LESSONS UNLEARNED

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THE US ARMY'S ROLE IN CREATING THE FOREVER WARS IN AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ

PAT PROCTOR

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LESSONS UNLEARNED

INTRODUCTION

I LOVE THE U.S. ARMY. After all, I spent nearly my entire adult life—three decades—serving the nation in its ranks. But sometimes love means speaking hard truths.

And this is the painful truth. The Army claims that its purpose is to fight and win the nation's wars.[1] Yet the past three decades—since the end of the Cold War—have proven that the Army is only capable of fighting and winning the nation's battles. Fighting and winning battles requires killing people and breaking things to impose one's will on an opponent's military. In these activities, since the end of the Korean War, the Army has proven itself without peer. But winning wars requires more than winning battles; it also requires using violence or the threat thereof to impose one's will on an opponent's government and people. And in these activities—again, since the end of the Korean War—the U.S. Army has proven itself largely incompetent.

By way of evidence one need look no further than America's present wars. The United States has been engaged in the war in Afghanistan—the longest war in the nation's history—since October 2001, nearly eighteen years as of this writing. One might be forgiven for thinking that the United States has only been engaged in Iraq since mid-2014, when the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) began its conquest of much of Sunni Arab Iraq. But a more clear-eyed examination reveals that America has been engaged in a singular, continuous war in Iraq since the coalition invaded the country in early 2003, with only a brief, three-year respite during which nearly all U.S. forces temporarily withdrew.[2] The war has now expanded into Syria and shows no sign of ending soon because, while the Army is without peer in high-intensity conflict, it lacks the low-intensity conflict competencies required to bring such wars to a successful conclusion.

What's worse is that this represents a deliberately engineered incompetence. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the senior leadership of the Army refused to acknowledge that the world had changed—that the danger of a

great power war against the Soviet Union in western Europe had given way to a future of low-intensity conflicts—and reshape itself in response to this new strategic reality. Despite overwhelming evidence—repeated deployments to low-intensity conflicts throughout the 1990s and a growing chorus of critics warning that these types of operations represented the future of warfare—the senior leaders of the Army continued to stubbornly march their organization toward ever-greater capacity to fight a great power war that never came. Thus, the Army found itself tragically unprepared when the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq began.

Historically, Americans have been reluctant to blame their Army for its incompetence. Many laid the blame for the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan on the George W. Bush administration, claiming the president and his advisers had taken their "eye off the ball" there, distracted by a war of choice in Iraq. President Bush is also frequently blamed for making the decision to invade Iraq based on spurious intelligence about weapons of mass destruction. Others blame Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld for his decision to drastically cut the number of troops deployed in the initial invasion, or they point to presidential envoy Paul Bremer for disbanding the Iraqi Army, which the Army expected would provide security after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Yet others blame President Barack Obama for withdrawing all U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011 rather than leaving an adequate residual force to continue to train and support the Iraqi Army.[3]

Certainly each of these decisions by America's civilian leadership contributed to the ongoing military disasters in Afghanistan and Iraq, but none of them change the fact that the U.S. Army was deliberately unprepared for the prolonged low-intensity conflicts that it faced in each country. Moreover, this unpreparedness significantly compounded whatever strategic challenges the United States already faced in prosecuting these conflicts. For this reason, the senior leaders of the Army deserve a large share of the blame for the disastrous forever wars in Afghanistan and Iraq from which the United States still struggles to extricate itself.

From the end of the Cold War to the beginning of the Iraq War, the Army marched relentlessly toward ever-greater capacity to fight a peer competitor in a high-intensity conflict despite the growing body of evidence that it would almost certainly not have to fight this kind of war again. The United States was dealt a humiliating defeat by militias in Somalia, yet the Army refused to change. A U.S. military intervention in Haiti failed to produce political change on the ground, but rather than reflecting on this failure, the

Army dumped the conflict on the United Nations (UN) and went home. The Army's inability to forge a political settlement in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo trapped the United States in a decades-long quagmire, but Army leaders refused to institutionalize the lessons of these conflicts. A growing chorus of observers, inside and outside the Army, warned that these low-intensity conflicts were the new face of warfare in the twenty-first century, but the Army's senior leaders—steeped in a culture that emphasized preparation to fight high-intensity conflicts over all other activities—continued to develop expensive, high-tech weapons to fight a third world war.

