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Eric Egland

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Opinion - The Weekly Standard



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Washington (The Daily Standard) - IN THIS POLITICAL season, the debate about

Iraq has become almost completely backward looking. It has degenerated into finger pointing and partisan sniping--stuck between a false choice of "cut and run" versus "more of the same."

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Failure in Iraq is not an option, because it would spell disaster for U.S. national security and foreign policy credibility, not to mention military morale. Our mission in Iraq continues to move forward, and U.S. forces have successfully defeated the insurgents in several areas, yet the enemy has proven resilient and effective. Thus, we must succeed in Iraq by changing the status quo.

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The plans for victory so far have fallen short. They have come, top-down, from the

Pentagon or the palaces-turned-coalition headquarters in Baghdad. Now, American leaders, especially the nominee for secretary of defense, should consider a bottom-up plan to win that taps the collective grass-roots wisdom of successful battlefield innovators. In particular, there are six course corrections that can be taken almost immediately.

1. Encourage innovation by emphasizing small-scale technological solutions and rejecting peacetime bureaucracy.

The White House, Congress, and the Pentagon earn commendations for their commitment to winning in Iraq. Steadfast leadership, generous supplemental spending, and a streamlined acquisition process have resulted in the rapid fielding, on a massive scale, of critical defensive equipment such as body and vehicle armor, as well as jammers to impede the enemy's use of remote-detonated IEDs.

While these measures have helped us defensively, a more entrepreneurial approach is needed to field capabilities that enable offensive success against an adaptive enemy. Deploying unit commanders, most of whom have already served at least one tour in Iraq, must have direct input into how supplemental funds are invested in new technologies. Technology providers should conduct road shows to earn at least some funding approval and priority from ground commanders.

In Washington, there remains too much focus on massive technological efforts that cost hundreds of millions of dollars and take years to develop, test, and field. Meanwhile, low-cost programs like remote handheld cameras, biometrically-capable, Wi-Fi enabled PDAs, and tethered blimps with mounted cameras are put on the back burner. To inspect suspicious objects that could be roadside bombs, troops have resorted to spending their own money to buy remote-controlled cars with jerry-rigged mounted cameras because the thousands of remotely controlled robots in Iraq are held by specialized bomb disposal units.

Without such an option, they are told to "guard" possible IEDs until the heavily tasked bomb disposal experts can arrive, often hours later. This creates a situation where our troops lack needed gear and are exposed, on the

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defensive, at a time and place of the enemy's choosing. U.S. troops should no longer be required to stand guard over enemy weapons, and they should be empowered to rapidly acquire the tools they need to do their job without exposing themselves unnecessarily.

We must also eliminate the peacetime bureaucratic hurdles that keep useful innovations from getting fielded to help our troops. In early 2005, the military demonstrated a peacetime bureaucratic mentality by placing a 'safety hold' on an urgent request from Iraq for thousands of powerful handheld lasers. Field commanders wanted to broaden the success achieved by a few units that employed the lasers to alert local drivers of upcoming checkpoints and approaching patrols. In those areas, the measure was dramatically reducing 'escalation of force' incidents, where troops are forced to open fire, assuming non-compliant vehicles to be car bombs. Yet, the lasers never came because bureaucrats declared they were not 'eye safe'--as if the alternative, a .50 caliber slug, were. The deaths of many innocent Iraqis caused by these incidents, while legally justifiable, scar our troops emotionally, weaken support for the new government, and fuel the insurgency.

2. Improve pre-deployment training realism and abandon Cold War-era checklists.

When troops were first preparing to deploy to Iraq, they followed the same checklists that had been used in the Cold War and [Gulf War](#) that focused on the conventional military's core mission: "high-intensity conflict." Once the invasion was successful, though, the threat facing our troops changed as the insurgency started using ambush tactics, but the training and preparation that our troops receive has not kept pace.

"Train how we fight" is a mantra in the military, and for good reason. Training intensity and realism is the number one predictor for combat success, especially when facing a thinking, adaptive enemy who observes our patterns and exploits perceived vulnerabilities.

There is another training mantra, however, that ends up inviting attacks from such an enemy because it creates predictability: "We don't train to time, we train to standard." Translation: "No matter how long it takes, soldier, you will perform this task exactly how we trained you until it becomes second nature." Ask a soldier returning from combat in Iraq which mantra best describes their pre-deployment training experience and the latter is chosen overwhelmingly.

