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## Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom

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**DEVELOPING ADAPTIVE LEADERS:  
THE CRUCIBLE EXPERIENCE OF OPERATION IRAQI  
FREEDOM**

**Leonard Wong**

**July 2004**

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## FOREWORD

The euphoria over the exceptionally successful combat operations of the Iraqi War has subsided as Operation IRAQI FREEDOM shifted to the long, hard tasks of nation-building and counterinsurgency. By all accounts, the process of assisting Iraq in becoming a secure, stable democracy has become much more complicated than originally believed. Yet within the complex environment of postwar Iraq, Dr. Leonard Wong argues that junior officers are being developed into creative, innovative, and independent leaders. He attributes this unique leader development opportunity to the ambiguous, complex, and unpredictable environment of postwar Iraq.

The implication of so many of the Army's junior officers being developed into adaptive leaders is significant. For several years, the leadership literature in both the military and civilian arenas has been replete with calls for adaptable and innovative leaders. The U.S. Army is transforming as its lowest officer ranks are filled with leaders who have learned to deal with ambiguity, change, and complexity. It is now the Army's responsibility to leverage this newly developed cohort and continue to develop the confidence and creativity of tomorrow's senior leaders.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
Director  
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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

LEONARD WONG served in the Army for over 20 years, including teaching leadership at West Point, serving as an analyst in the Office of the Chief of Staff of the Army, and in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, and serving as the Director of the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis. His current research includes leadership, professionalism and innovation in the military. He is a Professional Engineer and holds a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy, and an M.S. and Ph.D. in Business Administration from Texas Tech University.

## SUMMARY

This monograph examines the Operation IRAQI FREEDOM environment and concludes that the complexity, unpredictability, and ambiguity of postwar Iraq is producing a cohort of innovative, confident, and adaptable junior officers. Lieutenants and captains are learning to make decisions in chaotic conditions and to be mentally agile in executing counterinsurgency and nation-building operations simultaneously. As a result, the Army will soon have a cohort of company grade officers who are accustomed to operating independently, taking the initiative, and adapting to changes. The author warns that the Army must now acknowledge and encourage this newly developed adaptability in our junior officers or risk stifling the innovation critically needed in the Army's future leaders.



# DEVELOPING ADAPTIVE LEADERS: THE CRUCIBLE EXPERIENCE OF OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

Can you find the opportunity within the chaos? Because you can't organize the chaos of the battlefield.<sup>1</sup>

General Peter J. Schoomaker  
Chief of Staff of the Army

Leadership has and always will be associated with the U.S. Army. Cadets continue to memorize that “the commander is responsible for everything the unit does or fails to do”<sup>2</sup> and names such as Lee, Patton, MacArthur, and Marshall still evoke images of larger than life leaders in service to the Nation. The preeminence of leadership is reinforced in Army guiding documents with statements such as “We are about leadership; it is our stock in trade, and it is what makes us different,”<sup>3</sup> and “Leadership is the lifeblood of The Army.”<sup>4</sup>

A few years ago, a new emphasis began to emerge concerning the leadership and leaders required in the *future* Army. It began in 2001 with the Army Training and Leader Development Panel (Officer) report, concluding after a sweeping study of the officer corps that future leaders needed to be self-aware and *adaptable*.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the 2001 *Objective Force White Paper* looked into the future and contended that tomorrow's security environment will require leaders “changing from plan-centric to intent-centric operations; changing from physical rehearsals to virtual ones; and changing from static command posts to situational awareness on the move. They will be *adaptive* and self-aware—able to master transitions in the diversity of 21st century military operations.”<sup>6</sup> More recently, the current senior Army leadership's vision of the future Army calls for “agile and *adaptive* leaders able to conduct simultaneous, distributed, and continuous operations.”<sup>7</sup> While the U.S. Army historically has valued the ingenuity and creativity of its leaders, the ambiguous and decentralized combat environment of the 21st century has made *adaptive* leaders an especially valuable resource.

The criticality of adaptability has also emerged as a theme in the civilian leadership literature. Warren Bennis, a prominent



leadership researcher, argued that effective leaders tend to have experienced at least one intense, transformational experience—what he calls a *crucible experience*. A crucible experience is “both an opportunity and a test. It is a defining moment that unleashes abilities, forces crucial choices, and sharpens focus. It teaches a person who he or she is.”<sup>8</sup> According to Bennis, the critical quality of a leader that determines how that leader will fare in a crucible experience is *adaptive capacity*. Adaptive capacity allows leaders to respond quickly and intelligently to constant change. It is the ability to identify and seize opportunities. It allows leaders to act and then evaluate results instead of attempting to collect and analyze all the data before acting.<sup>9</sup> Bennis describes the role of adaptive capacity in a crucible experience,

People with ample adaptive capacity may struggle in the crucibles they encounter, but they don't become stuck in or defined by them. They learn important lessons, including new skills that allow them to move on to new levels of achievement and new levels of learning. This ongoing process of challenge, adaptation, and learning prepares the individual for the next crucible, where the process is repeated. Whenever significant new problems are encountered and dealt with adaptively, new levels of competence are achieved, better preparing the individual for the next challenge<sup>10</sup>

