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Operational Vision, Conflict Termination and the Combatant Commander

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract

Operation IRAQI FREEDOM provides a vivid example of poor planning at the Operational Level of War. Research and analysis revealed three key elements that are essential for successful operational design: operational vision, conflict termination and end-state. A combatant commander's ability to visualize how the campaign should end and how to synchronize and sequence his forces in order to achieve the desired strategic end-state is critical in the joint operational planning process. The paper examines several underlying issues that contributed to the overall failure to address the post-conflict transition. Specifically it examines the role of the combatant commander's operational vision and its affect on conflict termination planning. Additionally, the paper draws conclusions concerning the consequences of not having early, integrated planning for conflict termination and the desired end-state. Finally, it offers recommendations for further research and analysis into two additional elements that may contribute to poor operational planning.

The mistake here was primarily of the Bush administration's making. Indeed, much of the prevalent view within the uniformed military is that the Rumsfeld/Wolfowitz/Cheney vision of modern warfare, as well as their strong preconceptions about how easy it would be to depose Saddam, deserve the blame for CENTCOM's lack of readiness to handle the challenges that began to present themselves in Iraq on April 9, 2003, when Saddam's statue fell in Baghdad. This perspective is mostly right. It is also too simple.

Michael E. O'Hanlon
Iraq Without a Plan

INTRODUCTION

Michael O'Hanlon's observation might make those who planned Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) feel a bit better about their efforts. It is not what he writes in the first three sentences but what he states in the last sentence that deserves analysis. The idea that blame for the situation that occurred after major combat operations ceased in early 2003 is attributable to the civilian leadership is not the whole story. As Mr. O'Hanlon states in the last sentence, ~~it~~ "is too simple."¹

Several months after the U.S. Military toppled Saddam's regime during the opening phases of OIF, a subdued President George W. Bush addressed the nation and said his goals in Iraq would take a lot more time and money than previously assessed. A few days prior to his announcement, the *Washington Times* reported the President had been let down by the Department of Defense (DOD). *The Times* released DOD ~~lessons learned~~ "obtained from ~~anonymous~~" sources that found planning for the post-conflict phase was ~~so~~ rushed there was insufficient time for essential work, and that command relationships and responsibilities were not defined clearly until just before combat began."² Twenty-two days later on *The News Hour*, retired Marine General and former U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM)

¹ Michael E. O'Hanlon, ~~Iraq~~ Without a Plan," *Policy Review*, Dec 2004/Jan 2005, 38-39.

² John H Cushman, ~~President Bush Deserved Better~~," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 129, no. 11 (Nov 2003): 96.

commander, Anthony Zinni answered questions from Jim Lehrer. “Do you believe what is going on on the ground now, post-war Iraq, could have been avoided?” General Zinni replied, “I think we could have done it better. I think many of the things we are confronting now could have been and should have been anticipated....I think those responsible for planning in the Pentagon should have [foreseen many of the conditions that are now being encountered].”³ What is even more interesting about the interview occurred with when General Zinni answered Mr. Lehrer’s question about the current USCENTCOM commander, Gen Tommy Franks’ role in preparing a post-conflict plan. General Zinni said “That wasn’t Tommy’s responsibility; that was the responsibility of the Pentagon...they [told Congress] they had a post-Iraq or post-Saddam administration they were ready to put in place. It failed.”⁴

General Zinni’s statement summarizes many critics of U.S. planning and execution of OIF. It appears that culpability for the insurgency was a result of the lack of OIF post-conflict planning, which was the responsibility of the civilian leadership.⁵ However, this paper argues that the planning conducted by USCENTCOM was inadequate and lacked a clear operational vision of how it should end. The paper does not attempt to assign blame but examines several underlying issues that contributed to the overall failure to address post-conflict transition planning. Specifically it examines the role of the combatant commander’s (CCDR) operational vision and its affect on conflict termination planning. It argues that conflict termination sets conditions for the peace to follow and, as such, conflict termination must be part of the plan from the earliest planning stages. Within this context, future CCDRs and planners find the essence of improved campaign design. It is a future in which

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

operational and strategic success occurs when conflict termination planning remains at the forefront of the planning effort. There are two additional underlying issues, time and assumptions, that research showed may affect the planning effort. Due to limitations on the length on this paper, they are not covered.