While repetition is a useful approach for maintaining a vehicle or a rifle, it is the wrong approach for training troops how to maneuver when on the roads of Iraq. Repetition means the more we train, the more predictable we become, and the easier it is for the enemy to exploit. The enemy exploits how we maneuver on the roads and react to roadside bombs, templating our previous reactions to set up follow-on attacks that create significant casualties because responding troops are often out of their vehicles and more vulnerable to a blast or small arms fire.

According to one soldier in Iraq, his unit spent days going over how to clear a foxhole, something many had already trained to do numerous times in their careers. The problem is that the enemy we face in Iraq is not entrenched in foxholes, but moves fluidly and blends into the civilian population. While clearing a foxhole is an important capability, he acknowledged, "We probably would have been better off taking that time to work on IEDs."

Training requirements for deploying units should be stripped and rebuilt with a focus on the current threat in Iraq and with significant input from the deploying units themselves.

3. Allow local commanders to buy what they need and nationalize the war effort by connecting the American public with the troops and their mission.

The troops need more support, from both the military and the American people, and the ground commanders must be empowered to lead our national effort to support them. The localized insurgency, coupled with an adaptive, resilient enemy means the troops on the ground best understand how to win. Our support should fulfill their stated needs, not what Congress, the Pentagon--or even the generals in Baghdad--think they ought to need.

We need to expand "commander discretionary funds" to give each battalion commander a large budget, on the order of \$3 million, to spend as they see fit both before they deploy and while in country, with appropriate accountability. This would allow commanders to take action that will help the mission, but which bureaucratic practices currently prevent. For example, they could buy video cameras and phones to give to locals so that they can film and report insurgent activity; or hire military-aged males to clean roads and dig trenches that improve security while providing jobs to men who would otherwise be recruited as insurgents. It would also allow ground forces to reward a neighborhood chief with a few electric generators for his support of our mission, or to hand a \$20 bill to a local who identifies a bomb that could have killed several soldiers.

Similar general staff policies sound effective, but fail in practice. For example, there is a "small rewards program" (SRP) in Iraq that allows cash incentives for supportive locals. The problem is that the units have not been trusted to handle the cash themselves, so a unit that wants to reward a helpful local has been required to give a coupon redeemable at the front gate of the nearest American base.

This "reward coupon" is of little value to Iraqis, so they lack incentive to cooperate. Locals often lack transportation and justifiably fear that the enemy will observe them outside the base and retaliate against them and their families. Plus, the SRP money requires detailed paperwork from the units, and is reimbursed only after a one-month delay.

So, neither the troops nor the locals like or use the SRP. Still, many enlisted soldiers--whose families are strapped for cash back home--use their own money to provide small rewards because the technique, when properly executed, is highly effective.

One innovative battalion commander knew the value of small on-the-spot cash rewards, which provide a powerful, immediate incentive for locals to turn in insurgents and their weapons. So he started using "commander discretionary funds," a more readily accessible but still limited account, to give cash rewards. He then reimbursed the account when the SRP money finally arrived.

In essence, a bureaucratic mindset has undermined mission success. The Pentagon trusts the troops with deadly weapons and million dollar vehicles, but not a few dollars in their pockets. This forced one of the best battalion commanders in Iraq to "cook the books" and lie to his superiors in order to simply achieve what the rewards program claimed to do in the first place.

Still, not everything can be done by the military alone. A major problem with Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan as well, is that the American people, while supporting the troops with prayers and bumper stickers, do not feel connected to the effort because they do not know what they can do to help. They must be given more opportunities to directly support the troops on the ground--as the unmatched generosity of the American people remains a highly underutilized resource in this conflict.

We need to establish sister city relationships between battalions that are preparing to deploy or are already in Iraq and American cities--not just the towns around military bases. The Pentagon should expand on the success of existing grass-roots organizations such as AnySoldier.com and SoldiersAngels.org that allow private citizens and organizations to send the troops the items they need, whether for themselves or for the Iraqi people.

Just as an engaged couple sets up a wedding registry for loved ones to buy them what they need, so the relationship should be between deployed units and Americans back home, using places like Wal-Mart, Ebay, Radio Shack and Target. Added elements that could make the program even more effective could be: competition between cities to see who can marshal the most support per capita, broadcasting the results, and awarding tangible recognition for cities that exceed certain thresholds.

