'From Afghanistan to Iraq: lessons in modern counter-insurgency'
Transcript of Lecture by Dr Andrew F. Krepinevich
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My topic is*: 'From Afghanistan to Iraq: Lessons in Modern Counter Insurgency'*. Yet the war is ongoing and the final lessons to be drawn are not certain. I, therefore, will make a slight qualification that instead of "lessons" I will share with you my "observations" about the conflict. Of course, given my background, these will be principally American observations, although because of the closeness of British-American relationship as allies, many of them would probably apply to you as well.

First lesson or observation: avoid insurgencies if at all possible. To be fair, in Afghanistan there was not much of a choice. However, in the case of Iraq, it is not quite clear that we planned on that kind of engagement.

Historically, insurgency warfare is not something that we do well in the United States; our military is simply not configured for this kind of conflict. Having been burnt in the Vietnam War, we had really gotten out of that business. In the 70's, there was a popular slogan: '*No more Vietnams'*. It was not just a demand of the American people, but also the general feeling within the political leadership and the military. *'This was a bad experience, don't do this again.'*

In the 1980s, we had the Weinberger and the Powell doctrines, designed specifically to avoid these kinds of conflicts. In the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, we had the exit strategy mandate. Even during the Clinton administration, every time we thought about getting involved in the Third World, there was that desire or that impulse to come up with an exit strategy.

All that changed dramatically after 9/11. The new security realities required swift adjustments in our military, and, on a broader scale, in our governmental institutions. I would have to admit that so far, the conflict is more dynamic and evolving faster than our ability to adapt to it. This situation is analogous to what would happen if someone told General Motors, our biggest auto maker, in the middle of the 1970s to stop making automobiles, and then thirty years later submitting: *'well, start making automobiles again, but don't make the 1975 models, make the 2002 models.'*

Our military, particularly the Army, is scrambling to make up for the lost time. In dealing with insurgency, we are still struggling to achieve the tight integration that exists between the political, diplomatic, social, economic, intelligence and security dimensions of the conflict.

Second observation: wars are unpredictable. You cannot count on a rosy scenario. In a sense, this is the lesson of our involvement in Iraq. Winston Churchill famously said, *'Never, never, never believe that any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on this strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter.'* Somehow I think that's something that George Bush wishes he had read before going to war in Iraq.

Planning for less than optimum scenarios, or less than rosy outcomes, is critical. We, essentially, have an army built for sprints – short, decisive, conventional wars. We showed up at a series of track meets: the first Gulf War, the second Gulf War, Allied Force – and we ran sprints. Now we find ourselves in Iraq and Afghanistan, being asked to run a marathon. One can be a world-class sprinter, but a marathon requires a different set of techniques and skills.

This also applies to the kind of warfare we are prepared to fight. For a long period of time, our primary focus was traditional/conventional warfare. Now we are involved in irregular warfare, and in early 2006, Secretary Rumsfeld signed a directive stating that stability operations are now a core mission of the US military. So again, we have to play catch-up. This demonstrates the need to plan and to hedge against uncertainty in war.

Another observation, perhaps forgotten, especially in America, given the ease of the victory in 1991, in 1999 in the Balkans, and again in 2003 in Iraq, is that wars often tend to be messy affairs. Clemenceau once said that *'war is a series of catastrophes that results in a victory.'* And certainly we have seen a series of minor catastrophes, if you will, in this war. That does not mean that the war is not worth fighting, and that does not mean you cannot win the war. Certainly, World War II history shows that you can undergo a series of catastrophes and still have a war that is worth fighting, and still emerge victorious in that war. However, you have to have a war that is perceived by the public as worth fighting. You also have to have a public that believes a well-formed strategy is being pursued. And finally, you have to show the public somehow that progress is being made.

One of the big challenges that the Bush administration faces is the inability to demonstrate to the American people that progress is being made, which involves establishing some kind of metrics, some kind of way of measuring progress. The administration has struggled with this and obviously up to this point has not been able to do it successfully.

The fourth observation is that, on occasion, wars of choice can become wars of necessity. In the case of Afghanistan, certainly that was not a war of choice. The country was used as a sanctuary by Al-Qaeda. There were the attacks of 9/11. The Taliban refused to 'deny hospitality', as they put it, to Al-Qaeda, and there was a conflict as a consequence. In the case of Iraq however, one can argue that it certainly was a war of choice. We chose to go to war at a particular point in time.