Despite the Army's tendency to lean towards the gravitational pull of its bureaucratic nature, many of today's junior officers—indeed a large majority—are being given opportunities to be innovative, adaptive, and mentally agile. The foundation of this unique leader development transformation rests on the serendipitous crucible experience of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF)—more specifically, postwar Iraq. Although there are many criticisms of postwar Iraq as being avoidable,<sup>11</sup> undesirable,<sup>12</sup> and unwinnable,<sup>13</sup> it nevertheless is producing a cohort of junior leaders who are acquiring adaptive capacity critical to the future Army.

The following monograph describes how the environment of OIF is allowing—and compelling—junior officers to develop adaptive capacity. In the crucible of OIF, captains and lieutenants are becoming more creative, innovative, and confident as they learn to deal with the complexities, unpredictability, and uncertainties

of counterinsurgency and nation-building in postwar Iraq. This study examines the leadership development of junior officers in OIF through their words and perspectives. The study relies heavily on observations collected from junior Army leaders deployed to Iraq in March of 2004—specifically over 50 structured interviews conducted with junior combat arms officers in the 1st Armored Division, 1st Cavalry Division, 2nd Infantry Division, and the 82nd Airborne Division in locations throughout Iraq. The interview sessions were conducted in the field environment, followed an interview protocol, were taped, and subsequently were transcribed.<sup>14</sup>

The study reveals that our junior officers are developing adaptability—a competency that the Army has recognized as vital to future warfare, yet difficult to develop in a nondeployed Army. By being confronted with complexity, unpredictability, and ambiguity, junior officers are learning to adapt, to innovate, and to operate with minimal guidance.

## DEALING WITH COMPLEXITY

Two things seemed pretty apparent to me. One was, that in order to be a [Mississippi River] pilot, a man has got to learn more than any one man ought to be allowed to know; and the other was, that he must learn it all over again in a different way every 24 hours.<sup>15</sup>

Mark Twain  
*Life on the Mississippi*

### Complex Roles.

Complexity for a junior leader in the garrison Army environment may consist of dealing with complicated personnel issues, logistics or maintenance, or preparing and participating in a culminating field exercise such as a CTC rotation. (CTC and many other acronyms used in this manuscript are explained in the Appendix.) In OIF, complexity for junior leaders comes from a much wider variety of sources. One significant source of complexity is the number and nature of roles that junior officers must fill in counterinsurgency and nation-building operations. When examining the roles required of our junior officers in OIF, the question is not *which* role, but *how*

*many?* One officer commented, “You are not just trying to learn one job, you are trying to learn several dozen jobs. Everything from being a politician to being a war commander. That is just an incredible amount of information for someone to carry around in their head.”

Because of the large-scale nation-building effort taking place in OIF, junior officers are being thrust into additional roles that would ordinarily be the realm of specialists or be resident in a higher echelon unit. Junior officers are finding themselves much more involved in activities other than leading their platoon or company in combat operations. A captain noted, “Junior officers are handling the embassy, PAO, and IO—missions that were mainly designated functional areas for others . . . People are wearing a lot of different hats that they thought they would never wear.” Another officer stated,

The complexity comes from some of the things that we did not have to deal with [in the past], like POO, FOO, claims officer, dealing with the IGOs, having CA teams attached, PSYOPS attached, dealing with interpreters, all of the new things—the new variables—that make it different, but different in a good way.

Unlike recent previous deployments where debates centered on whether combat arms soldiers could shift from being aggressive warriors to functioning as calming peacekeepers, OIF requires junior leaders to be warriors, peacekeepers, and nation-builders—simultaneously. A captain reflected on the concurrent roles that he performed as a junior officer in postwar Iraq,

It is complex because of the difference from full spectrum war—because at one moment I am planning three missions to do raids over here, and the next moment I am planning projects for my three areas here, and the next thing with the three NAC members—they have certain things they need help with. I am doing three different things on top of the regular company commander stuff.

Another company commander described his changing roles,

You go out and you talk to the people at the school or the clinic. You ask them, ‘What do you guys need? How can we improve your neighborhood—your living conditions?’ You get all that information and

the next thing you have is, 'Hey tonight you have a raid.' You push all that information to the side . . . I got to go and do this raid tonight and then I got two more days of patrols and QRF—so a week later you get back to this civil affairs thing.

In addition to the complexity caused by the multiple roles of junior officers in OIF, the previous comments also illustrate what several officers called “the faucet” or the necessity of adjusting to situations that could change from cold to hot and back to cold instantaneously. A lieutenant described it by saying,

You have to be flexible to what comes down. You could be doing a presence patrol . . . saying “Hi” to a kid and your vehicle is there a few hundred yards away getting mortared. Now you are talking to this little kid, and you hear on the radio that the rest of your platoon is over there getting mortared, and they want you to maneuver to try to catch the guy who just mortared. So you have to switch from one thing to another.