A group of spouses of deployed Minnesota National Guard soldiers set up a program to make and ship dolls to Iraq so the unit could give them to the Iraqi girls in the neighborhoods they patrolled. One soldier explained, "We tried candy and toys, but found that dolls are the only thing that the Iraqi boys won't steal from the Iraqi girls." As part of a broader effort to build relationships with locals, this unit was able to tap civilian resources and support and saw a significant decrease in insurgent activity in their area as a result.

Truly supporting the warfighter means more than lip service. It requires listening to the needs of the ground units, then doing everything possible--as a nation--to deliver.

4. Strengthen intelligence sharing between tactical and national levels, and develop a national insurgent database.

We must have better intelligence on the enemy, especially human intelligence. Our existing intelligence technologies were designed during the Cold War to spy on conventional armies that use bases, have tanks and aircraft, and communicate on identifiable radio frequencies. In Iraq, however, the enemy lives in civilian neighborhoods, drives civilian cars, uses weapons composed of readily available materials, and communicates via civilian mobile phones and the internet.

In a Cold War scenario, the U.S. intelligence community would collect intelligence about enemy activity that would subsequently filter "down" to the maneuver units. Today, however, the case is often reversed. Ground units get the first information about an enemy, often by going on a raid and learning about the individual's ties to other insurgents. As that intelligence is sent "up," the national organizations focus collection efforts accordingly.

There are success stories in Iraq where units have provided tactical intelligence to a national organization, then national came back with amplified intelligence that led the unit in a successful operation against more insurgents. This model can and should be applied more broadly.

There have also been instances of tremendous successes in cooperation between three critical components of the overall effort: national intelligence organizations; the special operators who are present in small numbers but receive sensitive, actionable intelligence; and the conventional forces who have the manpower to act on the intelligence. This type of cooperation enables units to achieve significant operational success without compromising some of our most sensitive intelligence programs.

Still, American forces lack a national insurgency database to enable the pattern analysis that is a critical element of fighting an insurgency. While there have been numerous efforts to improve data collection, there remains no central database for information about enemy activity and attack patterns. Again, multiple reporting chains, proprietary databases, and top down solutions hinder our ability to understand our enemy.

Compounding the problem of not having a complete picture of enemy activity patterns is that many tactical units simply use their own programs and templates that are often not compatible with neighboring units or the data at the palaces in Baghdad. While those programs and templates often end up being useful for that unit, the data is often lost once they depart Iraq, leaving the replacement unit to come up with its own standard operating procedures for storing intelligence--without the benefit of databased enemy knowledge from their predecessors. Furthermore, many key tactical details of most attacks are not recorded, and a large share of IED attacks that cause no damage or injury are not reported at all because the troops see it as an administrative hassle rather than a pattern analysis opportunity.

Along with hiring the information pros at Oracle, Google and Microsoft, we can model the databases used by some

fire departments. One solution is to use a geo-referenced graphical data input interface that is imagery-based with pop-up and drop-down menus to allow the troops to quickly record the critical tactical details that facilitate meaningful pattern analysis. Once data input is made quick and accessible for the troops, commanders must explain the need to record data on enemy attacks, and hold units accountable for doing so.

5. Take the offensive by reducing predictable patterns on the ground while conducting operations that hunt, rather than chase, the enemy.

U.S. forces need to reduce the predictability of their movements. To do this, generals in Baghdad should stop requiring units to report the number of patrols conducted, and instead focus on effective offensive operations. The current emphasis on gauging unit effectiveness by the quantity of patrols conducted keeps the troops too busy to conduct quality operations that offensively hunt the enemy.

Accordingly, the generals should forbid a common practice that needlessly endangers our troops. "Presence patrols" are a legacy from Bosnia, where many of today's lieutenant colonel battalion commanders conducted peacekeeping operations as junior officers. Presence patrols involve troops simply driving around to show a military presence that ostensibly deters one side from attacking another.

The problem is that Bosnia is not Iraq, where the enemy just wants to attack U.S. forces, so we end up needlessly giving them opportunities to do so. While some units have stopped using the phrase "presence patrol," the emphasis on quantity of patrols still results in U.S. forces going out on the roads without a meaningful offensive purpose in mind.

Also, our most vulnerable movement patterns are the product of administrative convenience rather than strategic considerations. For example, enemy attacks throughout Iraq remain concentrated along the seams of the operational boundaries shared by different U.S. units.

