



Shocked and Awed: Defense Transformation in Iraq and Afghanistan

By Thomas Donnelly

One hundred days into the second term of President George W. Bush, a clear national security agenda and policy team have emerged. While there has been some change—most notably, the elevation of Condoleezza Rice to secretary of state and primary policy pilot—there is also a great deal of continuity, particularly in the Pentagon, where Donald Rumsfeld still rules supreme. In addition to fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the defense secretary is leading the charge on a third front—the internal fight to transform the U.S. military. Yet two recent books by experienced war correspondents tell important stories that call parts of the transformation program into question. David Zucchino and Sean Naylor, both “embedded” with units in the thick of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively, perform the traditional journalist’s function of telling truth to power. Their books and their messages deserve careful scrutiny.

The recent and forthcoming leadership changes at the Pentagon—the move of Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz to the presidency of the World Bank; the departure of Under Secretary for Policy Douglas Feith; their replacements by Secretary of the Navy Gordon R. England and Ambassador Eric S. Edelman, respectively; and the elevation of Marine General Peter Pace to chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—should remove any lingering doubts about Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s grip on his department. Whether Rumsfeld leaves in a year or so, after the completion of the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) in early 2006, is for the moment immaterial. Love him or loathe him, Donald Rumsfeld has already proven himself to be the most important secretary of defense since Robert McNamara.

Rumsfeld’s influence has not only been felt in his conduct of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but even more significantly, in his direction of the

process of defense transformation. When the secretary famously observed that you go to war with the army you’ve got, his refrain was applicable not only to the military’s post-invasion shortages in Iraq, but to the broader dilemma he will leave his successors. Absent some unforeseen change driven by crisis, the United States will go to war in five years or ten with the force Rumsfeld is building today.

Rumsfeld’s plan for defense transformation has always been controversial, not unlike the man himself. Most pointedly, a rising chorus of critics has argued that the Pentagon’s vision of defense transformation—with its emphasis on “swift defeat” campaigns that seek to substitute technology and firepower for human capital—seems only partially relevant, particularly in the protracted counterinsurgency campaigns that have characterized the global war on terror.

These charges are increasingly difficult to rebut, given the day-to-day realities of Iraq and Afghanistan. To its credit, there are indications that the Pentagon’s upcoming QDR will place considerably greater emphasis on how the U.S.

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military responds to a range of irregular, catastrophic, and disruptive threats than it has in the past. At the same time, however, popular wisdom continues to hold that—despite whatever unforeseen frustrations have been encountered since Baghdad and Kabul fell—the conventional portion of these conflicts largely validated “transformational” notions about the future of war, as neatly summarized by Max Boot shortly after the invasion of Iraq:

Spurred by dramatic advances in information technology, the U.S. military has adopted a new style of warfare that eschews the bloody slogging matches of old. It seeks a quick victory with minimal casualties on both sides. Its hallmarks are speed, maneuver, flexibility, and surprise. It is heavily reliant upon precision firepower, special forces, and psychological operations. And it strives to integrate naval, air, and land power into a seamless whole. This approach was put powerfully on display in the recent invasion of Iraq, and its implications for the future of American war fighting are profound.¹

Yet, as closer examinations of conventional operations in Afghanistan and Iraq are published, there is growing cause to rethink why the United States prevailed in these fights. In particular, a closer examination of a critical battle from each of these theaters—the thunder runs through Baghdad in April 2003 and Operation Anaconda in eastern Afghanistan in March 2002—reveals just how elusive defense transformation’s promise of “precision” warfare continues to be. In addition, while information technologies have yielded extraordinary advantages to America’s fighting forces, the fog of war remains—and with it, the need to conduct a wide range of operations, including ones built around manpower and brute force.

The Power of Thunder

Perhaps the best proof of the need to balance precision with overwhelming firepower, maneuver, and armored protection can be found in the famous “thunder runs” by U.S. forces through Baghdad that collapsed Saddam Hussein’s regime in April 2003. These are worth studying in detail, even if they were simply the action that preceded the current counterinsurgency that has proven so difficult. Fortunately, in *Thunder Run: The Armored Strike to Capture Baghdad*, David Zucchini, a national

correspondent with the *Los Angeles Times*, has provided a wealth of detail about the two key operations that severed Saddam Hussein’s grip on power.²

The book is a rich narrative of the fight by the army’s 2nd Brigade, Third Infantry Division, into the Iraqi capital and Saddam’s Republican Palace. Zucchini tells his story straight, with only sparing analysis in the text, but a host of themes leap off the pages. Among them:

In moments of chaos, intelligence is never decisive.