Thus, when the United States was attacked on September 11, 2001, and the World Trade Center towers fell, the stage was set for a slow-motion military disaster. The apparent "cheap win" in the first days of the war in Afghanistan through the use of special operations forces (SOF) and airpower further validated transformers—those advocating a high-intensity-conflict, information-age transformation of the Army—in their conviction that technology could supplant numbers. The Army that invaded Iraq in March 2003 was ill-prepared for the character of warfare that it ultimately faced. While the depleted Iraqi Army rapidly melted before the advance of the vastly superior U.S. Army, it did not disappear. Instead it hid among the population, evading America's high-tech surveillance and precision strike capabilities. Once Saddam's regime was toppled, the Iraqi Army reemerged, not as a conventional military threat but as an insurgency that severely challenged the halting U.S. efforts to establish a new Iraqi government. Other adversaries also emerged, including Shiite militias, Sunni Iraqi Islamists, and foreign terrorist groups. Back in Afghanistan the war that had seemed to be all but won in 2002 likewise transformed into a grueling battle against al-Qaeda and Taliban insurgents.[4]

An eleventh-hour gamble by President Bush—a troop "surge"—seemed to put the war in Iraq on the path toward conclusion, but President Obama's later attempt to replicate the Iraq surge in Afghanistan failed to stem the tide of violence in that country.[5] And, as it turned out, the war in Iraq was not over, either; the Army withdrew from Iraq at the end of 2011, only to return in 2014 to combat the reemergence of a Sunni insurgency in the form of ISIS. No president would again dare to withdraw forces from either theater before a political solution to the conflict was absolutely secure. But no political settlement has yet emerged and, as of this writing, America has spent nearly eighteen years paying the price for its army's intentional unpreparedness to fight the war on terror.

I use the word *intentional* because I contend that the senior leaders of the Army stubbornly insulated their organization from the lessons that might otherwise have been learned from the low-intensity conflicts of the 1990s. Of course, some units and individuals clearly did draw on their experience from these interventions. For instance, the 1st Infantry Division, which deployed from Germany to Iraq in the first rotation of units into the war, had just returned from Kosovo in 2002 and many of its leaders had participated in earlier deployments to Bosnia-Herzegovina. As division commander Maj. Gen. John Batiste would later comment, "We understood well that combat was important, but so was stability and support operations. And the notion that building relationships and changing attitudes and giving people alternatives to the insurgency was also terribly important."[6]

But where units were able to draw on the experiences from the Army's 1990s interventions it was incidental, because the Army had failed to institutionalize the lessons from these conflicts and integrate them into its training, education, and organizations. Thus, while the 1st Infantry Division could draw on its experiences in the Balkan States and the 101st Airborne Division could benefit from the academic background of its commander, Maj. Gen. David Petraeus,[7] the overwhelming majority of units had little or no training or experience in low-intensity conflict and were unprepared to combat the insurgencies that emerged in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Moreover, for every Batiste or Petraeus there were dozens of Army leaders who made the situation worse. The Army's stubborn focus on high-intensity conflict before September 11 produced leaders like Lt. Col. Nate Sassaman, who tacitly encouraged violence against Iraqi civilians and then covered it up when it resulted in deaths in 2004, and Col. Michael Steele, of *Black Hawk Down* fame, who launched massive, counterproductive air assault raids throughout Saddam's home province in 2006 (which resulted in numerous civilian casualties) instead of seeking a political settlement to the Sunni insurgency. It also produced senior leaders like Lieutenant Generals Dan McNeill and David Barno in Afghanistan, who remained laser-focused on hunting down the remnants of al-Qaeda throughout 2003 and 2004 while Taliban insurgents reconquered much of southern Afghanistan virtually unopposed.[8]

Of course the Army did, eventually, institutionalize low-intensity conflict proficiency. The tale of how General Petraeus and a team of "insurgents" wrote a new counterinsurgency doctrine and implemented this vision in Iraq and Afghanistan has become legend. But by February 2007, when Petraeus took command of all forces in Iraq, more than three thousand U.S.

troops had already died in that war. And nearly 1,200 U.S. troops would die in Afghanistan before Gen. Stanley McChrystal arrived in June 2009 to implement the new counterinsurgency doctrine there.[9] At least equally important, this supposed turnaround in Army thinking on low-intensity conflict has not resulted in "wins"—enduring political solutions—in either Afghanistan or Iraq. As of this writing, American troops are still fighting and dying in both countries.

