W. Bush and his government gave little thought to how to address the problems of a defeated state ravished by almost twenty-five continuous years of war, economic sanctions, and a brutal dictatorship. Tom Ricks' aptly titled book Fiasco summarized the situation the United States military forces were experiencing, with stories of atrocities and abuse permeating all aspects of the national media.¹ Missteps by the American proconsul (technically the Administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority), L. Paul Bremer, accelerated Iraq's descent into chaos. Ineffective military leadership made the problem worse and by the 2006 mid-term elections, Congressional and public leaders from all portions of the political spectrum demanded a change. All that changed in January 2007 as President Bush replaced his controversial Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld with Robert M. Gates and appointed General David H. Petraeus as commander of the Multi-National Force-Iraq. Petraeus, with two previous tours in Iraq, then serving as the commandant at Fort Leavenworth and the principal author of a manual on counterinsurgency,² provided the direction the military needed to defeat the Iraqi terrorists. Employing time-honored principles for fighting insurgents, and a "surge" in troop levels, he attained an acceptable American victory. Because of this new direction, an Iraqi government assumed responsibility for its own security by the end of 2010.

While convenient, this narrative is much too simple. As officers at the Army's School of Advanced Military Studies regularly point out, units in the field had begun addressing emerging insurgent problems in Iraq long before Petraeus and his manual arrived. James A. Russell has validated these officers' protestations with the publication of his Innovation, Transformation, and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, Iraq, 2005-2007. Russell, an associate professor at the Naval Postgraduate School, is a well-respected expert on military affairs in the Persian Gulf and Middle East. He convincingly argues that eighteen months before the new commander and his manual arrived, Army and Marine battalion and brigade commanders in Iraq, with minimal direction and support from their superior

¹ Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2006).

² Department of Army, *Field Manual 3-24, Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2006).

headquarters, changed their tactical approaches to combating the insurgencies in their districts.

Russell organizes his manuscript with an introduction that sets the context for his arguments. Repeating arguments found elsewhere, he claims that the American military entered the war without an established doctrinal approach to counterinsurgency. The Army found itself ill prepared to fight an irregular war when it arrived in Iraq and that “Prior to September 11, 2001, irregular warfare, terrorism, and insurgency were of scant concern to the U.S. Army” (16). What saved the day was the innovative leadership of junior leaders, who paid little attention to military doctrine and developed approaches, which Russell calls bottom-up innovation, to respond to the situation on the ground. Tied closely to his introduction, Chapter One presents background on innovation theories, essentially what causes organizations, especially military ones, to change behavior when confronted by different situations on the battlefield. He also explores why parent bureaucracies generally are hesitant to make the required adjustments. Having set the background, he shifts to his evidence.

In the next three chapters Russell describes the details of emerging counterinsurgency operations in Western Anbar province, Ramadi, and northern Iraq. Using a host of contemporary journal and newspaper articles, interviews with unit commanders, and selected after-action reports, he presents a convincing narrative of units taking responsibility for the insurgent environment they inherited and developing techniques to achieve some semblance of success. Throughout his discussion, he presents the argument that Army and Marine organizations excelled in spite of confusion and poor guidance given at the national level and “in ways not envisioned in doctrine” (191). Furthermore, he argues that junior military leaders had actually been “set up for failure by national-level political and military leadership” (192). Arriving in Iraq to conduct conventional operations, “a form of warfare for which these organizations were largely unprepared...” (209), junior officers adapted and innovated while their superiors hesitated.

On one level, Russell’s account of operations is accurate and right on. Confusion and poor decisions by national leaders during those early years set the stage for near tactical disaster in Iraq’s cities and towns. He is also accurate that unit commanders,

from company through brigade, had to switch from an intended conventional fight into more localized counter-insurgent operations. His fundamental argument is correct that, in the end, the Army and Marines incorporated many of these ideas into the development of techniques that General Petraeus adopted during the surge of 2007.

On another level, however, he overstates his case. The Army and Marines had obviously not anticipated a major insurgency, but they were also not totally unprepared. For many years the Army practiced many of the elements of counterinsurgency in Bosnia and Kosovo. Special Operations Command, the military's experts in counterinsurgency operations had been conducting these kinds of operations for decades, and especially in Afghanistan and the Philippines since 2001. What was different in Iraq was the physical and demographic scale. Secondly, doctrine is little more than a collection of procedures and ideas to get units into the fight. The idea that it is possible to develop a set of rules for as nebulous a concept as counterinsurgency, in advance, and have those rules be applicable to all parts of the world is absurd. The United States military found itself in a unique situation in 2005: a disbanded Iraqi military swimming in a pot of sectarian violence, with the lid removed by the demise of Saddam's Baathist dictatorship, and accelerated by serious economic hardship. What military doctrine could be designed to anticipate this condition? Of course, unit rotations complicated the doctrinal development problem. Units rotated through Iraq in a series of one-year tours, with commanders always reporting progress and success. In reality, such progress could only be evaluated over an extended period of time. Without a unified doctrine or higher-level direction, gains by individual units were often lost and not passed on to the following units. Petraeus's manual helped preserve some of those lessons.

Finally, and in many ways the most important critique, is that the author acts somewhat surprised that the unit commanders were able to adjust and implement local changes before General Petraeus arrived in 2007. As Russell admits, these military leaders were part of an "organization that recognized and developed talent long before it appeared on the battlefields of Iraq" (133). Army and Marine generals had selected these lieutenant colonels and colonels for command because they had already demonstrated tactical leadership, initiative, and problem-solving skills. The fact that they were able to innovate and transform, to use Russell's terms, should come as no

surprise to those who understand the modern American military. It was their job to work within the scope of their commander's intent to solve the problem at hand. That much of this adaptation was done before the administration changed its approach to war, its Secretary of Defense, and its commander in Iraq is, in many ways, immaterial.

These minor criticisms aside, James A. Russell has written an important book that provides details of the environment in the early stages of the Iraqi insurgency. It provides the student of the period details of small unit action that is overlooked in other works, such as Gordon and Trainor's recent history of the conflict, *The Endgame*.³ It is a solid contribution to our understanding of this complex conflict and should be in the hands of all students of the Iraqi wars.

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³Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, From George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2012).