Preparing for the initial thunder run, Lieutenant Colonel Eric Schwartz, commander of Task Force 1-64 Armor, asked his intelligence officer what he knew about Iraqi strength and dispositions in Baghdad. After a “vague, long-winded answer,” Schwartz put it to his staff: “So you don’t know shit about the enemy in the city, do you?” Answered the intelligence officer: “No, not really.”³

Indeed, the story of the thunder runs, particularly the first run on April 5, 2003, is a classic tale of “reconnaissance by fire,” the military term for sticking your head in a beehive and waiting for a reaction. The most important pieces of information—how well organized the Iraqi defense was and whether Iraqis were willing to die for Saddam’s regime—were qualitative, not quantitative. No enemy templates or signal intercepts were likely to provide decisive insights; this was something that only Schwartz and other senior, on-scene tactical commanders could judge from the tempo and intensity of the fight itself.

The on-scene commander still has the best understanding of the battle.

Because of the ineluctable and ineradicable fog of war, the dangers of a second Clausewitzian phenomenon, friction—simply, the unpredictable interactions of human beings in combat—remains as salient a fact of war as ever. Technology has merely displaced it, driving uncertainty into new forms. Command decisions are still more a matter of “feel,” experience, and the commander’s will than precision and perfect rationality.

Perhaps no incident of recent warfare captures this enduring reality more clearly than did the thunder runs, particularly the second such attack on April 7, 2003. After the fierce fighting of the previous day, the Iraqi defense of Baghdad—designed primarily to withstand air attack, defend against American airborne and dismounted infantry, and withstand a long siege—had been shattered, having proven ill-equipped to survive an armored assault. The question on April 7 was not merely how to raid, but how to invade and occupy—

particularly how to be *seen*, and especially on television—as occupying the regime’s symbols of power, like the palace. As brigade commander Colonel David Perkins told his men the night before the battle:

We have set the conditions to create the collapse of the Iraqi regime. Now we’re transitioning from a tactical battle to a psychological and informational battle. This is the last battle tomorrow, gentlemen. They said it would take five divisions to win this war, but there’s no question now that we can really do it ourselves tomorrow. We’ve got to seal the deal now.⁴

This quintessentially strategic decision was essentially driven by Perkins; reading Zucchini’s account makes it clear that it was Perkins’s ambition—there is no better word for it—that convinced his superiors, division commander Major General Buford Blount and V Corps commander Lieutenant General William Wallace, to let U.S. troops occupy Baghdad rather than simply raiding it again. Blount and Wallace deserve great credit for trusting a subordinate to such an extent. The danger was less that the brigade’s tanks and Bradley infantry fighting vehicles would be overrun than that its logistics chain—its supply of food, water, fuel and ammunition—would be vulnerable. In a matter of hours, the campaign plan to methodically reduce Baghdad was overthrown by an on-scene commander. What is missing from Zucchini’s book is the story of how even more senior officials acted. Was, for example, Secretary Rumsfeld consulted? The decision was of such importance that one might have expected it to go to the very top of the command chain. Regardless, the most important point revealed by this episode is that strategic decisions in war often flow bottom-up, if only because the on-scene commander usually has the best understanding of the battle.

Armored protection, firepower, and mobility make commanders bold. There is no question that the boldness of Perkins and his subordinates and the trust shown them by Wallace and Blount stemmed from a tremendous confidence in their M1 Abrams tanks and Bradleys. These systems combined near invulnerability, incredible firepower, and speed—despite the tanks’ gas-guzzling turbine engines—to make the decisive maneuvers both thunderous and rapid, creating a shocking effect on the Iraqis, and to convince them that a coherent defense of Baghdad was beyond their capacity. In addition to the

Iraqi fear of American air power, the recognition that they could do almost nothing to stop the ground invasion was thoroughly demoralizing.

Not only did U.S. ground combat vehicles sustain numerous rocket-propelled grenade strikes, but their main and machine guns were lethally effective against whatever the Iraqis threw their way. One of the most telling parts of Zucchini’s book is his interviews with Iraqis. Juawad al-Dayni was a retired Iraqi general who took up arms in the defense of Baghdad, joining with ranks of Saddam *fedayeen* fighters. On April 5 he had survived the initial thunder run, which had come into his neighborhood.