Another officer gave an example, “You got to deal with a little girl who wants a chem light and the very next minute might have to shoot somebody for trying to place an IED . . . It is such a switch.”

Many leaders spoke of the intricacies of leading troops in the sharply different worlds of fighting insurgents and maintaining good relationships with the local people. One platoon leader described the situation,

It is very difficult to keep 18-year-old guys, to take them and one second we are dodging bullets and trying to hide on the street corner and react because you got somebody in a window or a roof, and the next second you are knocking on the door, asking to search the house and you have to be polite. I think that is a very large leadership challenge here—keeping guys focused on that; making sure that they can calm back down after brief periods of excitement.

Because U.S. forces are largely consolidated on forward operating bases, junior officers commented on the “surreal” nature of shifting from the extreme danger in the streets to the relative comfort of the FOB. One lieutenant put it this way,

Leaving out the gates of the fire base, you can get in a fire fight one minute, or you can be on the scene of a VBIED—just horrid scenes, body

pieces everywhere. Ten minutes later, you travel back inside the FOB and you can be inside your room with a TV on, go take a shower, sit in your PT, sit on the couch. You know what I mean—it is odd.

In addition to the mental agility needed to take on additional duties or to shift roles constantly, many junior leaders in OIF described the need to adapt by functioning outside their combat specialty. Field artillerymen, engineers, and tankers spoke of operating as infantrymen as they conducted raids or cordon and searches. One engineer noted, “I don’t think that I am much of an engineer at all. I think I am an infantry guy with a lot more equipment.” A field artillery officer stated, “I definitely didn’t think that I would be clearing buildings as an artillery officer, or working with the CIA or Special Forces or anything like that. Never, never ever.” On the other hand, infantrymen spoke of functioning as engineers or civil affairs officers as they assumed responsibility for the infrastructure of a sector. An infantry lieutenant commented on his added responsibilities,

I am a combat infantryman. You want me to fire and maneuver; I can fire and maneuver—anywhere, in any terrain, anywhere you want to do it. Here, I have had to learn how sewage works. In my AO, I can brief you where all my pumps are, all my manholes, and where my sewage is broke.

Similar comments were heard from mechanized junior leaders learning to operate as light infantry. An armor officer spoke of his transition to light infantry tactics, “My mental tool guide is just not filled with how to employ dismounted soldiers. I know how to employ vehicles. I know how to maneuver vehicles. I am a mounted maneuver warfare guy. [But] I am trying to pick it up; I am adapting the best that I can.” Another tanker spoke of the hard adjustment from mechanized warfare,

It is way out of my lane, dealing with dismounted. Every time I screw up or do something that is bad, someone is like, “No. Stop that. Bad idea.” Hey, roger, okay, just tell me when I am messing up because I am “Death before dismount.” It is a totally new way of thinking.

With so many leaders operating out of their usual specialties, junior officers were asked if their OIF experience made them more proficient in their particular branch. Armor officers were asked if they were becoming better tankers, artillerymen were asked if they were becoming better artillerymen. Except for infantrymen, most officers responded that they were not gaining proficiency in their branch. Interestingly, most officers also added that, while they were not becoming better officers in their branch specialty, they were becoming better officers in general. As one armor officer stated,

Am I a better tanker? Probably not. My tank is not here. I have not been in a tank for 6 months . . . My specialization in armor is probably getting worse, but my general knowledge as an army officer is exponentially increasing every day because I am exposed to so much now . . . I feel I am much more well-rounded—not specialized as much—but much more well-rounded.

Another officer bluntly stated, “Better artilleryman? For coming here? Hell no. Absolutely not. I am a better *leader*.”

Junior leaders in postwar Iraq are learning to be adaptable and agile. They are taking on roles they never envisioned; they are learning to shift mental models rapidly. They are developing the leadership ability that the Army has been seeking for many years, yet has struggled to capture. While many deployed officers do not see the transformation they are undergoing in the crucible of OIF, some do. One field artillery lieutenant reflected,

It wasn’t exactly what I thought it would be because I pictured myself fighting—laying steel down, destroying stuff. But this is fine; this is what it is about. It is about being flexible. It is about being able to conduct any mission as a soldier first and a leader first—not worried about being an artilleryman first.

## **Cultural Complexity.**

While junior officers stationed in Korea or Germany often learn to deal with a different culture, many OIF leaders expressed surprise at how different the Iraqi culture that confronted them could be. One lieutenant stated, “ We are absolutely the newcomers to this

environment . . . It is so foreign to us. You couldn't pick a place in the world that would be more foreign to most Americans than Iraq."<sup>16</sup> Another officer added, "The complexity of their culture—just dealing with their culture—has been overwhelming. That is where I run into the biggest problems right now." One lieutenant spoke of learning about the Iraqi culture in school, but not truly understanding it,

The biggest thing that makes it complex here for me personally is the religious aspect of it and the Muslim world. I grew up learning about Shia and Sunnis in social studies class in junior high school, but I had no idea what these people were all about. To be here and learn about how they interact with each other and then in turn how they interact with the rest of the world—it was nothing I was prepared for.