BACKGROUND

The CCDR sets the conditions for conflict termination based on the end-state envisioned by the national level leadership and CCDR's operational plan. The Administration may dictate the strategy and end-state, but it is ultimately the CCDR, who must plan and execute the mission to accomplish the strategic and operational objectives. This is where the CCDR demonstrates operational leadership and vision, where he then translates those national level objectives into an operational strategy that will accomplish the overall mission objectives. This paper demonstrates, by not following the planning process through to Phase V (Enable Civil Authority), and by not setting or achieving conflict termination conditions, the chance for overall mission failure increases. This manifested itself in the case of General Franks and USCENTCOM in 2003. As the U.S. continues with the strategy of preemption, it would be unwise to shortcut the planning process and neglect conflict termination planning. Without a clear operational vision to tie it all together, the potential for failure may increase with each occurrence.

As stated earlier, General Zinni appears to place blame for the lack of post-conflict planning for OIF and its results on the civilian leadership. It is easy to point out that Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, and his staff within the DOD led General Franks

and his staff to believe that the Pentagon would provide a plan for Phase IV operations.⁶ There also should be no doubt that the State Department should involve itself with the myriad of critical tasks involving the stabilization of Iraq. These tasks range from reconstruction to employing Iraqis to a de-Baathification strategy. As well, a task that seems simple in hindsight, who should be leading Iraq after Saddam? These tasks are but a few that needed addressing.⁷ This observation adds some strength to General Zinni's point but once again does not excuse General Franks and his planners from following the planning process through to conclusion, Phase V. In addition, the planners understood the command arrangements and understood the poor relationship between the State Department and the Department of Defense. In fact, it was clear to all involved inside DOD that the Bush administration chose to marginalize the State Department. They also knew how important the tasks in the stabilize phase is to overall mission success.⁸

In order to have a successful outcome and achieve the overall strategic objective it was imperative to have a coherent plan that accounted for all phases of the joint planning process. To be sure, the planners realized that ~~someone~~ "must have overall responsibility for the political and economic tasks that would surely arise during Phase IV operations. It appears they were too willing to —hope the problem would work itself out."⁹ However, the planning process according to Joint Publication (JP) 5-0 clearly states that the CCDR must work closely with civilian leadership to ensure a military end-state that is defined and supportable. The CCDR should also anticipate that military forces and capabilities are necessary in some capacity to support other elements of national power especially before,

⁶ The books are Fiasco, Plan of Attack and Cobra II.

⁷ O'Hanlon, 38-39.

⁸ Ibid., 38.

⁹ Ibid., 39.

during and after large-scale combat operations. Additionally, JP 5-0 continues, effective planning cannot occur without a clear picture of the military end-state and termination criteria. Knowing when to terminate or transition military operations and maintain the success achieved during the operation is essential to achieving the national strategic end-state.¹⁰

It is the responsibility of the CCCR to provide his input to the decision makers so that they understand the implications of terminating combat operations. While General Franks and his staff planned for Phase I – Phase III, they neglected to link Phase III (Dominate) with Phase IV (Stabilize). Regardless of what promises the Pentagon made, General Franks and his planners had a framework, JP 3-0 and JP 5-0, which clearly defined the requirements for a complete and thorough planning process. Both joint documents provide the CCCR and his planners with ample points, reasons, and guidance as to why the CCCR’s vision for the operation must include planning for all phases of the operation. The evidence shows the lack of a coherent and complete operational plan rests squarely on the shoulders of the CCCR and his planners *in addition* to the civilian leadership. Michael E. O’Hanlon put it bluntly, “The problem was simply this: The war plan was seriously flawed and incomplete. Invading another country with the intention of destroying its existing government yet without a serious strategy for providing security thereafter defies logic and falls short of proper professional military standards of competence. It was in fact unconscionable.”¹¹

Before moving further into the topic, it is necessary to define some key terms to ensure a clear understanding of the terms as presented throughout this document. The definitions, where specified, currently reside in joint doctrine specifically, JP 1-02,

¹⁰ Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operations Planning*, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 26 December 2006), III-5-8.

