

Inside The Pentagon

by Elaine M. Grossman

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AN 'OODA LOOP' WRIT LARGE

NEW BRIEFING APPLIES 4TH GENERATION WARFARE IDEAS TO IRAQ CONFLICT

In a [new briefing](#) [2.2 MB PPT], three retired officers—each hailing from a different service—lay out a vision for how the U.S. military must reorient itself to help meet security and reconstruction objectives in Iraq.

In fact, successive iterations of “orientation” and “reorientation” as circumstances change are key to success in Iraq, but such an adaptive approach is largely missing there, argue the retired officers—Marine Corps Col. G.I. Wilson, Army Lt. Col. Greg Wilcox and Air Force Col. Chet Richards.

All are longtime experts in “4th Generation Warfare,” a form of conflict in which a nation’s highly sophisticated military can be undermined by alternatively organized adversaries using unconventional tools and methods. Fourth-generation foes—like the insurgency in Iraq—may rally around cultural, religious, race, tribal or ideological similarities, rather than identify with a single nation or governing regime.

“We need to adapt faster by out-thinking the enemy and forcing him to react to our initiatives, rather than the other way around,” Wilcox told *Inside the Pentagon* last week.

The insurgency in Iraq “is becoming long term in perspective with political goals,” states the briefing, “Fourth Generation Warfare and OODA Loop Implications of the Iraqi Insurgency.” Though senior U.S. military officials have observed that the insurgents have not yet won a single battle against American forces, the Iraqi and foreign fighters need only sow chaos with occasional attacks in order to meet their own goals, the retired officers suggest.

Knowing American leaders are eager to resolve the Iraq situation and pull forces out, the insurgents can undermine U.S. objectives relatively easily and are “fueled by our quest for a decisive engagement,” they write.

The briefing, obtained by ITP, evolved from a presentation one of the authors made at an information warfare conference in September 2003.

“We hope people will rethink what we’ve been doing” in Iraq, one of the authors said this week, speaking for the group and asking not to be named. The U.S. military has “been doing a lot, but not thinking through the impact.”

The three retired officers wrote the piece “to reopen the dialogue constructively,” the participant added. They are circulating the briefing throughout the Pentagon and the defense community, according to the trio.

Not everyone anticipates the Pentagon will adopt the retired officers’ perspectives or recommendations.

“I would not exactly expect a warm reception,” Wilcox said. “It represents some frustrations about some of the mistakes we have made and recommendations for a better understanding, as well as some course of action that might be helpful.”

But in some sectors, the document is already winning kudos.

"I cannot imagine any thoughtful person not agreeing with the basic premise of the brief," retired Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Charles Krulak, who reviewed the document this week, told ITP via e-mail. "The most important 'transformation' that needs to take place is found in the mind of the individual warrior. We need to think differently to truly succeed in this 'new' conflict."

Krulak said he put "new" in quotation marks "because history will always repeat itself."

Larry Johnson, a former deputy director in the State Department's counterterrorism office, this week said the new briefing "is a solid assessment of the mess we are in and offers a road map for getting out of Iraq with our reputation intact."

While the briefing exhibits all the hallmarks of a slick Pentagon slide show in PowerPoint software, it is arranged in anything but standard fashion. As suggested by the briefing title, the authors constructed their work around the late Air Force Col. John Boyd's concept of a decision cycle. Boyd called it an "OODA Loop," in which a warfighter or commander repeatedly "observes" the environment, "orients" to similarities with and differences from past understanding, "decides" what to do, and "acts."

Before his death in 1997, Boyd described how a successful warrior uses the process to adapt quickly to an evolving battle situation, while attempting to undermine his adversary's ability to cope.

The briefing takes the OODA Loop to the strategic level over the course of 63 pages, beginning with "observations" about the ongoing conflict in Iraq that are meant to set the stage. Among them are the view that insurgent attacks are becoming increasingly sophisticated and well coordinated, and that a trend has emerged toward attacking in small groups.

The authors also cite an observation, made by retired Army Col. Douglas Macgregor in an op-ed piece published this week in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, that U.S. forces have "killed, maimed and incarcerated thousands of Arabs, 90 percent of whom were not the enemy. But they are now."

Wilson, Wilcox and Richards offer their own observations, as well, about the nature of the U.S. military and its approach in Iraq thus far.

"We are addicted to technology and technological solutions [rather than] operational solutions," they write. "We have lost sight that people and ideas are the essence of why wars are fought." The insurgents in Iraq have made a virtue of their relative military weakness, the authors observe. The retired officers use the shorthand "4GW" for these 4th Generation Warfare-type fighters.

"Because 4GW actors are militarily weak compared to their state opponents, their techniques often include 'opponents, their techniques often include 'terrorism' and manifest as an insurgency," according to the briefing. "However, 4GW is often successful in circumventing our military's far stronger high-tech conventional posture."