Because junior officers are heavily involved in nation-building activities, they are interacting much more with the local populace than in other deployments such as Bosnia, Kosovo, or the MFO. As a result, the nuances of culture become more noticeable. Officers reported having to learn how not to offend Iraqis with mannerisms inadvertently. Others noted that there were Iraqi idiosyncrasies that had to be learned. One officer commented, "People here like to get really close to you when they talk. That bothers the hell out of me. It is a good thing to learn that they are not trying to sneak up on you or grab you or anything. They just want to talk; they are being friendly."

Of course, junior officers in past deployments and even tourists on vacations have had to deal with the complexities of foreign cultures. OIF is unique, however, in that a large number of junior officers are dealing with cultural intricacies that have potential strategic implications. As one captain recounted,

I was never given classes on how to sit down with a sheik that 2 days before I had seen his face on CNN, and now all of a sudden I am talking to this guy face-to-face. He is providing food for myself and soldiers out in the trucks that are providing security for us while we are having our meeting in this guy's house . . . He is giving me the traditional dishdasha and the entire outfit of a sheik because he claims that I am a new sheik in town so I must be dressed as one. I don't know if he is trying to gain favor with me because he wants something . . . or is it something good or something bad. It is just something you are going to have to learn on the job and how to deal with.

Another lieutenant gave an example of how a seemingly simple misunderstanding of cultural hand gestures could have led to strategic consequences. “Well, I did this [👉] to the Minister of [a governmental branch] to say, “Wait,” and he flipped out because you are suppose to cup your hand like this [👐] and say “Hold on.” You do this [👉] to dogs, I think . . . I didn’t really understand.”

The result of the immersion of such a large cohort of junior officers into a foreign culture is an emerging confidence that they can operate effectively in unfamiliar conditions. Day-to-day interaction with Iraqis produces competence in understanding a Middle Eastern culture, but more importantly, company grade leaders are realizing that their horizons are being broadened. One officer reflected upon the leadership development value of the OIF cultural environment,

The things that I have experienced here, beyond the soldier environment, just going around and really experiencing the Middle East, you know, another part of the world and just being in a new environment, interacting with the interpreters, I think that is where the real experience comes in.

## **Complex Warfare.**

While war is never simple, many junior officers believed that counterinsurgency operations were proving to be more complicated than the high-intensity battles they had trained for in the past. Many officers yearned for the simplicity of coordinating with units on their right and left, and destroying everything in the sector ahead. One lieutenant spoke of the experiences of high-intensity training at a CTC and then arriving in Iraq,

[At NTC] we went through traditional force-on-force fighting—tank battles. That is easy. You are here. The bad is north. Drive north and kill. Secure this piece of terrain; clear this piece of terrain . . . You get here [in Iraq], and it is just different.

Another lieutenant observed,

The waves of BMPs and T72’s and stuff that you train for—that would have been great! My guys wanted to blow something up so badly. As soon as we got [live] ammunition, we were like, “I hope I get to pump it into a Volkswagen.” That is the easy stuff.



Counterinsurgency warfare presents junior officers with missions and tasks that appear to be less complex than high-intensity warfare, e.g., cordon and search, traffic control points, or escort duty. Indeed, many officers noted that their actual missions were amazingly simple. But many junior leaders also noted that the counterinsurgency environment demanded more mental energy. For example, one lieutenant commented on the asymmetrical moral nature of insurgency,

It is frustrating at times because you are expected to play by certain regulations and certain rules when your opposition is not held to the same standard. There are all these Geneva Convention rules: you can't go undercover in certain situations; you got to be in very plain view. You have all these ROE rules that we are restricted to, yet we are fighting against an enemy who is not constrained by the same things.

Another lieutenant described how fighting an insurgency adds a level of complexity to leadership,

Most of the people here are actually our friends. It is very, very difficult to determine who in a crowd is friendly and who is not, and what to do. We go over ROE and then you have to constantly before every mission sit down with the guys and read through and make up off the wall situations because they actually happen.

Another officer reflected upon CTC training and stated,

I think—as far as mentally—this [OIF] is tougher. There [at a CTC], it is physically tougher, but here it is mentally more difficult. There you knew that if you see a guy on the hill with a weapon, you kill him because he is the bad guy at JRTC, and they wear the uniforms and all that. Here, you see a guy with a weapon and he is not in a uniform. You have to call and be like, “Hey do you see that guy?” “Is he wearing an Iraqi police uniform?” “No, he is not.” “Does he have that weapon slung across his back?” “Yeah, he does.” “Okay, well, let's go and dismount and talk to him and see if he should be having that weapon.” You can't just shoot the guy like you do at NTC. You got to think about it.