A watchful enemy quickly determines where units operate and where they turn around on a given stretch of road. They then exploit the seams, knowing that it is easier to conduct attacks in an area where a unit does not regularly operate.

Similarly, they can identify which units shoot back when engaged and which ones try to speed away, focusing efforts on the latter. In any given area, U.S. forces that are transiting are consistently attacked at a much higher rate than the combat units responsible for the area. The enemy learns that transiting units are less familiar with the terrain and thus less likely to shoot back--or hunt the enemy down tomorrow to settle the score.

Often, the enemy enjoys freedom of action on roads representing the boundaries between U.S. units. No one feels responsible for the deadly attacks taking place on the roads because they area busy patrolling nearby areas, and no one is held accountable for allowing the enemy to attack. One combat battalion operations officer was visited by an advisor who noticed that U.S. units transiting the area, such as military police, bomb disposal teams, and logistics movements, were suffering enormously high casualties, while his unit had hardly been touched, even though they were operating in the general area every day.

"Well, the guys getting hit are usually combat support guys who have bad tactics," he explained. When queried as to what specific tactics his own unit uses to achieve such success, he admitted, "Well, we don't go out on that part of the road." Why not? "Because it's dangerous," he replied.

A fundamental tenant of warfare is that someone should be responsible for any key terrain feature, such as a ridgeline, river, or road. Almost all U.S. casualties in Iraq occur on one key terrain feature: the roads. So the generals in Baghdad must put specific units in charge of the roads and then let the units themselves develop appropriate plans for success.

We must also seize the "smart offensive" on the ground. The enemy knows that the U.S. excels at traditional offensive maneuvers initiated by clear commands, such as "take Haditha," so the enemy hides when this happens, waiting instead to attack our patrols and convoys later. Amazingly, the attacks from roadside bombs, which have long accounted for the vast majority of coalition casualties, occur not only in the same areas, but often in the same exact spot, with the hole from one blast being re-used to hold a larger and more deadly bomb the next time.

Instead of being told to offer themselves up as targets on "presence patrols," the troops should be empowered to adopt a "hunting" mindset that seeks to identify enemy patterns and create conditions that draw the enemy into our traps.

U.S. forces that adopt the hunting mindset in Iraq tend to do well against the enemy. One of the first units to successfully engage the roadside bomb threat in their area of operations was a National Guard unit from a state in the Deep South. They were new to Iraq but took it personally that the enemy was conducting so many deadly attacks against passing U.S. forces in the area for which they were now responsible.

They used intelligence showing the enemy attack patterns and figured out when and where the enemy was most like to attack next. One night they set up ambush positions in the area. Many hours later, they patiently watched through gun sights as the enemy prepared the attack site and emplaced several explosive charges. Just as the enemy team had finished its emplacement work, they engaged successfully.

When U.S. explosives experts arrived later and detonated the charge, it took out a twenty-foot section of road--a planned attack that likely would have killed several U.S. soldiers had their comrades not decided to take the fight to an elusive enemy. They subsequently managed to engage another insurgent team, and their success stopped not only those insurgents, but drove down insurgent activity in their entire area of operations. As one of them later said, "It's just like huntin' deer."

..... This type of offensive success has been achieved by other tactical units as well, and consistently drives down

enemy activity in the affected area. But until similar offensive solutions are carried out as part of a broad plan, overall attacks will continue to increase as the enemy simply shifts operations to nearby areas--a phenomenon sarcastically referred to as "whack-a-mole." If neighboring units were led to conduct such operations on a broad scale, however, the result would likely be analogous to playing whack-a-mole as a team, with one mallet per mole.

6. Accept the realities of warfare in the media age by decentralizing the sharing of information with both the Iraqi and the American public.

The government and military must better communicate its message--to both Iraqis and the American public. The hurdles posed by political correctness and self-imposed bureaucratic constraints must be cleared in order to balance the insurgents' current control of the airwaves. Their "flaming car bomb-a-day" television propaganda campaign has dominated the media debate since late 2004, negating or neutralizing any reports of positive news.

The lack of reporting on the incredible progress being made in Iraq every day is the media equivalent of trees falling in the forest but no one hearing them. In today's media environment, progress only counts when it is filmed and reported.