Another war of choice was the decision by Austria-Hungary following the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, to go to war. Two years later, that war of choice had become a war that was going to decide the fate of empires – a war of necessity if you will.

And so one of the critical issues we have to resolve now, in regard to both, Afghanistan and Iraq, is whether we are involved in a war of choice, where we can disengage (and there are Americans who have argued this); or in a war of necessity, where there is no choice but to move on, because the consequences of leaving before the mission is accomplished would be too grave.

Iraq, which was not the central front in the war on terror in March 2003, fairly clearly has become the central front in the war on terror now. Many radical Islamists have gravitated

towards Iraq for the purpose of taking on the Americans in what they must feel is a "target-rich" environment. It certainly appears that Zawahiri, Bin Laden's operational deputy, sees it in that way. In his letter to Zarqawi last year (a mini-Mein Kampf of sorts), Zawahiri argued that first they need to take over Iraq and get the Americans out, then move on to the other Sunni nations in the neighbourhood and finally, take on the Israelis.

Of course, at this point, losing in Afghanistan runs the risk of it once again becoming a base of operations for radical Islamists and for Al-Qaeda. There is a possibility for new spill-over issues arising, such as the stability of Pakistan, which is being used as a sanctuary by Taliban elements. Pakistan is in a fragile state right now: Bin Laden has marked President Musharraf for death, and there is a prospect of the country becoming destabilised at a point in time where not only Pakistan is a nuclear-armed state, but India is as well.

The stakes are high in wars of necessity. They may not have been perceived to be high at the onset of the war, but they are certainly high right now. One of the problems we have in the States is that neither the Republicans and the Bush administration, nor the Democrats have really been honest and straightforward with the American people about just how high the stakes are. There is an effort to fight this war on the cheap. There is a lack of resolve to go to the American people and say, *'You know, this is going to be tough. It's tough to stay and it's tough to leave.'*

This is not Haiti or Somalia-- you can't just call it a day, as one of my colleagues in America suggested we do. If we decide to leave, we should have a good idea of the consequences. If we stay, we ought to resolve ourselves to do what is necessary in order to achieve our objectives.

Clearly more NATO forces are needed in Afghanistan. It is also obvious that any talk of a US drawdown in Afghanistan, given the events of recent months, is premature. We need a larger and a better-equipped Afghan national army, because eventually it will be in charge of providing stability to Afghanistan.

As I wrote recently in my New York Times op-ed, we need to expand our advisory effort, both in Afghanistan and Iraq. There are roughly 130, I believe, Iraqi security force battalions. About 75 of them, according to the Defense Department, are capable of taking the lead in operations. Right now we have about ten advisors in each of these battalions. They tend not to be our best officers and sergeants. My calculations and the calculations of others in the Army is that you probably need about 30 advisors per battalion.

Why do we need them? We need them because while their basic training teaches Iraqis how to march, how to do the basic field work, how to shoot a rifle and so on, it does not teach Iraqi officers and sergeants how to command units, how to lead them, how to co-ordinate them, not only in groups of a few soldiers, but in groups of ten and in some cases, a hundred and more.

You also need advisors to minimise the casualties of your own troops. It is better to have 30 American advisors in an Iraqi battalion, than 500 Americans in an American battalion trying to do what Iraqi forces ought to be doing themselves. We simply do not have the cultural awareness that the Iraqis do.

Another benefit is that the advisors can be a terrific source of intelligence. They can tell which Iraqi commanders are competent and which are incompetent, which are loyal and which are partial in the context of sectarian violence, which are honest and which are corrupt. And we can use that leverage to try and get the right ones promoted and the others dismissed or transferred.

Often, cheaper short-term solutions may turn into expensive problems in the long term. For example, while we need to undertake a serious effort at poppy eradication in Afghanistan, we can't put the carriage before the horse. By destroying the poppy fields and offering the people no alternate source of income, we drive them into the arms of the enemy. What is needed is a serious, comprehensive and quite frankly expensive approach, but far less expensive than the prospective alternative, that we risk in terms of the threat to our security and, of course, the drugs trade which imposes untold costs on our society. This implies a major effort to rebuild Afghanistan's economic infrastructure.

In Iraq we have apportioned over $18 billion to our effort without developing an integrated approach to security operations to enable the reconstruction that provides you with the intelligence that allows you to whittle away the insurgency. We have wasted a lot of that money but that does not mean that that effort should not go on.

