



Executive Summary

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**THE U.S. ARMY IN THE IRAQ WAR:
VOLUME 1
INVASION • INSURGENCY • CIVIL WAR**

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The U.S. Army in the Iraq War was commissioned by Chief of Staff of the Army General Raymond Odierno in 2013 to serve as the initial Army's operational level history of the conflict. While he instructed that the review should be held to the same academic and evidentiary requirements of previous historical studies, other aspects would be fundamentally different. Believing that a classified review of the war would not be circulated sufficiently to engender organizational learning and change, General Odierno directed that the final product should be a readable, unclassified narrative. He also challenged the authors to maturely address topics previously considered taboo. In order to meet these intents, thousands of hours of interviews were conducted, and tens of thousands of pages of documents were declassified—ultimately resulting in a product cleared for public release by the Defense Office of Prepublication and Security Review. This manuscript also includes assessments that at times will strike a critical tone that some readers find unusual for an Army study.

Given the operational level focus of the study, our attention primarily settled on the corps and theater level commanders whose responsibility fell in creating campaign plans that translated strategic political guidance into tactical direction and that blended the various elements of national power toward a strate-

gic goal. Our objective was to understand not only the decisions that were made and when, but why they were made and the process through which they were determined. At times, our focus shifts up to the strategic level when new guidance was reviewed and issued, and down to the tactical level when changes at that level affected the operational level. Although the book is titled as an Army history, it includes considerable information about the contributions of our coalition allies, the U.S. Marine Corps, and special operations forces. The Army has not fought a conflict unilaterally in recent history, and the Iraq War is no exception. An operational level review that failed to examine the critical contributions of these elements would have tremendous gaps in trying to fully understand the conflict.

This volume, the first of two, begins at the truce tent at Safwan Airfield in southern Iraq at the end of Operation DESERT STORM and charts how the Iraqi and U.S. militaries perceived and prepared for future conflicts during the interwar years from 1991-2003. The term "interwar" could be considered a misnomer as the years between the two major wars were marked with a persistent low-grade conflict whose magnitude ebbed and flowed. That trajectory was altered decisively by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Plans for the invasion of Iraq, focused on regime

change and the elimination of the country's weapons of mass destruction, began in earnest before the ruins of the World Trade Center stopped smoldering. Spurred by notions that a revolution in military affairs had given the United States generational advantages over Iraqi military forces, and by the assumption that many Iraqis would welcome America and its allies, the initial invasion footprint was purposely kept small.

Although the invasion force was able to defeat the decrepit Iraqi military forces, it was not able to fill the void when the Iraqi state collapsed. Vast tracts of the country were left relatively unsecured and irregular forces, tribal connections, and complex social dynamics vexed coalition efforts to conclude the campaign. In the absence of central authority, Iraqis looted the country's infrastructure and communities began to fragment along ethno-sectarian lines. The ad hoc and anemic civilian and military headquarters that were established by the U.S. after the invasion proved similarly unable to restore order. Many of the initial decisions of these organizations, notably the Coalition Provisional Authority with its fratricidal Orders 1 and 2, made the situation far worse. While the U.S. military had achieved operational success during the invasion, it was unable to consolidate its gains and achieve a strategic victory. The resultant governance and security vacuum in the summer of 2003 was quickly occupied by Sunni resistance organizations, Islamic terrorists, Shi'a militants, the Iranian regime, and Kurdish factions—circumstances that effectively ceded the initiative from coalition forces to Iraq's competing insurgent groups for years to come.

In the face of these challenges, U.S. leaders decided to reduce the military footprint further and tried to transfer civil authority to international organizations, such as the United Nations or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. A series of effective terrorist attacks and the emergence of a full-scale domestic insurgency made both options untenable, a realization which senior U.S. leaders were not able to come to grips with quickly. As the overall strategy and campaign planning foundered, the insurgency gained strength—eventually exploding in countrywide uprisings in April 2004. These uprisings, combined with the embarrassment of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, shook U.S. senior leadership to the core, cementing decisions to redouble efforts by creating new civilian and military headquarters staffed by new leaders.

These changes initially appeared to be sufficient to correct the campaign's failures, and the new leaders quickly produced a strategy and began implementing its components. The first steps of this strategy included a series of battles, labeled a "fight to the elections,"

to clear insurgent-held sanctuaries. While these battles accomplished the coalition's objective of breaking Sunni and Shi'a insurgent groups' hold on territory in order to safeguard the 2005 elections, they had unintended consequences. Although insurgent groups had been dealt significant blows, none had been damaged sufficiently to prevent them regenerating fully over time. Within Sunni groups, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq rose to prominence on a narrative of having fought the coalition to a standstill, as it pursued a strategy to ignite a sectarian civil war by carrying out a relentless terror campaign against Iraq's Shi'a community. Sunnis, fearful of Zarqawi's group and perceiving that the "fight to the elections" had mostly targeted their community, boycotted the first election. This decision effectively excluded Sunnis from new government formations and the drafting of Iraq's constitution, in essence, handing control of the instruments of government power to Shi'a Islamist parties that responded to Zarqawi's sectarian attacks in kind. A cycle of violence ensued, with each faction forming its own extra-governmental militias to protect their community and prey on civilians from the other.

Perceiving the situation differently, coalition leaders believed that the elections had instilled popularly elected representative governments whose inherent legitimacy would drain support from the insurgency. To improve Iraq's security situation and keep pace with these ostensible political gains, thousands of new American advisors were deployed to partner directly with Army and special police units. A new strategy of transitioning increased responsibility to Iraqi forces served as a forcing function to spur progress and prevent an over-reliance on coalition forces. Base closures, reduced presence, and troop withdrawals were important components of this strategy and were managed intently by operational level leaders.

Coalition leaders were slow to realize the mismatch between their strategy and the true situation. They continued to pursue policies as though Sunni and Shi'a insurgent groups were fighting primarily to expel foreign occupying forces, rather than fighting each other for power and survival. Accelerating the transfer of responsibility to Iraqi Government forces only served to hasten the onset of civil war, as these forces were generally seen as illegitimate by most Sunnis due to their complicity in sectarian violence and negligence in restraining Shi'a militia attacks. As the situation devolved, U.S. military leaders chose to further accelerate the transition to Iraqi authority, still believing that the majority of security problems came from the presence of foreign forces and that ultimately Iraq's political problems would have to be solved by

Iraqi leaders. It was thought that the aggressive and independent way in which U.S. forces were conducting operations was restraining Iraqi political progress and reconciliation by not incentivizing the Iraqi government to solve problems themselves.

These dynamics came to a head in the aftermath of the February 2006 Samarra mosque bombing. Coalition leaders finally came to realize that the war had developed into a complex contest among Iraqis for political and economic power. The bombing did not mark the beginning of the Iraqi civil war, but rather the point at which coalition leaders' perception of the situation caught up with reality. Iraq's violent power struggle had begun with the fall of Saddam Hussein and only intensified over time into a full-blown ethno-sectarian civil war that threatened Iraq's existence as a unified state. Despite the starkly changed situation, coalition leaders chose not to alter their campaign plan of transitioning increased authority to Iraqi leaders, believing that only Iraqis could hope to understand and solve the sectarian troubles roiling the country. The failure of operational and theater level leaders to reverse the deteriorating situation resulted in then-President George W. Bush losing faith in the

coalition's transition strategy, prompting him to begin quiet efforts to search for a new one.

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