The environment in OIF is forcing our junior leaders to confront the hard realities of a complex situation, a relatively restrictive ROE, the presence of innocents on the battlefield, and the need to

still accomplish the mission. The OIF experience is developing in our junior officers the ability to recognize the strategic implications of their actions in a complex moral environment. As one astute lieutenant noted, “The fact is that we don’t lower our standards and we abide by an ROE; that we are not out there just to kill innocent civilians; and that the mission is important, but the means to that end is sometimes more important.” Such words speak volumes about how adept our junior officers are becoming in dealing with the moral complexities in the OIF crucible.

### **Complexity through Change.**

Adaptive leaders learn to live with unpredictability. They spend less time fretting about the inability to establish a routine or control the future and focus more on exploiting opportunities. In OIF, junior leaders reported operating in an environment of planning ahead and attempting to establish a battle rhythm against a backdrop of imminent change. Junior officers quickly learned that the battle rhythm they emplace lasts only until the next interruption. As one lieutenant paradoxically described the environment, “Right now, it is fairly predictable, but that can always change.”

Army officers have always been accustomed to sudden change, but the OIF environment is a sharp contrast to recent deployments. Many factors appear to be accelerating the impact of unpredictability. First, the insurgents are an adaptive enemy. As one officer noted, “It’s a constant struggle of one-upmanship. We adapt, they adapt. It’s a constant competition to gain the upper hand.”<sup>17</sup>

Second, because the OIF environment is rich in intelligence, missions emerge on very short notice based on new information. One platoon leader noted,

I can’t tell you what I am doing tomorrow. I can tell you what I am *supposed* to be doing tomorrow. Things change so frequently and you just expect that. You know that every day you live a day at a time. Things you plan change based on intel reports, based on different changes in the mission.

Third, the attitudes of the Iraqi people towards U.S. forces are by no means homogenous or stable. Junior leaders cannot assume the

reception their troops receive during missions will be constant. A lieutenant observed,

We don't know whether we are going to get rocks thrown at us, or mortars, or a handshake, or a cup of tea. It really doesn't depend on what neighborhood we are going to. It doesn't matter what we are going to do. The level of hostility is something that we cannot predict.

Finally, the overall strategic environment in postwar Iraq is still unstable which creates havoc for those at the tactical level. An assassination, a prison abuse scandal, or a localized uprising can change conditions for leaders on the ground. One officer elaborated,

Things are going to go wrong and some crazy things are going to happen. Like the UN is going to blow up or Sadr is going to ambush a patrol in Sadr City, and they are going to call our tanks in to be prepared to basically assault the city . . . My guys realize that it is a very unpredictable environment that we live in.

As a result of the possibility of change at any moment, junior officers have learned to plan and establish routine, but anticipate change at any moment. One lieutenant stated,

You never know what to expect. Tasks seem to come in spurts. It is quiet for a while—you think that maybe we have gotten a hold of the sector . . . then we will have three IEDs in a day within the battalion AO.

One officer gave this advice for leading in the OIF environment, "The first priority is to accept the fact that it is going to be completely unpredictable. You just have to make the best of it." A lieutenant added,

I guess you get used to the unpredictable nature of things . . . I guess you build little lessons learned off of each one. So next time when a new experience comes up, you draw from that last one. Okay, how could I quickly adapt to this and make this happen? I guess the only danger is it really could make you complacent. You want to be comfortable with unpredictability. But, you don't want to become complacent. I guess that's the balance.

Junior officers in the OIF environment are working towards establishing predictability for their troops. They are planning and scheduling, but they are also learning to adapt to the situation when it changes or emerges differently from what they expected.

## TASK AND PURPOSE

There is a type of staff officer who seems to think that it is more important to draft immaculate orders than to get out a reasonably well-worded order in time for action to be taken before the situation changes or the opportunity passes.

General B. H. Liddell Hart  
*Thoughts on War*

A key factor in developing adaptive capacity in junior officers is the ability to actually lead and make decisions rather than merely to execute the orders of higher commands. Two years ago, a study chartered by the Chief of Staff of the Army entitled *Stifling Innovation* reported that the centralized and overly structured Army system had created an oppressive culture that encouraged in our junior officers “reactive instead of proactive thought, compliance instead of creativity, and adherence instead of audacity.”<sup>18</sup> Although creativity and innovation tend to be highly esteemed by the Army in its rhetoric, the report found that “the reality is that junior officers are seldom given opportunities to be innovative in planning training; to make decisions; or to fail, learn, and try again.”<sup>19</sup> In essence, the Army had replaced *leadership* with what leadership researchers call *leadership substitutes*.<sup>20</sup> The leadership substitutes model suggests that a variety of situational variables can substitute for or neutralize the effects of a leader’s behavior. These situational variables can “paralyze, destroy, or counteract” the ability of leadership to make a difference and make leadership “not only impossible but also unnecessary.”<sup>21</sup> For example, lack of authority may neutralize a leader’s effectiveness, while detailed planning may substitute for leadership and make the leader redundant.

