8

Embeds

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I saw three Iraq wars: the first Iraq War in 1991, otherwise known as the Gulf War; the second Iraq War from 2003 to 2011, being the invasion and stabilisation of Iraq by counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency; and the third Iraq War, being 2014 to perhaps 2017–18, against ISIS. There is a popular view that there was just one war and that it was all the fault of the United States, President Bush, or the invasion of Iraq in 2003. But in fact—and I acknowledge that this is a contentious view—the only thing common across the three wars was the geography of Iraq.

From 2004 to 2005, I was an embedded member, an 'embed', of the Headquarters Multi-National Force – Iraq (MNF-I), and probably the most senior Australian soldier deployed. During that time, I was chief of operations in Iraq. My experience was an American experience of what our US comrades considered to be a war of necessity. For the US Army at least, this was a war of necessity, and the achievement of the mission was more important than the lives of soldiers, so greater risks and more casualties were accepted by the United States. For the allies, this was a war of choice, and most allies chose to prioritise the lives of their soldiers over the achievement of almost any mission.

I discussed the various views of my task as chief of operations in my book, *Running the War in Iraq*. I made the point that my experience was an American experience as I worked as a lone Australian (except for my brilliant executive officers and my extraordinary bodyguard) in the headquarters and throughout Iraq with almost no contact with other

Australians. I was told by the Australian Chief of Defence Force to ensure that the commanding general was aware that I was working for him alone. Suffice to say that since 2004, as the ADF and the government's exposure to war increased, Australia has become much more competent in giving direction to its deployed soldiers through military directives.

The war in which I was involved as an embed was big. Most Australians are unaware how big it was or how vicious the fighting was. When I was there, there were 150,000 to 175,000 coalition troops, and we built the Iraqi army up to 125,000 troops and police over a year. The United States had 20 combat brigades deployed but, strangely, only had 413 hospital beds over the entire theatre because of the capability to evacuate casualties. Out of the 10 combat divisions that the full-time US Army possessed, the equivalent of three and a half were deployed at any one time in Iraq. Given the US world responsibility, this illustrates how desperately short the United States is in terms of land combat forces and how much the United States needs its allies. But in Iraq, the allies were not there.

To illustrate the level of combat in this counter-insurgency fight, I spoke briefly about the second battle of Fallujah, in November 2004. This was a conventional 'divisional' attack on a city that had 3,000 to 6,000 dug-in insurgents defending it. That this should occur within a counter-insurgency, which most Australians seem to associate with jungles and communist terrorists, was somewhat counter-intuitive. To show how one type of traditional but complex conflict has merged into other types of complex conflict, I described Fallujah as 'a conventional operation as part of a stabilization campaign to achieve an integrated political effect against an insurgent and terrorist force that stayed and fought'.

I commend to you Dr Albert Palazzo's 572-page report on Australia's participation in the Iraq War,[1] which has recently been made available through a Freedom of Information request by the *Sydney Morning Herald*— *but* with 500 redactions by Defence.[2] The *SMH* quoted Defence as referring to the report as an 'unofficial history that reflect the author's own views', the author being referred to as an 'Army official'. In that report, I was referred to as 'the ADF member most directly involved in fighting the insurgents', and I consider this report to be a good summary of our participation in the Iraqi war up to 2010. The author of the report considered that Australia's

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1   Palazzo, *The Australian Army and the War in Iraq: 2002–2010*.
2   See www.smh.com.au/interactive/2017/pdfview/ViewerJS/#../The_Australian_Army_in_Iraq.pdf (retrieved 3 April 2020).

participation in the war was 'inconsequential and confused, timid even', and observed: 'It would be interesting to know the reaction of US personnel who served in Iraq to Australia's timidity.' Well, as someone who lived within the beast for a long time, and became familiar with the US personnel at the top, let me tell you that whenever they thought of it, which was not often because they were running serious operations and battles, they were not impressed, and we were just another ally.

This issue goes to the importance of military credibility in an alliance. Because the centre point of our defence policy is an expectation that the United States will come to our aid in an extreme military situation, it is important that the United States feels that Australia will share the burden not just of military expenditure but also of combat. This was not a view that seemed to be accepted by Australian defence civilians in the room, the flippant comment being made that 'we do not go to war to impress the US military'. My view is that Australia's credibility as an ally is crucial to our defence policy if we base that policy on US assistance in an emergency. This does not mean that we accept US policy always or that we follow the United States like a deputy sheriff.

If we consider that a war should be fought, and we are prepared to put troops into that war, then we should realise that it is against our interests for us to be popularly considered the 'new French', as the British called us in Al Muthanna Province because we would not fight. The alternative is to not rely on the United States and to put our minds to defending ourselves, which we are unlikely to do. Regardless of what the United States says to us or to our allies, the United States understands which nations are truly prepared to carry the burden of world security with them. Many defence civilians seem to think that 'showing the flag' is clever when we send troops to Iraq at a time when the United States is desperate for assistance, and we decide that we will support the war rhetorically, so that we will send our troops there but not fight. Then of course many of the same people point out how we are 'punching above our weight' in an appalling show of insensitivity.

Ignorant people think that the United States does not need its allies and that it has infinite military strength. It did not then, and after 16 years of one or two wars, eight years of President Obama and congressional sequestration, the United States needs its allies like it has never needed them before. And Australia needs to have a clear-eyed view of what it contributes to the alliance.

My favourite lesson from Iraq was about allies, and it was that it took the coalition eight years to win a war that in my judgement (and in retrospect) we should have won in two years. Why? Because the allies, like Australia, refused to help effectively. Twenty-eight countries were present in Iraq when I was there, yet one, or maybe two at times, were doing all the fighting.

By way of conclusion, I came up with a number of generalised lessons put as simply as possible, as follows:

- Counterinsurgencies are not quick, cheap or easy. But they are winnable.
- Get serious or get out.
- Security forces are not the only answer, but they are normally the first answer.
- The amount of strategic benefit derived from a 'niche' or 'token' deployment is in direct proportion to its value to an ally.
- You will never 'do strategy' if you cannot balance the objective with the costs (mainly time and casualties).
- Close combat is so ugly that everyone is looking for alternatives—except the modern insurgent.
- A comprehensive inter-agency approach is not just a set of words; it is real resources (time, money, lives, reputation).
- 'End-states' (i.e. the conditions to be achieved at conclusion of the operation) specified before the start of a war are an interesting academic exercise.
- It is much harder to get out of a war than to decide to get into a war in the first place.
- Avoid simple solutions—they are likely to be wrong.
- Avoid the four standard errors:
  1. allocating insufficient troops initially
  2. insisting that reconstruction start before there is security
  3. failing to provide even the non-military resources necessary
  4. stretching the involvement beyond the limits of your home nation's resolve.

These are the lessons about winning wars that embeds can provide.