

WHAT'S THE PLAN?

Unleashing the full force of its weapons of mass discussion, the media made the war plan the focus of its attention during Week 1 of the Iraqi conflict. TV and news reporters who had not seen the plan goaded retired senior military officers who also had not seen the plan to critique and cross swords with those who had not only seen, but had created or approved the plan. The debate seemed both inconclusive and unedifying, not only because they weren't talking about the same plan, but because the two camps meant entirely different things by the term.

Senior journalists such as Michael Gordon of the *New York Times*, and distinguished retirees such as General Barry McCaffrey talked about the plan as it has been traditionally thought of: a course of action to achieved defined objectives. Accordingly, they were absorbed in comparisons between expected and actual events, and whether or not the military was surprised by the stiffness of the Iraqi resistance or the apparent lack of enthusiasm on the part of some Iraqi civilians upon seeing the coalition troops arrive. And because there was a lot of speculation that the war would be short and decisive –an expectation not discouraged prior to the start of the conflict by the Bush Administration-- Secretary Rumsfeld, General Meyers and General Franks were repeatedly asked to describe the extent to which they were surprised; the degree to which they had to change the plan; and how good they now thought the plan was. The retired generals, particularly the army generals, opined that the plan was faulty because there weren't enough boots on the ground, and the speed of the advance was stretching supply lines unacceptably. Further, the main attack was being diluted and "bogged down" because of the amount of time and effort required to deal with rear guard actions in "secured" but uncaptured cities that the main force had sped past.

Every senior military officer knows and believes in the adage, "No plan survives first contact with the enemy." Yet both Secretary Don Rumsfeld and General Richard Meyers were vigorous in their defense of this plan, consistently characterizing it as innovative and brilliant. In one press conference, Rumsfeld went so far as to say that the coalition was "exactly" on plan. At another, Myers told reporters that the plan had multiple branches, implying that everything that had happened so far fit tidily into one or another of these alternatives. General Tommy Franks, the author of the plan, was also consistent in his assurances that the coalition was on plan.

But Franks also said two things that suggest that he was indeed a different kind of planner. First, he said that he expected surprises. And second, he talked about his confidence that the coalition would be able to adapt when such surprises occurred. This confidence was based on the fact that he felt prepared to deal with a very broad spectrum of possible eventualities—from catastrophic success to stubborn resistance throughout the country.

By saying that he expected surprises, Franks was acknowledging that the people who developed all the branches that Meyers talked about were not clairvoyants. But if they weren't, how could he be so confident that surprises could be dealt with?

It is quite likely that he was not placing his confidence in a traditional plan or any of its branches. Rather he was relying on an adaptive *design*, and in the competence of his subordinate commanders to make good and mutually coherent local decisions within the framework of that design. A design *for* action is fundamentally different from a plan *of* action. Action plans, and their close relatives, procedures, are only as good as the ability of the planners to identify in advance what contingencies

might arise. That's why they never survive first contact with the enemy, who ordinarily is not a willing contributor to the planning process.

Designs for action, on the other hand, specify capabilities and the interactions between them. There is no time dimension in a design. There are no activities in a design. There is only the specification of:

- The outcome that the organization is missioned to produce (in this case, elimination of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and displacement of Saddam's regime)
- the type of outcomes that each design element (role) is accountable for producing (particular maneuvers, fires, denial of access, target destruction, logistical sustainment, intel, for example),
- who is accountable for producing and who for receiving each category of outcome,
- what are the constraint/restraint boundaries governing the deployment of the capabilities (in military lingo, the latter are typically called Rules of Engagement).

The crucial choices in a role and accountability design are:

- what capabilities are needed, and how much or many of each,
- how granular are the capabilities that are addressable at a given level of the design, (corps, division, battalion, company, squad are increasingly granular subsets of a ground force, for example. A design that makes it possible for the corps commander to issue an order down through the chain of command to a squad leader is obviously a very different design than one that makes it possible for a special operations spotter to dispatch a bomber to deliver a JDAM on a nearby target),
- what individuals should be placed in charge of the capabilities specified by the design.
- how constraining are the rules of engagement: globally and for each subordinate role,
- by what means do accountable people communicate with one another to coordinate action, and how is consistency with the rules of engagement assured. (This requires a technology that enables different roles to communicate with one another, to share information about a given situation, and to agree on a collaborative action.)

In other words, a design for action is a role and accountability design that defines who owes what to whom. In a stable environment, the roles can be dispatched in advance. This results in a schedule or a process design. Because things are sufficiently predictable, the premium is on efficient –even six sigma – execution of the schedule. The design for action is transformed into an plan of action by the people at the top of the organization. This is presumably what the media and military analysts assumed they were critiquing. In this mindset, deviations from the plan are considered defects.

But when things are so unpredictable that you have to expect continuous surprise, you want to sequence your capabilities as late as possible. And, to the maximum extent possible, you want the local commanders to do it, because they know more about what they need in the moment. For this to result in coherent behavior at the organizational level, these commanders must be in constant touch with one another, share information about what is happening, and operate with internally consistent rules of engagement.

I suspect that Franks and the others who had “seen the plan” were not defending it as a clairvoyant set of pre-planned action sequences. And they weren't measuring success by how close reality matched with predictions. They were measuring success in terms of progress toward the ultimate purpose and the accomplishment of some key subordinate outcomes –such as preventing the torching of oil wells. They were clearly exploiting to the hilt the increased tempo that was enabled by an ability to locally dispatch and synchronize special ops, tanks, Blackhawks, bombers, fighters, and other combat elements. The

Iraqi army had much slower sense-and-respond cycles, and were consequently back on their heels from the start of the war.

It's possible that the real plan was a hybrid of a carefully thought out plan of action enhanced by a design for action of capabilities that were more granular and modular than ever before. And it's probable that a lot of the dispatching is still being done from fairly high in the command structure. But as warfare becomes ever more unpredictable and asymmetric, it will be necessary to push decisions closer to the event, and to replace command and control with "context and coordination." The enabling technology is clearly in place, but doctrine and the concept of command-and-control will have to be drastically modified, as will leadership training, and that will take time

We are told that it took something like 35 minutes for fresh intel about Saddam's probable whereabouts to be turned into a decision to strike, and only 12 minutes after the decision was made to divert a B-1 and have it unload four bunkerbusters on a suspected meeting of Saddam and his senior officials.. Clearly this action wasn't part of anyone's original plan...anymore than the decision to start the war with a similar decapitation strike was part of a pre-existing plan.

A plan is not a plan when it is a design. There's now overwhelming evidence that the Iraqi Freedom war design was every bit as good as the secretary and his generals said their "plan" was. It seems equally obvious that unexpected events and changes to the plan of action was every bit as prevalent as the critics charged.

So both sides can claim they won the argument, but only traditional planners could be surprised by the outcome.

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