In OIF, many of the situational variables that normally substitute for leadership in the nondeployed Army are removed. For example, many officers reported that their missions were not covered by

Army doctrine or established TTP. Officers spoke of improvising and experimenting in operations such as the employment of heavy units in a MOUT environment, patrolling in a nonhostile MOUT terrain, and conducting Phase IV (nation-building) operations in a situation void of many of the agencies and organizations normally expected in reconstruction. As a result, junior officers are having to rely on their own judgment and ingenuity in getting the mission accomplished. One lieutenant perceptively noted, "Every environment that we as a military go in, we are going to learn something. For those of us who are learning it now, we'll be the ones to write the doctrine later to help out the next set."

For many of the officers interviewed, there was a surprising lack of detailed guidance from higher headquarters. Geographical dispersion, changing tactical and strategic situations, and volatile environments prevented higher echelon commanders from developing plans with specific guidance for junior officers carrying out missions. Junior officers became the experts on the situation, not higher headquarters. One officer commented on why he did not receive more explicit directions, "The big thing that you have to understand is that this is bottom-up fed. I am the guy on the ground. I know everything about my AO." As a result, junior officers reported moving away from the traditional detailed military decision making process and relying on FRAGOs, task and purpose, and commander's intent for guidance instead.

One platoon leader recounted how general his guidance was upon arriving in his sector, "When we first got here, the colonel told us to go out and find bad guys and kill them. That was our orders. That was our task and purpose. We were, like, 'Roger, all right!'" A company commander related the broad guidance he received,

I had a very simple commander's intent. It was two lines. It said prevent anti-coalition militants and former regime militants from getting weapons or explosives into this facility. Second line—always use active force protection measures to deter an attack, i.e., be a hard target. In a situation like this, you can make your commander's intent as complicated as you want. You can address every issue, or you can just give them a broad stroke of a philosophy you want them to work under.

A significant implication of OIF is the growing confidence possessed by junior officers that they can lead without being propped up by either close supervision or detailed guidance. They are learning to be comfortable, as one officer noted, with only, "Here is your task, here is your purpose, we don't have as much information that may be necessary to complete the whole mission, but the information is out there for you to get." Another officer described the command climate as, "Here, a lot of times it is, 'Here it is, figure it out, go, you have one hour.'" An aviation lieutenant commented on his confidence in operating in an intent-centric rather than plan-centric environment,

Honestly, if I was flying around out there . . . you give me a call sign on a ground unit, a grid to go to, and a task and purpose—e.g., there is a cordon and search, this grid, this is the call sign of the ground unit, this is their frequency—in the time that it takes me to get there, I can have a pretty good warm fuzzy about how to handle the operation.

## **TOMORROW'S LEADERS**

The preceding paragraphs have attempted to make the case that today's junior officers are learning to lead in the crucible of the extremely complex and dynamic OIF environment. Lieutenants and captains have conducted missions for which they never trained, executed operations that have outpaced Army doctrine, shifted constantly from adrenaline-pumping counterinsurgency to patience-demanding nation-building, and received very little detailed guidance or supervision in the process. The result of this experience is a cohort of junior officers that is learning to be adaptable, creative, innovative, and confident in their abilities to handle just about any task thrown at them.

One lieutenant reflected upon the leader development aspects of OIF, "I have learned that I can adapt to circumstances and situations that surround me much better than I expected . . . Three hours after I got on the ground in Baghdad, I went on my first raid with these guys. Just my ability to learn and absorb information has impressed me." Another officer offered insights on what he learned in theater,

You learn not to over-analyze . . . A place like this really drives home, I would say, that the most important thing that a leader can do at the lowest level is make a decision—right or wrong . . . Making the decision in a timely manner, on the spot, at the lowest level, has implications that are huge all the way to the top.

Being able to adapt, make decisions, and lead in the complex, ambiguous, and uncertain conditions of OIF produces a confidence in junior leaders. The boldness developed in OIF is the seed for the audacity required in the future Army. It is something that can be best developed by allowing junior officers to lead in a crucible experience. One lieutenant noted,

I feel that myself, and all the other officers that I serve with, are doing things that they never expected they would have to do and finding out that they're doing them very, very well. I think that it comes to a shock to some guys, many of us, how well things are going for us individually.

For the officers deployed to Iraq, the OIF environment has become the way the Army operates. For many of the more junior officers, OIF is their only reference point in the leadership development process of the Army. As a second lieutenant pointed out, "I don't really know what infantry platoon leaders normally do. I went to two training centers and I came here. I have no idea what they do in garrison." Another lieutenant said, "I have never been on a CMTC or a JRTC. You could say this is my first field problem coming out here and coming to Baghdad. I am just kind of learning as I go." For other officers with experience in the nondeployed Army, the OIF experience stands in contrast to much of what they learned in other leader development experiences. For example, one officer compared leader development in the OIF environment with a CTC rotation,

I know the Army hates this word, but [the OIF environment] keeps me *flexible* . . . The Army hates the word because if you have ever been to a training rotation, you always have an AAR, and the thing that they always tell you . . . is "Don't ever say under one of your 'Sustains'—*flexible*." Don't even bother. They hate to hear it. The Army hates to hear the word *flexible*.