We can all agree with Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's assessments that the victory in these wars would involve "a long, hard slog" and I think that is what we confront. This is not going to be a war that is won in the next six months, although I think Ambassador Khalilzad is correct that the next six months are going to be critical, at least in Iraq. I suspect we may find out a lot about ourselves in Afghanistan over the next six months as well, as NATO begins to take over responsibility in the south.

Unfortunately, time seems to be the only source of concern, and the only measure that we are worried about. There is a pressure to reduce force levels before the 2006 congressional elections, or to be out before the 2008 elections. To me that is a very poor measure. George Orwell once said the quickest way to end a war is to lose it, so if all we are worried about is leaving quickly, all we have to do is accept defeat. The path to achieving even a minimum acceptable level of objectives, I think, is rather protracted.

Observation five: leadership counts for a great deal. We have always known that leadership counts for a great deal in war, but I am not sure that the American government or even the Defense Department have fully absorbed that axiom.

The greatest progress in Afghanistan has been achieved under the leadership of Ambassador Khalilzad, General Dave Barno and General Rick Olsen. Khalilzad is no longer there, Barno and Olsen, for reasons known but to God and to the Defense Department, are retired from active military service. I would have moved heaven and earth to keep those two officers in uniform. I cannot understand why they are not, and I think our effort in Afghanistan has suffered ever since they departed.

In terms of Iraq, we are fortunate that Ambassador Khalilzad has gone from Afghanistan to Iraq. I think he is probably the most indispensable person we have there right now. And we

also have a very capable general who is head of the ground forces, General Peter Chiarelli, with whom I served once upon a time during my Army days.

One of our oddest practices is the rotation of senior officers in and out of these billets as though they are interchangeable parts. We all know that it makes a difference when you have a Marlborough commanding your army, a Jackie Fisher commanding your fleet, or a Montgomery commanding the army in North Africa and Europe. I posed this question to our senior leadership and have not yet got an answer that satisfies me. Great commanders are "force multipliers". They can take fewer troops and actually accomplish more than can lesser commander with larger forces. They know how to lead. They know the character of this conflict, and how best to apply force.

I have to touch upon one other hobby horse of mine before getting off this particular observation: the Americans do not have unity of command in Baghdad. There is no single person in charge. Unity of command is one of the principles of war. It is one of the fundamentals, one of the Ten Commandments of War, if I could use the term. Khalilzad is not in charge; General Casey is not in charge. They have to negotiate with one another to see what we are going to do. This is particularly pernicious, given the high level of integration between the various dimensions of conflict that is required to defeat an insurgency. In this regard, the case we, Americans, always study is Malaya. And in Malaya, you had Briggs and then Templar and there was a unity of command there, something by the way, we did not have in Vietnam.

Lesson six, I would say, is an obvious lesson and the very last lesson in terms of these conflicts and insurgency warfare in general. It is the importance of the social dimension in strategy. Now this is a term that was crafted, by Michael Howard. He had a piece in Foreign Affairs in 1979 and he talked about the Vietnam War. He said there were four dimensions of strategy: technical, logistical, operational, and social.

Howard pointed out that in Vietnam, we had technical predominance. We also dominated logistically – having spent far more money and applied far more force. But the enemy was able to dictate the operational dimension. They were not going to stand out there and fight us conventionally; they forced us to deal with insurgency warfare. Because of that, the social dimension of strategy became critical. Did the indigenous population support what we were trying to do? And, as an external power, could we maintain support in our home country to persist in the conflict?

What this gets down to in my mind is just how dependent we are upon both the Afghan people and the Iraqi people to win these two conflicts. Insurgency warfare, to a great extent, is intelligence warfare. We have overwhelming power in Afghanistan, even though we do not have enough troops. We have overwhelming power there and also in Iraq, in a way. What I mean by that is that if you knew where the insurgents are, if you knew who they are, both conflicts would be over in short order. The problem is that we do not know who they are or where they are, and we cannot cover the entire country because we do not have enough troops. And so we remain vulnerable.

Who is going to give us that information? The population knows best who they are and where they are. Well, why are they going to give us that information? They will give that

information if they want us to win the war, if they feel like our victory is going to give them a better life, if they think we are going to win, because ultimately they have to accommodate themselves with whoever they think is going to win.