One could reasonably argue that the Army failed to fully implement the doctrine enshrined in Petraeus's Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*. For instance, despite the manual's repeated insistence that in a counterinsurgency it is the Army's job to identify and solve the country's political problems, the Army abdicated its political role in both countries to provincial reconstruction teams led by U.S. Department of State diplomats and containing a hodgepodge of Department of Defense, Department of Justice, U.S. Agency for International Development, and other U.S. government agency officials.[10] One could also argue that this doctrine came too late; because the Army was unprepared to fight low-intensity conflicts at the beginning of each war, the situation had so deteriorated by the time counterinsurgency doctrine did arrive that the situation in both countries was beyond recovery.

Doing It Again

This book is not intended merely as a simple history or as an exercise in laying blame for past sins, however. It is instead an intervention, because the U.S. Army is in the process of making the same mistake again.

By 2006 the Army's failure in Afghanistan and Iraq had silenced the "transformers" who had dominated the debate over the direction of the Army at least since the end of the Cold War, creating space for General Petraeus and his "insurgents" to institutionalize counterinsurgency in Army doctrine and training. But now that the crisis has abated—yet, notably, before either war has actually been brought to a successful conclusion—Army transformers have reemerged and undone most of these gains.

Just as it did after Vietnam, the Army is intentionally forgetting its hard-won lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq. This effort began as early as 2010, when Bernard I. Finel, former professor of strategy at the National War College, made the ridiculous suggestion that the Army could have avoided the counterinsurgency in Iraq if it had simply unilaterally withdrawn after Saddam was captured in 2003. Likewise, Col. Craig Collier wrote that counterinsurgency advocates were "reluctant to admit that killing the enemy actually worked" and insisted that "killing or capturing an insurgent

consistently and quantifiably had a more positive impact than anything else we did."[11]

The effort to forget low-intensity conflict truly took off at the end of 2011, after the Army withdrew from Iraq (though that withdrawal proved to be only temporary). At both live training at the Army's National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California, and in virtual "warfighter exercises" run by the Army's Mission Command Training Program from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, the Army began to abandon training in low-intensity conflict and to instead return to training in high-intensity conflict.[12] At first the Army seemed almost apologetic about these moves toward restoring proficiency in high-intensity conflict. A 2013 article in *Army* magazine, the official publication of the Association of the United States Army, assured its readers that the Army would not abandon the lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq; the "reintroduction of conventional force-on-force training engagements" in training rotations at the NTC would be combined with "wide area security operations that include COIN [counterinsurgency] elements and a few extra wrinkles."[13]

But by late 2013 the effort to expunge low-intensity conflict from the collective Army consciousness had become explicit. Leading the ideological charge was Col. (Ret.) Gian Gentile. Embittered by the belief that "the myth of the counterinsurgency narrative"—the rise of General Petraeus and his "insurgents"—denigrated the sacrifices made by him and his soldiers in Baghdad in 2006, Gentile penned *Wrong Turn*, a 208-page assault on counterinsurgency doctrine in general and FM 3-24 and its authors in particular. He dismissed FM 3-24's "Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency Operations" as "a jumble of dreamy statements that bordered on some mixture of philosophy, theory, and military operational history." Seizing on the common refrain of counterinsurgency advocates that "an army 'can't kill its way to victory,'" Gentile painted counterinsurgency doctrine as rejecting the use of violence and echoed Collier's claim that it was killing insurgents that actually won the war—a war that is still on going, as of this writing, six years later.[14]