Also, it is clear that "good news" must come directly from the units on the ground or the Iraqis themselves. Anything coming from higher headquarters or the Pentagon is dismissed, fairly or unfairly, as propaganda. Recent reports that the Pentagon is building its public relations efforts, including "message development" teams and "surrogate" spokesmen, demonstrate an awareness of the problem. More Pentagon talking heads, however, will have less impact on broadcasting a more balanced message than authentic reporting from the troops.

Some units have embraced the internet to communicate their message, even going so far as to promote soldiers blogging on a personal website to the unofficial position of "unit blogger." In one case, this not only helped unit morale by keeping friends and family back home better informed, but it also improved local media coverage around that unit's home base because there was more complete coverage of progress and setbacks, rather than just the "flaming car bomb-a-day."

Thus, the Pentagon should abandon its reflexive instinct toward control of information that has led it to seek to ban personal cameras and blogs. Instead, a "unit blogger" approach should be applied across Iraq, with appropriate guidance and training to preserve operational security. Tactical units should each have two members who are trained in public relations and equipped with high-quality cameras and laptops with video editing software, and offered incentives and rewards for effective reporting. They should record unit activities in writing and video, and share them with the American people via sites modeled on wildly successful pro-military websites, such as Blackfive.net and MoveAmericaForward.org.

Also, the embed process that helps journalists visit ground units must be streamlined. The general staff in Baghdad should measure the success of its public affairs effort by how many journo get out on the ground, in contrast to recent reports of the staff making life difficult for proven combat communicators like Michael Yon to embed with units. Yon, a former special operator, does so much to report an authoritative, balanced perspective from Iraq that the generals should instead assign him his own helicopter, and perhaps a limo.

Along with sharing more information with the American and Iraqi public, U.S. forces should also be empowered to share more information directly with locals in Iraq. The messages U.S. forces often share, however, are those that have been approved for nationwide dissemination by staffers in Baghdad and are therefore vague and generic.

Surprisingly, units are not permitted to create and distribute their own flyers without approval from the generals in Baghdad, which is a non-starter, because they are understandably concerned that troops would distribute inappropriate flyers that would end up on the news and create a public relations nightmare.

But, instead of solving that by banning the flyers, more effective leadership would give guidelines and provide samples of acceptable flyers. In short, empower the units to develop and share a message that works in their neighborhoods. Better communication between tactical units and Iraqi locals will help to build on the existing success that has led to significant growth in the quantity of intelligence tips received per month from Iraqi locals, from about 400 in early 2005 to over 4,000 in 2006, according to the Brookings Institution's Iraq Index.

While the U.S. stutters and stammers with the Iraqi and American people, the enemy waxes eloquent, masterfully sharing its message to the people of Iraq and the rest of the world. Specifically, the enemy maximizes the exploitation of their attacks for purposes of propaganda and recruitment.

We must improve our ability to get our visual message out, while contesting the enemy's current domination of the visual information environment. Recently, the Minnesota National Guard offered a striking example with their powerful visual rebuttal of a US senator's slander of the troops.

THE U.S. MUST win in Iraq. This can be achieved sooner by making these six key course corrections. The top U.S. Army general recently announced plans to have the same number of troops in Iraq until at least 2010, so there is time to change regardless of what happens in the next congress, and change is urgently needed as public figures show October was the deadliest month for U.S. troops in Iraq.

Even when the U.S. draws down its forces in Iraq, these steps will be crucial to improving U.S. conduct in future counter-insurgency efforts as potential adversaries seek to emulate insurgent successes in Iraq. Examining the many unstable parts of the world today, coupled with the current dominance of the U.S. military in large-scale conventional conflicts, it seems likely that future operations over the next two decades will largely resemble what we face in Iraq today. This makes it all the more important that we consider a grass-roots solution and make key course corrections now, so America can succeed in Iraq and start to bring the troops home.

Eric Egland is a major in the military reserve and has served on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan. The

recommendations in this article were distilled from a broad array of combat innovators with whom he worked while patrolling with combat units, field testing new technology, designing new training scenarios, and briefing generals in Baghdad and Washington. He previously served in a counter-terrorism role.

Author's Note: Please forward this to someone who has been on the ground in Iraq or Afghanistan. Encourage them to offer a supporting anecdote, contrary view, or a better idea, so this can become the best plan possible. In the spirit of finding grass roots solutions to major challenges, send comments to SixStepsInIraq@hotmail.com.

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