They may like what you are promising to do for them, but in Afghanistan at the end of the day, if the population thinks that the Taliban is going to emerge, no matter how much they like what NATO, the Americans, the coalition has to offer the government in Kabul, they are going to accommodate themselves to the Taliban. We have to provide them with security, so they are able to provide that intelligence without risk to their person or their family.

This is why operations like the so-called 'whack-a-mole' operations in Iraq, where we try and find the insurgents, then go out and whack them (hence the 'whack-a-mole' name) are problematic. Operation Mountain Thrust, where we go out into areas that are infested with Taliban and try to kill as many as we can, is the latest incarnation of that approach. It is attractive in a traditional military sense, but it continually uncovers the population. A soldier can only be in one place at one time. If you have sufficient soldiers to provide security for the entire population, maybe Operation Mountain Thrust would make sense, but as long as you do not have that, top priority should be in getting the intelligence on people running the insurgency. And I think General David Richards' proposal for establishing zones of security makes a great deal of sense

One more point and then I will wrap up on this hot day. It strikes me that the IT revolution really has changed insurgency warfare in dramatic ways and generally, to our disadvantage. It plays a critical role in dominating the social dimension of strategy, winning the hearts and minds of the people. I am supposed to go give a talk where I contrast Vietnam with what is going on in Iraq right now. And one of the things that is clearly striking is the dramatic difference in terms of information, that the people of Iraq have access to, relative to the South Vietnamese during the Vietnam War.

In a Vietnamese village, you were lucky if someone had a radio. And if there was a radio, you maybe had access to a couple of stations. And maybe they could pull in radio Hanoi.

In Iraq information is ubiquitous. People download speeches by Nasrallah as their cell phone tone ring. DVDs of massacres and atrocities are readily available and are handed out like samplers in the market square. Lots of homes and cafes have satellite dishes with access to Al-Arabia and Al-Jazeera. There is an enormous variety of information.

What has not changed greatly is the level of the education of our people tasked with processing this information, making sense of it, deciding what is relevant: what's in their interests and what's not. Unfortunately, in this case, the enemy is playing a "home game". The insurgents in Iraq, the insurgents in Afghanistan, they know the population, they know that market a lot better than we do. There are many areas of difficulty for us in this conflict, but this is the one area where I think we are competing especially poorly.

Zawahiri in his letter to Zarqawi last year said that the war is being waged at least half in the media. So when you read about Abu Ghraib, when you read about the alleged massacre at Haditha, those are major battles that we are losing. And maybe fifty years ago, they would have been local incidents. Now, the entire country, the entire world knows about them.

Ironically and sadly, the enemy also uses the media not only to highlight our failings, but also to terrorise the population. The beheadings and other atrocities are shown by the media. Not only is it personally revolting, but obviously it has a terror effect and a coercive effect as well.

So let me wrap up. Staying or leaving? I personally think that either choice is fraught with risks and consequences. I think a lot of it has to do with whether you consider Iraq and Afghanistan to be wars of choice or wars of necessity. I do not think that either alternative offers a low-cost option. I think if you do believe that it is a war of choice, then there is a great temptation to cut our losses and perhaps leave under as best a set of circumstances as we can, and defer the ultimate reckoning to a later date. I think then it would be a victory for the forces of radical Islam and perhaps substantially worse.

If you think it is a war of necessity, then you are really called to respond to the challenge. In my country there is a book called 'The Greatest Generation'. It is a book about the American generation that came of age in World War II and the sacrifices they made in that war, both the leadership and the younger generation. In the Cold War, we had a similar experience - a group of leaders that was forced to make difficult choices, and a younger generation that was forced to sacrifice. There is a quote from President Kennedy's speech given a few moths before the Cuban Missile crisis. He talked about the race with the Soviets to the moon, about seeing who would be first to reach the moon, but he also talked about the larger Cold War. I was really struck by this passage:

'We choose to go to the moon this decade and to do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because the challenge is one we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone and one which we intend to win.'

And those are the questions I think we have to ask ourselves: is this a war of choice or a war of necessity? If it is a war of necessity, is it a challenge that we are willing to accept, because it is going to require sacrifice. Or are we willing to postpone the reckoning to another generation or another administration or another government? And do we intend to win it, because if we intend to win it, there are a number of things I think we need to do. We need to get serious. Despite all the rhetoric, I feel that my government has not taken steps to demonstrate that it views this war as it says it does.

And with that, I will conclude my remarks and thank you again for the invitation.

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