Incredibly, in 2017—despite the fact that the United States was once again fully engaged in two low-intensity conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq—the Army completely abandoned low-intensity conflict proficiency and returned to full-time preparation for a third world war. The newest edition of the Army's capstone doctrine, FM 3-0, *Operations*, pays implicit lip service to low-intensity conflict, acknowledging that "the U.S. Army must be manned, equipped, and trained to operate across the range of military operations." Yet in the same sentence, the manual insists that "large-scale ground combat

against a peer threat represents the most significant readiness requirement." While it fails to name either Afghanistan or Iraq in its rejection of the importance of proficiency in low-intensity conflict, FM 3-0 makes clear its authors' view that the Army was trapped in counterinsurgencies in the two countries because it failed to "consolidate gains" during the brief high-intensity conflict phase of each war. The Army could avoid such low-intensity conflicts in the future, the manual explains, by "exploitation" to destroy "every part of an enemy's ability to resist," ensuring "that enemies cannot transition a conventional military defeat into a protracted conflict that negates initial successes."[15] In other words, this manual contends that the Army could have avoided having to fight a low-intensity conflict in Afghanistan or Iraq in the first place if, during the high-intensity conflict phase of each conflict, it had simply killed every person—combatant or noncombatant—who might potentially resist later.

The manual insists that the United States is in a race to recapture its dominance in high-intensity conflict capacity before the next war with "Russia, China, Iran, [or] North Korea." In the foreword, the commander of the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, Lt. Gen. Michael Lundy, warns that these countries "already have overmatch or parity, a challenge the joint force has not faced in twenty-five years." For Lundy, the Army's focus on counterinsurgency had been a costly distraction: "As the Army and the joint force focused on counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism at the expense of other capabilities, our adversaries watched, learned, adapted, modernized and devised strategies that put us at a position of relative disadvantage in places where we may be required to fight."[16]

The senior leaders of the Army seem to actually believe that a great power war is imminent. Lundy warns, "The proliferation of advanced technologies; adversary emphasis on force training, modernization, and professionalization; the rise of revisionist, revanchist, and extremist ideologies; and the ever-increasing speed of human interaction makes large-scale ground combat more lethal, *and more likely*, than it has been in a generation." While the authors of FM 3-0 see Iran and North Korea as threats, they insist that the future holds—and the Army must prepare for—"large-scale combat operations against a peer threat": China or Russia.[17]

At first blush, the U.S. Army's construction—ongoing at the time of this writing—of Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs) would appear to indicate that it is still taking seriously the requirement to engage in low-intensity conflicts. After all, the outgoing chief of staff of the Army, Gen.

Mark Milley, claimed that the SFABs are an acknowledgment that the Army is "likely to be involved in train, advise, and assist operations for many years to come." Yet these brigades are not designed as much to make the Army better at low-intensity conflict as to allow the rest of the Army to look the other way and continue to get better at high-intensity conflict. According to Brig. Gen. Brian Mennes, director of Force Management for the Army G-3/5/7, SFABs are intended to help the Army "to reduce . . . the demand for combat advising from conventional brigade combat teams,"[18] presumably so that they can continue to prepare for high-intensity conflicts.

SFABs are also a backdoor way of providing additional forces for a great power war. As Mennes has noted, "In a time of national emergency, SFABs provide options for the Army to grow BCTs [brigade combat teams] rapidly."[19] This second purpose, creating a basis for the rapid mobilization of combat forces for a high-intensity conflict, is repeated throughout the Army's rhetoric on SFABs. As Lt. Col. Jonathan Thomas, also from the Force Management Directorate, said of this expansibility, "The SFAB will provide a cadre of officers and [noncommissioned officers] who will facilitate the regeneration of an SFAB into a full-blown brigade combat team." The Army's deputy chief of staff for operations and training, Lt. Gen. Joseph Anderson, called the SFAB a "standing chain of command for rapidly expanding the Army."[20]

Incredibly, despite the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the numerous low-intensity conflicts the U.S. Army faced in the 1990s, and America's disastrous and ongoing interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Army remains obsessed with the delusion that a war against a peer competitor is imminent.

There Will Never Be Another Great Power War

There is not going to be another great power war—at least as long as nuclear weapons remain the dominant feature of the strategic landscape.

In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, writing of the great power war between Athens and Sparta, ancient historian Thucydides warned that war, "far from staying within the limit to which a combatant may wish to confine it, will run the course that its chances prescribe."[21] The idea that the United States could fight a war with Russia only in the Baltic States or a war with China only in the South China Sea flies in the face of millennia of world history; as soon as either party began to lose, they would open hostilities in another theater, which would be met by reciprocal escalation until the world was plunged into another world war. It is as true today as it was in the fifth

century BC; there is no such thing as a limited war between great powers, and this is especially true in the nuclear age.