Such observations raise a key question: What happens when these junior officers—who have experienced the exhilaration of leading

troops in a complex environment with little close supervision—return to the nondeployed Army? Will the Army leverage this newly developed adaptability? Or will bureaucratic forces gradually whittle away and wear down these young warriors with SOPs, TTPs, MREs, and strict adherence to the MDMP? While there have already been some adjustments at the CTCs to instill ambiguity and uncertainty instead of following closely scripted scenarios, changes are also needed throughout the schoolhouses, and more importantly, in the daily operational training of units. The leader development gains of OIF will be lost if instructors at the Captain's Career Course, battalion and brigade commanders in tactical units, and division chiefs on headquarters staffs fail to recognize that these junior officers are quite capable of operating within the broad boundaries of commander's intent, instead of being told what to do and how to do it.

Three factors are important to consider when exploring the implications of a large cohort of adaptive, independent leaders returning to the garrison Army. First, while the current situation has many similarities with deployments of the past such as Bosnia and Kosovo, Vietnam, or post-World War II Germany or Japan, the leader development experience is unique due to differences in scope and scale. The Vietnam experience included counterinsurgency operations, but the nation-building in that conflict was mostly at the local level (e.g., civil action teams) and did not attempt to rebuild the national government. Operations in Bosnia and Kosovo included some nation-building, but leaders were not confronted with an active insurgency. Likewise, while post-World War II reconstruction efforts were at the national level, junior officers did not have to contend with fighting an insurgency at the same time. Probably a more significant difference in the leader development experience from past deployments is the increased quality of the all-volunteer force—especially when comparing Iraq with the Vietnam conflict. With higher quality troops, especially the noncommissioned officer corps, junior officers can devote more of their mental energy to issues other than discipline and individual training. Additionally, current force stabilization policies allow units to push their band of excellence upwards due to cohesion and reduced turbulence.



In other words, the current situation of so many adaptive junior officers returning to the nondeployed Army presents an extremely rare opportunity to the Army.

Second, this monograph focused on the development of adaptability in company grade officers. While many field grade officers are also in postwar Iraq, mostly lieutenants and captains are in the line units interacting with the local populace, conducting the raids, and working with soldiers. The development of agile, adaptive leaders in OIF is, by and large, a junior officer phenomenon. Thus, any impact of adaptability and flexibility on the Army will come mainly through the influence of a large cohort of junior officers with OIF combat experience.

Finally, the influence of the Army's senior leadership on the leadership development of the Army is also a salient factor to consider. Former Chief of Staff of the Army General Eric Shinseki set the stage for change. He chartered the Army Training and Leader Development Panel (ATLDP) in anticipation of developing adaptive leaders for the Objective Force. Under his direction, the Army explored ways to eliminate 50 percent of nonmission related training in order to allow company commanders to be innovative in developing their own training. Additionally, he directed that all company commanders be given a week of "white space" on their training calendars to encourage junior officer creativity. While the institutional Army may not have responded with significant policy changes to promote adaptability during his tenure, General Shinseki's vision of adaptive leaders established the foundation for change.

Current Chief of Staff General Peter Schoomaker continued the momentum of change and is pushing the Army towards reform with radical restructuring, discontinuation of programs once thought sacred, and the dismantling of processes no longer viewed as flexible enough for a transforming Army. As far as developing leaders, General Schoomaker has shown that he is comfortable with exposing leaders to complex, ambiguous environments. Statements such as, "What makes a great team is what happens after the ball is snapped," "You're not learning unless you're operating in the zone of discomfort," and "You can't organize the chaos of

the battlefield”<sup>22</sup> reflect a perspective consistent with notions of flexibility, adaptability, and innovation.

With a cohort of junior officers experiencing and expecting to be treated as adaptive, innovative, and independent leaders putting pressure on the Army from the bottom, and a Chief of Staff of the Army familiar with the virtues of special operating forces (not to mention a transformation-oriented Secretary of Defense) pushing adaptability from the top, the Army finds itself sandwiched between forces of change. The Army can continue the momentum by leveraging and encouraging adaptability and innovation, or it can allow traditional Army inertia to gradually grind down the out-of-the-box perspectives of its returning junior officers.

An Army at war is stressed and stretched. Wars also have the ability, however, to mature an Army. Today’s Army is receiving a large number of junior officers who have learned to be comfortable with complexity, change, and ambiguity. While these junior officers do not appear much different than fresh-faced cadets, they carry with them a savvy and wisdom that can only be gained in a crucible experience. Such a perspective is evident in the following quotation from a very eloquent second lieutenant. Note the maturity in his words as he reflects upon the OIF environment and his development as a leader.