[B]ut he had been deeply disturbed by the carnage inflicted by the tanks and Bradleys. He had served in the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s and in the first Gulf War, but had never seen such lethal weapons. The tanks and Bradleys were remarkable. They were able to fire in a 360-degree radius, and from incredible distances, even while on the move. Their guns reduced some of the Fedayeen militiamen to hunks of meat; their remains had to be slopped into plastic bags for burial. . . .

Now, on the morning of April 7, Dayni was back in [his] bunker, fearing the worst. When the American column sped up Highway 8 [toward Baghdad] just after dawn, the tanks and Bradleys shot at everything on either side of the roadway. The Fedayeen and Syrians—and a few small units of Republican Guards—fought furiously, but even their recoilless rifles and antiaircraft artillery pieces had little effect on the column. Their technical vehicles were pulverized by tank and Bradley cannons. Dayni could not see anything from inside the bunker, but he could feel the impact of the rounds and hear the cries of men dying. At the far end of his bunker, there was a sudden explosion and a flash of flame. Dayni saw the burning body of a man who lived on his street, a middle-aged retiree like himself. Dayni moved to help the man, but it was pointless. He was dead. There was not much left of him. . . .

Dayni stayed down. Thirty minutes later, it was over. . . . As the fighters around him geared up for another confrontation with the Americans, he debated whether to stay in the bunker or walk back to check on his house. After a while, he got up and walked home.⁵

Operation Anaconda: The Other Side of the Coin

In sum, Juawad al-Dayni and many other Iraqis who intended to defend their capital made the judgment that April 7, 2003, was not a good day to die. Conversely, March 2, 2002, the day that elements of the 101st Airborne and 10th Mountain divisions assaulted the Shahikot Valley in eastern Afghanistan, was not a good day for U.S. troops. The lessons suggested by the two thunder runs into Baghdad were also learned, much more painfully, in the battle for the Shahikot. To read *Not a Good Day to Die*, Sean Naylor's gripping narrative of the planning and execution of Operation Anaconda—by far the largest set-piece battle of the Afghan war and a moment when the fighting in Afghanistan shifted from a small-scale, counterterrorism campaign into something larger and more conventional—is to understand that technology can contribute to the fog of war as well as dispel it.⁶

Intelligence in the Shahikot. As it happened, U.S. intelligence about Taliban and al Qaeda forces in the valley significantly underestimated their strength, judging their numbers to be 200 or less when it was likely—the truth is unclear to this day—five times as many. Perhaps more importantly, analysts from both the military and the CIA believed that these fighters were dispersed among the civilian population, when in fact the local villagers had fled and the enemy was deeply dug into the surrounding mountains. Thus the problem was less a lack of information than false information.

Where Perkins and his battalion commanders expected chaos, the various units that fought in the Shahikot—both Special Operations forces and conventional forces—believed they understood their enemy; they had a misleading sense of clarity. Moreover, repeated surveillance of the Shahikot, a remote part of the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan, did nothing to change commanders' preconceptions. As Naylor makes clear, the few indications as to true Taliban–al Qaeda strength, dispositions, and intentions were picked up by on-the-ground, human reconnaissance forces, notably the handful of SEALs designated "Mako 31." This small team stumbled upon a number of positions, including a large-caliber machine gun guarding one of the intended helicopter landing zones for the main U.S. attack.⁷

The most challenging art for intelligence gathering is to ascertain when an enemy is not acting in the

expected manner. To be sure, the source of this problem lies in the limitations of human imagination, but, upon reading about Operation Anaconda, it is hard to avoid the suspicion that an over-reliance on technology—and an overconfidence in its abilities—can exacerbate the problem.

Command decisions in Anaconda. As the initial assaults into the Shahikot were surprised by the intensity of the resistance and the air assault forces were pinned down in the valley by enemy fire, higher headquarters far afield from the fight gradually assumed greater responsibility for it. Ultimately, Air Force Brigadier General Gregory Trebon, in charge of all Special Forces in Afghanistan, assumed the leading role in the battle along with his staff. But Trebon was 100 miles distant from the Shahikot, at Bagram Air Base near Kabul, and his staff was situated on Masirah Island, off the coast of Oman, 1,100 miles away. They tried to manage the battle based upon information supplied by reporting units and data gathered by surveillance aircraft orbiting above the valley. Most deceiving were the feeds from the Predator drones, which provided a vivid but narrow view. As Naylor sums it up, their "faith in technology trumped the principle of trusting the guy on the ground."⁸