¹¹ O’Hanlon, 36.

Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms. Other definitions, where specified, come from Dr. Milan Vego, U.S. Naval War College and Colonel William Flavin, Associate Professor of Peace Operations Concepts and Doctrine for the U.S. Army.

Definitions

- **Operational Art:** The application of creative imagination by commanders and staffs — supported by their skill, knowledge, and experience — to design strategies, campaigns, and major operations and organize and employ military forces. Operational art integrates ends, ways, and means across the levels of war.¹²
- **Operational Vision:** The commander's vision is a combination of his personality traits, education and training and experience. The ability of the commander to envision clearly and correctly the military conditions that will exist after the mission is accomplished is operational vision.¹³
- **Objective:** 1. The clearly defined, decisive, and attainable goal toward which every operation strives. 2. The specific target of the action taken (for example, a definite terrain feature, the seizure or holding of which is essential to the commander's plan. Alternatively, an enemy force or capability without regard to terrain features).¹⁴
- **Conflict Termination:** The formal end of fighting, not the end of conflict.¹⁵
- **Conflict Resolution:** A diplomatic function carried on by senior civilian leadership supported by military, economic, and informational aspects of the state.¹⁶

¹² Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication (JP) 1-02 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 12 April 2001 As Amended Through 19 August 2009).

¹³ Milan Vego, "Operational Vision," *Joint Operational Warfare, Theory and Practice* (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2007) XI-35.

¹⁴ JP 1-02.

¹⁵ William Flavin, "Planning for Conflict Termination and Post-Conflict Success," *Parameters*, Autumn 2003, 96.

¹⁶ JMO 37, "Conflict Termination," *Joint Military Operations Syllabus*, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI, August 2009, 153-154.

- End-State: The set of required conditions that defines achievement of the commander's objectives.¹⁷

With these definitions in place, we can continue with the analysis.

DISCUSSION / ANALYSIS

Operational Vision

Dr. Milan Vego dedicates approximately five pages in his book Joint Operational Warfare Theory and Practice to operational vision and its importance to success in an operation or campaign. He states, —Operational vision can be understood as the commander's ability to clearly and correctly envision the military conditions that will exist after the mission is accomplished.” From this statement, we see that a CCDR must envision all phases of the planned campaign. He must view the whole, from Phase I – Phase V, and he must not view them separately, but with one vision. Dr. Vego goes on to state, —without proper operational vision the commander cannot translate the strategic objectives assigned by the top political and military leadership into a military-strategic or theater-strategic objective. No campaign or major operation can be coherently planned and executed without a vision of how it should end.”¹⁸ While General Franks and his planners developed the OIF plan through Phase III,¹⁹ they did so without regard for and neglect of, Phase IV and Phase V.²⁰ Vego points out that it is a major mistake to focus exclusively on the major combat phase. In fact, Vego points out distinctly that it is even worse to ignore the post-major combat or post-

¹⁷ JP 1-02.

¹⁸ Milan Vego, —On Doctrine,” *Joint Operational Warfare, Theory and Practice* (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2008), XI-35.

¹⁹ Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (Pantheon Books, New York, 2006), 68.