Our equation is filled with variables that constantly change—the weather, people, different dynamics that we have no control over. If we tried to control them, we would be breaking the rules. It is important that we understand our constraints, understand our limitations, understand the variables that are out there, and then learn how to deal with it. There are certain things that you are not going to be able to control—the emotions your soldiers run into, the problems your soldiers have at home, the complex situation between the Shiites and Sunnis, the cultural barrier, the stand off between Western culture, Christian culture, and Muslim culture. There are certain things that we won’t understand because it is a totally different environment . . . To prepare an officer for this, to prepare anyone for this, you need to just constantly test him, put him in very challenging situations, and allow them to sort of think and act under pressure and stress. That is essentially what you do here. You are given a task and expected to perform . . . You see the true colors of people because you see a lot of these guys get bent out of shape. You get tired, you get frustrated, you get mad, you start screaming. You are, like,

“This is all [messed] up.” You understand their frustration. You got to pull yourself back. You got to remain calm. You got to come with, “Okay these are the changes, and this is how we are going to change our plan.” You got to be able to think on your feet. You got to be flexible. I can’t stress that enough. That has been our success here.

Of course, not all the junior officers encountered during interviews for this monograph were as comfortable as this lieutenant in leading in a complex environment. Some of the junior officers in OIF are frustrated with the constant change, while others report unease in dealing with ambiguity. Over all, however, most of the junior officers showed an astute understanding of leadership in the future environment.

Today’s junior officers are not afraid to lead in ambiguous conditions. They can execute a mission with minimal guidance. They are an incredibly valuable resource to a transforming Army that has desired and sought adaptive capacity in its leaders. The crucible of OIF has delivered to the Army a cohort of adaptive leaders. The challenge for the Army is to encourage and leverage this priceless potential.

## ENDNOTES

1. Quoted in Thom Shanker, “New Chief Sets Out to Redesign a Stretched-Thin Army,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2004, p. A19.
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3. Headquarters, Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Vision Statement*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999, p. 7.
4. Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 1, *The Army*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001.
5. Headquarters, Department of the Army, *The Army Training and Leader Development Panel Officer Study Report to the Army*, <http://www.army.mil/atld>, 2001 (emphasis added). See also Lieutenant General William M. Steele and Lieutenant Colonel Robert P. Walters, Jr., “21st Century Leadership Competencies,” *Army Magazine*, August 2001, p. 29.
6. Headquarters, Department of the Army, U.S. Army White Paper, *Concepts*

for the Objective Force. <http://www.army.mil/features/WhitePaper/ObjectiveForceWhitePaper.pdf>, 2001, p. 5 (emphasis added).

7. Headquarters, Department of the Army, *The Way Ahead*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. 2004, p. 8 (emphasis added).

8. Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas, *Geeks & Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders*, Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002, p. 16.

9. Warren G. Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader*, New York: Basic Books, 2003, pp. xxii–xxiii.

10. Bennis and Thomas, p. 93.

11. James Fallows, “Blind Into Baghdad,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Jan/Feb 2004, Vol. 293, p. 74.

12. Bob Herbert, “No End In Sight,” *The New York Times*, April 2, 2004, p. A19.

13. General William E. Odom in John Harwood, “Former General Sees ‘Staying the Course’ in Iraq as Untenable,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 28, 2004, p. 4.

14. In addition to assisting in officer interviews, Colonel John R. Martin handled logistics, scheduling, and transportation. He is a first class soldier who made this monograph a reality.

15. Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, Cambridge, MA: University Press, 1883, p. 105.

16. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from transcribed interviews with OIF company grade officers.

17. Major John Nagl, quoted in Nicholas Blanford, “Insurgent And Soldier: Two Views On Iraq Fight,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 25, 2004, p. 1.

18. Leonard Wong, *Stifling Innovation: Developing Tomorrow's Leaders Today*, Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2002, p. v.

19. *Ibid*, p. 3.

20. Steven Kerr and John M. Jermier, “Substitutes for Leadership: Their Meaning and Measurement,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, Vol.

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21. *Ibid*, p. 395.

22. Shanker, p. A19.

## APPENDIX

### ACRONYMS

AAR	After Action Review
AO	Area of Operations
BMP	Soviet military personnel carrier
CA	Civil Affairs
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CMTC	Combat Maneuver Training Center
CSA	Chief of Staff of the Army
CTC	Combat Training Center
FOB	Forward Operating Base
FOO	Field Ordering Officer
FRAGO	Fragmentary Order
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IGO	Intergovernmental Organization
IO	Information Operations
JRTC	Joint Readiness Training Center
MDMP	Military Decision Making Process
MFO	Multinational Force and Observers
MOUT	Military Operations in Urban Terrain
MRE	Mission Rehearsal Exercise
NAC	Neighborhood Advisory Council
NTC	National Training Center
OIF	Operation IRAQI FREEDOM
PAO	Public Affairs Officer
POO	Purchase Ordering Officer
PSYOPS	Psychological Operations
PT	Physical Training
QRF	Quick Reaction Force
ROE	Rules of Engagement
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
TTP	Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures
VBIED	Vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Device