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Advice From An Ally: Get Past The Warrior Ethos

By Nigel Aylwin-Foster

Last week, Post military correspondent Thomas E. Ricks reported on a sharp, provocative critique of the U.S. Army's performance in Iraq written last year by a senior British military officer, Army Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster, who has extensive counterterrorism experience and has served in Iraq. Aylwin-Foster's paper was published by a U.S. Army journal, Military Review. The Army chief of staff told colleagues last week that he plans to send it to every general in the Army. Here are edited excerpts:

Few could fail to be impressed by the speed and style of the U.S.-dominated coalition victory over Saddam's forces in spring 2003. At the time, it appeared, to skeptics and supporters alike, that the most ambitious military action in the post-Cold War era had paid off, and there was an air of heady expectation of things to come.

In contrast, two years later, notwithstanding ostensible campaign successes such as the elections of January 2005, Iraq is in the grip of a vicious and tenacious insurgency. Few would suggest Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) has followed the path intended by President Bush when he committed U.S. forces.

There can be few acts more galling than a soldier from one country publicly assessing the performance of those from another. However, this is not an arrogant exercise in national comparisons: There is no other Army in the world that could even have attempted such a venture. It is, rather, an attempt to understand the apparently paradoxical currents of strength and weakness witnessed at close hand over the course of a year. Ultimately, the intent is to be helpful to an institution I greatly respect.

My own experience, serving at the heart of a U.S. dominated command within the coalition from December 2003 to November 2004, suggests something of an enigma, hence the spur to study the subject further. My overriding impression was of an Army imbued with an unparalleled sense of patriotism, duty, passion, commitment and determination, with plenty of talent, and in no way lacking in humanity or compassion. Yet it seemed weighed down by bureaucracy, a stiflingly hierarchical outlook, a pre-disposition to offensive operations and a sense that duty required all issues to be confronted head-on. Many personnel seemed to struggle to understand the nuances of the OIF Phase 4 [stabilization] environment. Moreover, whilst they were almost unfailingly courteous and considerate, at times their cultural insensitivity, almost certainly inadvertent, arguably amounted to institutional racism.

U.S. Army personnel, like their colleagues in the other U.S. services, had a strong sense of moral authority. They fervently believed in the mission's underlying purpose, the delivery of democracy to Iraq, whereas other nations' forces tended to be more ambivalent about why they

were there. This was at once a strength and hindrance to progress. It bolstered U.S. will to continue in the face of setbacks. But it also encouraged the erroneous assumption that given the justness of the cause, actions that occurred in its name would be understood and accepted by the population, even if mistakes and civilian fatalities occurred in the implementation.

This sense of moral righteousness combined with an emotivity that was rarely far from the surface, and *in extremis* manifested as deep indignation or outrage that could serve to distort collective military judgment. The most striking example during this period occurred in April 2004 when insurgents captured and mutilated four U.S. contractors in Fallujah. In classic insurgency doctrine, this act was almost certainly a come-on, designed to invoke a disproportionate response, thereby further polarizing the situation and driving a wedge between the domestic population and the coalition forces. It succeeded.

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U.S. forces put relatively little emphasis on HUMINT [human intelligence], concentrating instead on using technological assets to gather intelligence, the significance being that the latter can serve to keep the troops separated from the local population. This assists force protection, in the short term, particularly in an environment where suicide bombers are the major threat, but it equally helps to encourage the local sentiment that the troops are a distant, impersonal occupying force that has no interest in the population.

The U.S. Army's laudable and emphatic "can-do" approach to operations paradoxically encouraged another trait, which has been described elsewhere as damaging optimism. Self-belief and resilient optimism are recognized necessities for successful command, and all professional forces strive for a strong can-do ethos. However, it is unhelpful if it discourages junior commanders from reporting unwelcome news up the chain of command. The U.S. Army during this period of OIF exemplified both sides of this coin.

The most straightforward reason why the Army struggled in OIF Phase 4 to achieve the effectiveness demonstrated in the preceding combat phase was that it was, by design, relatively ill-prepared for it. The Army's focus has been conventional warfighting, and its branches into COIN [counterinsurgency] and S&R [stabilization and reconstruction] have been regarded as a diversion, to be undertaken reluctantly, and preferably by Special Operations Forces and other specialists, many of whom are in the Army reserves.

The U.S. Army published an interim field manual on COIN only recently, in response to events in Iraq, but too late to assist those who needed to adapt so swiftly in 2003. Furthermore, COIN only merits the status of an elective subject at West Point and other officer training establishments, and is not widely studied in any of these: There is little incentive to do so.

In short, the U.S. Army has developed over time a singular focus on conventional warfare, of a particularly swift and violent style, which left it ill-suited to the kind of operation it encountered as soon as conventional warfighting ceased to be the primary focus in OIF.

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Armies reflect the culture of the civil society from which they are drawn. According to [retired Army Col. Don] Snider [a West Point senior lecturer], the Army is characterized, like U.S. domestic society, by an aspiration to achieve quick results. This in turn engenders a command and planning climate that promotes those solutions that appear to favor quick results. In conventional warfighting situations this is likely to be advantageous, but in other operations it often tends to prolong the situation, ironically, as the quick solution turns out to be the wrong one. In COIN terms the most obvious example is the predilection for wide-ranging kinetic options (sweep, search and destroy) in preference to the longer term hearts and minds work and intelligence led operations.

Furthermore, a predilection with technology arguably encourages the search for the quick, convenient solution, often at the expense of the less obvious, but ultimately more enduring one.

The Army's "Warrior Ethos" is also illuminating in this respect. It was introduced in 2001. At its core is the Soldier's Creed. Note that it enjoins the soldier to have just the one type of interaction with his enemy -- "to engage and *destroy* him": not *defeat*, which could permit a number of other politically attuned options, but destroy. It is very decidedly a war-fighting creed, which has no doubt served well to promote the much sought conventional warfighting ethos, but cannot be helping soldiers to understand that on many occasions in unconventional situations they have to be soldiers, not warriors.

As important, the Army needs to learn to see itself as others do, particularly its actual or potential opponents and their supporters. They are the ones who need to be persuaded to succumb, because the alternative approach is to kill or capture them all, and that hardly seems practicable, even for the most powerful Army in the world.