²⁰ Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (The Penguin Press, New York, 2006), 79-80.

hostilities phases when planning a campaign or major operation.²¹ During OIF, initially there was little doubt that the operation achieved great success as planned and executed. This was a testament to the planning and execution of Phase I-III only however. Lack of planning for a transition from Phase III to Phase IV by General Franks and his planners would prove to be a turning point in the campaign. Consolidation of the strategic and operational gains made by the lightning quick destruction of Saddam Hussein's regime was lost due to faulty planning at USCENTCOM. Operational vision, seeing the entire campaign unfold and understanding the requirements necessary to meet the objectives and end-state and acting on those requirements, may have prevented the problems that followed combat operations during OIF.

Could we or should we reasonably expect a CCDR and his planners to ~~do~~ "do it all"? Should we expect our military operational commander to have the vision necessary to see that his efforts must extend through to Phase V? The short answer is absolutely. This emphatic answer deserves an explanation. Therefore, to highlight the issue of a CCDR's need for operational vision we examine the Allied effort in Europe during WWII. On 12 February 1944, General Eisenhower received orders to ~~enter~~ "enter the continent of Europe and...undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces." The guidance received was simple, direct, and clear. General Eisenhower took this mission, and along with his staff, developed the plan for Operation OVERLORD.²² That General Eisenhower and his staff developed Operation OVERLORD after receiving simple, direct, and clear guidance from their superiors is not unique. However, what is unique, and what is a testament of General Eisenhower's operational vision, is the sequel to Operation

²¹ Vego, XI-36.

²² Kenneth O. McCreedy, *Planning the Peace: Operation Eclipse and the Occupation of Germany*, "The Journal of Military History" 65 (July 2001), 713-719.

OVERLORD, Operation ECLIPSE. Operation OVERLORD was the terminal combat operation of the war while Operation ECLIPSE was the initial operation of the peace.²³

Unlike the planning for OIF, the Allies saw planning for conflict termination in WWII as necessary and conducted it concurrently with planning for Operation OVERLORD. Moreover, like General Franks, General Eisenhower and the military in general did not want to “do nation building.” Nevertheless, unlike General Franks, General Eisenhower had a complete vision for how the campaign would end as well as what steps were necessary in order to achieve the national strategic objectives and his military operational objectives. In short, General Eisenhower anticipated the need to conduct the planning for what we now call Phase IV operations while planning for the major combat phase.²⁴

When comparing the planning for Operation ECLIPSE with the planning for Phase IV of OIF we can see that the military planners of General Eisenhower carried the load and hammered out the framework and, as time permitted, the details that led to the successful operations to end WWII, establish, and then maintain the peace. Unlike the planning for Phase IV of OIF, General Eisenhower and General Marshall ensured focus on Phase IV planning by assigning thousands of officers and soldiers in scattered headquarters in Europe and the United States to assist with the effort.²⁵ Contrast this effort with the time and resources devoted to Phase IV planning for OIF and one gets the sense that Phase IV OIF planning was completely an afterthought. Without a clear vision of the entire campaign, General Franks allowed his staff and planners to focus on Phase I – Phase III operations. Without clear operational vision, General Franks did not view conflict termination as part of

²³ Ibid., 713.

²⁴ Ibid., 718.

²⁵ Ibid., 713.

his” effort to reach the strategic objectives nor did he see a need to ensure that Phase IV operations planning occurred in conjunction with Phase I – Phase III.

General Eisenhower’s vision allowed him and his staff to see the entire conflict in a broader sense. His vision and his ability to communicate that vision meant that Operation ECLIPSE planning was not an ad hoc, extemporaneous effort. It was a product of extensive preparation by his planners and the Allies. Even more remarkable is the fact that planning for Operation ECLIPSE commenced even with the war’s outcome still very much undecided.²⁶

What the Allies demonstrated with Operation OVERLORD and its sequel, Operation ECLIPSE, is that even without the joint planning framework currently in use today, a clear and coherent operational vision is essential. When campaign design begins with conflict termination criteria and the end-state in mind it helps ensure planning focus. Likewise, focused planning leads to mission accomplishment by ensuring the plan is complete and thorough as evidenced by Operation OVERLORD and its sequel, Operation ECLIPSE.