Then comes "orientation," which the authors call the "fulcrum of Boyd's OODA Loop" in that it "shapes the way we interact with the environment—hence the way we observe it, the way we decide [and] the way we act." To excel in the art of war, orientation must become "intuitive," the retired officers credit Boyd with observing. And, they say, skill in orientation is key to agility, or "the ability to shift from one OODA/orientation state to another more rapidly than an opponent, in response to changing circumstances."

In Iraq, orientation requires that U.S. officials recognize the unintended consequences of a sometimes violent approach using "kinetic" weapons over, say, more subtle logistics interdiction behind the insurgents' operating areas, or a psychological tool that undermines their cause, the authors say.

In fact, the traditional U.S. military inclination to attack an adversary's command-and-control technologies and infrastructure simply may not be a viable option against this brand of adversary, they write.

"Identifying and destroying insurgent infrastructure [or] organization is problematic" in Iraq, the briefing states. "Iraqi insurgents do not have Western-like command and control."

Rather, they communicate through a "very cellular, autonomous, diffuse and self-adapting" organizational structure, the authors write.

While U.S. military leaders envision high-technology computer “networks” linking forces on the battlefield with intelligence platforms in air, at sea and in space, they may not fully appreciate that the insurgency’s low-technology communications continue to undermine American efforts in Iraq, the authors say.

“Remember, they network, too!” the briefing implores. “You tell ‘Sam,’ who works with ‘Joe,’ who’s a distant cousin of ‘Dangerous Dawoud.’”

Direct communication may be less important among insurgents when they share the same mission goals and have a deeper understanding of the Iraqi environment than do U.S. soldiers.

“Insurgents have an intuitive sense of the effects their actions will achieve in the cultural and religious environment in which they operate,” states the briefing. “We often misread their culture and misjudge the effects.”

The Arab and Iraqi cultures are fraught with dichotomies that Western officials are only just beginning to understand, the document suggests.

It is “imperative to grasp the socio-political [and] economic intricacies of the ‘causes’ of the insurgents,” while keeping in mind insurgents themselves diverge in their Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish loyalties, the authors write.

“Without a cause, insurgents cannot galvanize the population to support them,” the briefing states. Yet, the authors note “some people just like to fight,” reflective of a “warrior culture.” While a cause may be used “to mobilize and garner support of the people,” religious or “tribal ties alone may provide significant support of the people.”

Effectively handling this complex picture requires “an extremely capable [U.S.] intelligence infrastructure” and communications ability, the authors write. “Both are key in getting beyond just kinetics. There must be an investment in human resources, IO [information operations], cultural intelligence and strategic communications.”

For a reorientation to be useful, it must be embraced by the nation’s leadership, the authors argue. Among other things, U.S. leaders “need to realize this is a small-unit war a great deal of the time,” potentially even leaving strategic power in the hands of a corporal, at times. Moreover, “leaders must know when and where to fight and not to fight,” the three officers write.

When it comes to the OODA Loop imperative to “decide,” the briefing authors endorse a concept proposed by counterinsurgency expert H. Thomas Hayden, a retired Marine Corps lieutenant colonel, for establishing small, specialized units to battle insurgents directly. The aim of these counterinsurgency cells would be “to neutralize or destroy the leadership of the insurgents fighting against the coalition forces,” the authors write. The forces must be “disciplined, well trained and highly mobile” to succeed in countering guerrillas, they state.

A lower-profile presence would help mitigate negative perceptions among the Iraqi public of the United States as an unwanted occupying force, while more effectively battling the insurgency, the authors argue.

“We should be the ones in the village, not the people attacking the village,” the briefing quotes Boyd as saying.

In the briefing’s final section, titled “Act,” the authors say the U.S. military should also establish “regional fusion centers” near critical security areas to provide customized intelligence to counterinsurgency cells.

“Personnel manning these fusion centers would be intelligence and cultural specialists, security personnel, AT/FP [antiterrorism/force protection], LNOs [liaison officers], linguists, contracting specialists, [State Department] representatives, civil affairs [personnel], political-military specialists, engineers and public works specialists, PSYOPS [psychological operations personnel], media relations specialists and economic advisers—all under one roof,” states the document, available publicly this week at www.d-n-i.net.

These centers would “collect, analyze, process [and] refine courses of action, and then disseminate the necessary intel to vetted Iraqi Security Forces and U.S. forces in the area,” the authors state. “Benefit is derived from specialized personnel staying in place for longer periods of time than operational forces, providing tailored products based upon the variance in the region.”

The authors also advocate a stronger program to “train the trainers” of the Iraqi military, rather than the current “ad hoc” approach. They say getting the Iraqi training right is “critical to any exit strategy.”

The briefing recommends the development of “a coherent grand strategy” to “ensure that success in combat does not repel the [local] population, potential allies, the uncommitted or even ourselves.” At this level, the authors say, even agility in orientation is not as important as “adherence to the values we claim to espouse.” Examples might include giving increased priority to protecting the local population with police and security officers, cultivating indigenous support for and participation in development and reconstruction projects, and ensuring operations adhere to established international law, according to the briefing.

—Elaine M. Grossman