It is revealing that the Army has embraced a different reading of Thucydides, one expressed in the troubled exhortations of Harvard University professor Graham Allison, who has spoken at the invitation of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and the U.S. Army War College. Army general Joseph Votel put Allison's book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* on U.S. Central Command's 2018 reading list. In the book, Allison warns that in twelve of the sixteen cases that he examined, the emergence of a new great power precipitated a great power war.[22] Yet he completely ignores the fact that in two of the remaining four cases—namely, the rise of the Soviet Union and the reemergence of a unified Germany—the rise of a great power did not result in war. Both of these instances occurred in the nuclear age. In fact, while Allison fails to acknowledge it, none of the cases that did result in war occurred after the advent of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons, the cornerstone of America's deterrence against China and Russia—a capability upon which the United States spends $25 billion or more annually—precludes the possibility of a direct war between great powers for the foreseeable future. This is hardly a novel insight. Deterrence theorists have been, to various degrees, reaching the same conclusion for more than sixty years. Military professionals concur; General Sir Rupert Smith of the British Army wrote in his book *The Utility of Force* that, because of the advent of nuclear weapons, "war as battle in a field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs: such war no longer exists."[23]

Yet despite the overwhelming improbability of a great power war, and having experienced nearly three decades of unrelenting low-intensity conflicts (including those in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq) punctuated by only a handful of brief high-intensity conflicts against second-rate powers like Iraq and Serbia (decidedly *not* peer competitors), the Army is once again preparing for a world war.

Meanwhile, there are real and dramatic costs to the Army's chronic inability to fight low-intensity conflicts successfully. The Costs of War project, led by Brown University professor Neta Crawford, estimated in late 2016 that the failure to bring the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq to a close cost the United States $4.79 trillion.[24] But this figure pales in comparison to the intangible strategic costs to the nation: the loss of influence with our allies in Europe, the Middle East, and the Pacific and the surrender of international political power to China and Russia. America's inability to effectively

intervene in low-intensity conflicts has encouraged regional competitors and great powers to engage in subversion, proxy wars, and outright aggression in places like Lebanon, Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, and Yemen. If the United States does not develop the capacity to fight and win in low-intensity conflicts, its military power will continue to become increasingly irrelevant to international politics and American foreign policy will hold ever-diminishing weight in the world.

By no means do I recommend in this book that the Army completely abandon its considerable capacity to engage in high-intensity conflict. Instead, I contend five things. First, the high-intensity conflicts that the Army will face in the future will be infrequent, short, and fought against national militaries less capable than that of the United States. Second, the Army will much more frequently face low-intensity conflicts that, even if fought well, will be long, difficult, and manpower-intensive. Third, the demands of low-intensity conflict are vastly different from those of high-intensity conflict. Fourth, no one Army unit can be trained, manned, and equipped to be good at both low- and high-intensity conflict. Fifth, and finally, to successfully meet the challenges of these first four realities, the Army must bifurcate, with a few, small, highly lethal units trained, manned, and equipped to fight the brief, infrequent high-intensity conflicts the United States will face while the larger remainder of the Army is trained, manned, and equipped to effectively fight the low-intensity conflicts that will constitute the majority of operations in which it will be engaged for the foreseeable future.

Unlike the work of some low-intensity conflict observers at the time and since, this study does not find fault with the decision made by Army leaders to return to competency in high-intensity conflict after the Vietnam War. One could legitimately make the case that the Army did so with too much zeal, throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater; in their drive to recapture the Army's competency in high-intensity conflict, senior leaders oversaw a purge of the lessons of the Vietnam War from Army doctrine and training. Yet with more than 150 Soviet divisions and 600,000 Soviet soldiers facing them on the other side of the Iron Curtain,[25] the senior Army leaders of the 1970s and 1980s can be forgiven for believing that another great power war was at least possible, if not probable.

Likewise, this book does not blame the Army for its unpreparedness to wage the low-intensity conflicts of the 1990s. The Army had very