Two of the most important aspects of campaign design are defining the desired end-state and planning a transition to post-conflict operations. Every campaign and every strategic effort have a goal. Every military action eventually ends.

Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1-2

Conflict Termination and End-State

Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1-2 devotes two and a half pages on the topic of conflict termination. In those pages, it stresses that campaign designers must plan for conflict termination early and must continue to refine and update the plan as the

²⁶ Ibid., 716.

campaign evolves. It goes on to state that when addressing conflict termination commanders must consider a wide variety of operational issues including disengagement, force protection, transition to post-conflict operations, and reconstitution and redeployment.²⁷ There is no overstating the importance of operational vision however; even with a clear operational vision, the CCDR must understand conflict termination and its effect on his overall objectives and the desired end-state. Conflict termination is the formal end of fighting, not the end of the conflict. Both U.S. and NATO doctrine state the following. “If conditions are properly set and met for ending the conflict, the necessary leverage should exist to prevent the adversary from renewing hostilities....When friendly forces can freely impose their will on the adversary, the opponent may have to accept defeat, terminate active hostilities, or revert to other types of conflict such as geopolitical actions or guerrilla warfare.”²⁸ This is a great point that both the U.S. and NATO embrace yet, conflict termination criteria continues to vex the U.S. today. Military theorists point out how important conflict termination is to the overall success of the campaign nonetheless it continues to be the planning effort often neglected in favor or focus of Phase III planning and execution. The U.S. as a nation has always struggled with conflict termination.²⁹ As operations in Iraq and Afghanistan attest, America’s military prevails quickly but the achievement of policy goals may not follow the military victory.” Therefore, if the U.S. military and civilian leadership understand the importance of conflict termination and the effect it has on policy objectives why is it often neglected during the planning process. Some suggest it is the mindset of the military to deploy, defeat the enemy, and then redeploy as quickly as possible and let the diplomats deal

²⁷ U.S. Marine Corps, *Campaigning*, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1-2 (Washington, DC: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 1997), 50-51.

²⁸ Flavin, 96.

²⁹ John R. Boule II, “Operational Planning and Conflict Termination,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 29 (Autumn 2001 – Winter 2002), 97.

with the aftermath of the conflict.³⁰ This argument sounds nice on the surface however; current joint doctrine stresses and emphasizes planning for conflict termination.

Some of the deeper discussions on the topic occur in JP 3-0, Chapter I. Chapter I, Strategic Concept, provides a good indication of the importance of conflict termination in joint doctrine. It points out within the first four pages that termination criteria properly conceived and planned is one key to a lasting victory.³¹ It follows that JP 5-0, “Joint Operations Planning,” would have the details that would guide the CCDR and his planners through the process of ensuring incorporation of conflict termination into the overall campaign plan. Chapter III, Section B, “The Relationship of Strategic Guidance, Termination, End State, Objective, Effects, and the Systems Perspective of the Operational Environment,” provides clear guidance to help planners understand the importance of conflict termination and end-state in the overall planning process.³²

There are examples throughout history that show the value of early, integrated, and synchronized conflict termination planning. One example described earlier was the planning for Operation ECLIPSE. Another example is the plan for the surrender of the Japanese in WWII. The results of both efforts highlight the importance of a coherent campaign plan that accounts for conflict termination and applies the resources to meet the ultimate policy aims. Recent campaigns and operations demonstrate the need for conflict termination planning as part of the overall campaign/operation yet they have failed to do so. For example, General Wesley Clark points out in his book Waging Modern War that it was only after a month of the air campaign during Operation ALLIED FORCE that the international community

³⁰ Ibid., 98.

³¹ Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operations*, Joint Publications (JP) 3-0 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 13 February 2008), I-1-3.

³² Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operations Planning*, Joint Publications (JP) 5-0 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 26 December 2006), III-7-9.

addressed the termination issues and their termination objectives. He also noted that end-states and objectives could slip and change. He attributes these points to the characteristics of modern conflicts.³³ Another example is Operation JUST CAUSE, the removal of Manuel Noriega from power in Panama. As is common knowledge within the U.S. military, in this example, we see once again that there was little to no guidance on what to do after the shooting ended. In fact, there is, “little evidence existing to suggest that those planning for restoration either realistically understood or adequately addressed...historical and contextual issues” when considering post-conflict plans. Even during the 1991 Gulf War, the political objectives were ambiguous in describing the post-conflict end-state. Comments like, “I do not think we had political objectives...The political objectives were to kick Iraq out of Kuwait—that was it. There was no consideration for conflict termination—where do you want to be politically in 20 years? What are the strategic decisions for this part of the world? None of that was considered.” This serves to highlight once again, the lack of planning for conflict termination and the lack of a stated desired end-state.³⁴

Of course, we can look at our current campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan to understand that again the U.S. military planning did not provide the necessary emphasis on conflict termination and its overall effect on the desired end-state. So, what changed after WWII? As the evidence shows, the U.S. efforts at conflict termination and even conflict resolution during WWII appear to meet the policy objectives and desired end-states. A survey of the literature points to three elements common in successful conflict termination and attainment of the desired end-state. These elements are operational vision, early planning for conflict termination, and a well-defined end-state.

³³ Flavin, 100.

³⁴ Ibid., 99.

...at the outset of a war, its character and scope should be determined based on political probabilities. The closer these political probabilities drive war toward the absolute, the more the belligerent states are involved and drawn into its vortex, the clearer appear the connections between its separate actions, and the more imperative the need not to take the first step without considering the last.

Clausewitz
On War

CONCLUSION / RECOMMENDATIONS

Clausewitz did not devote a special chapter to war termination in his seminal work, On War; nonetheless, he did view it as necessary in order to secure the political objective for which the war began in the first place³⁵ ...and not taking the first step without considering the last.

Operation IRAQI FREEDOM is a great example of a failure to heed joint planning doctrine. JP 3-0 and JP 5-0 both highlight the need for the commander and his staff to consider conflict termination and the end-state in their overall plan. Sun Tzu writes, —“win victory is easy; to preserve its fruits, difficult.” U.S. military history shows that conflict termination when planned and integrated early in the planning process has a high likelihood of success. WWII and Operation ECLIPSE provide the most vivid example of this point. Likewise, U.S. military history is replete with examples of operations that neglected conflict termination planning and in most cases the results have been a prolonged conflict at best and a complete failure at worst. Without a clear operational vision, joint operational planning has a high probability of failure due to incoherent and unbalanced planning efforts. As seen in Operation JUST CAUSE a few decades ago and as currently revealed in the planning and execution of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, operational vision, planning for conflict

³⁵ Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War Classical Strategic Thought*, 3rd ed. (London and Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), 195.

termination and end-state can be the difference between success and failure in achieving the strategic objective and desired strategic end-state.

Two areas not analyzed in this paper are the effects of time on the overall planning process and the assumptions that shaped the planning effort. The literature contains examples of how compressed the planning cycle became due to ambitious leadership and changing political situations. One recommendation is that further efforts to determine how much the lack of time contributed to the failure to plan for Phase IV operations. By determining how time, specifically, lack of time, contributed to the overall planning effort more research is necessary. Several readings provide data that show poor assumptions played a role and affected the planning effort. Specifically, different intelligence “cells” based their analysis on entirely different assumptions and the assumptions were never reconciled within the intelligence community.³⁶ Again, more research into both time and assumptions may yield more evidence that reinforces the need for a commander that has the end-state of his campaign at the forefront of his effort. Regardless of any further research efforts, a commander’s ability to see the entire campaign, from its inception to how it will end, remains the overriding factor in achieving the strategic objectives and the desired end-state.

³⁶ Gregory Hooker, *Shaping the Plan for Operation Iraqi Freedom: The Role of Military Assessments*, (Washington, DC: Institute for Near East Policy, 2005), xi-47.

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