Distance made a crucial difference as the assault turned into a rescue operation, as huge, twin-rotor Chinook helicopters tried to touch down on tiny ridgelines; landing zones that seemed safe from afar were in fact compromised by hidden Taliban and al Qaeda fighters. Naylor obtained access to the official Special Operations Command investigation, which concluded: "Here the . . . commander on the scene would clearly have made a difference. At least he would have insisted that the [rescue chopper] use an offset landing zone. He would have been in position to give this direction personally, using the more reliable line-of-sight radios, which would have significantly reduced the chances of misunderstanding."⁹

Vulnerability leads to timidity. Caught unprepared and outgunned, Anaconda commanders quickly abandoned their plan. Sporadic air support and the lack of U.S. artillery, including the initial absence even of mortars, had resulted in the Taliban–al Qaeda forces enjoying superior firepower for some time. The American-allied Afghan forces intended to make up the main effort of Anaconda barely made it to the battlefield before calling off their assault. They were a ragged group to begin with, hastily patched together by a variety of U.S. Army Special Forces

teams, who rode to the Shahikot in wobbly Afghan buses and pickup trucks. Mistakenly struck by U.S. gunships and immediately under fire from the real enemy on the mountains, the Afghans had little chance and, quickly, little appetite for the battle.

Things were not much better in the U.S. chain of command. It is perhaps too harsh to speak of timidity, for the troops on the ground fought exceptionally bravely and exacted heavy casualties from their foes. At the same time, and in retrospect, senior American leaders in the battle concluded that they had missed a golden opportunity. The large concentration of Taliban and al Qaeda forces was not just a threat but a great target, dug into the mountainside but available to be attacked and destroyed. Naylor neatly sums up the frustrations of those involved: “[T]he U.S. failure to fight a successful battle of encirclement in the Shahikot meant several hundred experienced al Qaeda fighters—Arabs, Uzbeks, and Chechens—escaped to Pakistan. Undoubtedly some senior enemy leaders were among them. Just how senior is a matter of conjecture.”¹⁰

The Limits of Precision

The soldier stories told so well by Naylor and Zucchini are teeming with messages about the brutal and confusing realities of close combat and the difficulty of making command decisions under such circumstances. What they show is not the folly of precision-strike warfare, but its inherent limits. No thoughtful reader of these books would for a moment want to renounce the advantages that precision bestows upon U.S. military forces. At the same time, no one would read these tales and conclude that precision strikes are the all-purpose panacea that they have so often been advertised to be.

As essayist Ralph Peters pithily notes in his forthcoming book, *New Glory: Expanding America’s Global Supremacy*, “We wish to wage war with tweezers, but combat remains the province of the ax.” One wishes, particularly, that the practice of the thunder run had governed our approach to the town of Fallujah as well as the capital of Baghdad; Sunni rejectionists were slow to feel what William Tecumseh Sherman called “the hard hand of war.” As Ralph Peters argues:

[T]he lesson of recent wars is that attempts to wage war surgically only postpone—and aggravate—the butchery. The great failing of precision weapons is that they lack sufficient force to convince an enemy of his defeat, whether we speak of individual leaders or of a hostile population. War must have penalties, and those penalties must be painful. War’s destruction must be sufficiently graphic to convince the enemy that further resistance is futile.¹¹

Let me be clear: precision is a blessing. When bombs and bullets go where they are intended, they make our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines more likely to win and to survive. But the siren song of “precision strike” is dangerous when it emphasizes the precision more than the strike. It is in this way that transformation has the potential to turn dangerously self-referential, focusing on capabilities in the abstract rather than the damage they might do the enemy. When Carl von Clausewitz famously argued that political aims alone gave war its logic, he completed his thought with the observation that warfare had a grammar all its own. When unmoored from any broader strategic vision, defense transformation risks becoming the work of unlettered men.

Notes

1. Max Boot, “The New American Way of War,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 4 (July–August 2003): 41.
2. David Zucchini, *Thunder Run: The Armored Strike to Capture Baghdad* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2004).
3. *Ibid.*, 12.
4. *Ibid.*, 80.
5. *Ibid.*, 141.
6. Sean Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda* (New York: Berkeley Books, 2005).
7. *Ibid.*, 158–183.
8. *Ibid.*, 320.
9. *Ibid.*, 334.
10. *Ibid.*, 376.
11. Ralph Peters, *New Glory: Expanding America’s Global Supremacy* (New York: Sentinel Press, forthcoming), 31.