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ANNALS OF WAR
BATTLE LESSONS

by DAN BAUM

What the generals don't know.

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During the early weeks of the Iraq war, the television set in my office was tuned all day to CNN, with the sound muted. On the morning of April 3rd, as the Army and the Marines were closing in on Baghdad, I happened to look up at what appeared to be a disaster in the making. A small unit of American soldiers was walking along a street in Najaf when hundreds of Iraqis poured out of the buildings on either side. Fists waving, throats taut, they pressed in on the Americans, who glanced at one another in terror. I reached for the remote and turned up the sound. The Iraqis were shrieking, frantic with rage. From the way the lens was lurching, the cameraman seemed as frightened as the soldiers. This is it, I thought. A shot will come from somewhere, the Americans will open fire, and the world will witness the My Lai massacre of the Iraq war. At that moment, an American officer stepped through the crowd holding his rifle high over his head with the barrel pointed to the ground. Against the backdrop of the seething crowd, it was a striking gesture—almost Biblical. “Take a knee,” the officer said, impassive behind surfer sunglasses. The soldiers looked at him as if he were crazy. Then, one after another, swaying in their bulky body armor and gear, they knelt before the boiling crowd and pointed their guns at the ground. The Iraqis fell silent, and their anger subsided. The officer ordered his men to withdraw.

It took two months to track down Lieutenant Colonel Chris Hughes, who by then had been rotated home. He called from his father's house, in Red Oak, Iowa, en route to study at the Army War College, in Pennsylvania. I wanted to know who had taught him to tame a crowd by pointing his rifle muzzle down and having his men kneel. Were those gestures peculiar to Iraq? To Islam? My questions barely made sense to Hughes. In an unassuming, persistent Iowa tone, he assured me that nobody had prepared him for an angry crowd in an Arab country, much less the tribal complexities of Najaf. Army officers learn in a general way to use a helicopter's rotor wash to drive away a crowd, he explained. Or they fire warning shots. “Problem with that is, the next thing you have to do is shoot them in the chest.” Hughes had been trying that day to get in touch with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, a delicate task that the Army considered politically crucial. American gunfire would have made it impossible. The Iraqis already felt that the Americans were disrespecting their mosque. The obvious solution, to Hughes, was a gesture of respect.

Hughes made it sound obvious, but, shortly before the Americans invaded Iraq, the Army had concluded that its officers lacked the ability to do precisely what he did: innovate and think creatively. In 2000, the new Army Chief of Staff, General Eric Shinseki, was determined to shake up the Army and suspected that about half of a soldier's training was meaningless and “non-essential.” The job of figuring out which half went to Lieutenant Colonel Leonard Wong (retired), a research professor of military strategy at the Army War College. At forty-five, Wong is handsome and voluble, with the air of a man who makes his living prodding the comfortable. Wong found that the problem was not “bogus” training exercises but worthwhile training being handled in such a way as to stifle fresh thinking. The Army had so loaded training schedules with doctrinaire requirements and standardized procedures that unit commanders had no time—or need—to think for themselves. The service was encouraging “reactive instead of proactive thought, compliance instead of creativity, and adherence instead of audacity,” Wong wrote in his report. As one captain put it to him, “They're giving me the egg and telling me how to suck it.”

Wong's findings impressed Shinseki, who in February of 2001 sent him into the lion's den of a two-star generals' conference to present his research. Some of the generals were suspicious, others openly hostile. “I sympathize,” Wong told me. “When you allow people to innovate and to lead, you invite failure.” Wong's report generated no policy changes, but, by stating plainly what many knew instinctively, it started the Army thinking about how to free up its junior officers' decision-making.

Then came Iraq. Every war is different from the last, with its own special learning curve, but there is a growing

sense within the Army that Iraq signals something more significant. In the American Civil War, Army manuals taught Napoleonic tactics, like close-order formations, even though they were suicidal against rifled muskets that could kill accurately at three hundred yards. In the First World War, the French, British, and German troops persisted in attempting to storm trenches before recognizing the defensive supremacy of the machine gun. In Iraq, the Army's marquee high-tech weapons are often sidelined while the enemy kills and maims Americans with bombs wired to garage-door openers or doorbells. Even more important, the Army is facing an enemy whose motivation it doesn't understand. "I don't think there's one single person in the Army or the intelligence community that can break down the demographics of the enemy we're facing," an Airborne captain named Daniel Morgan told me. "You can't tell whether you're dealing with a former Baathist, a common criminal, a foreign terrorist, or devout believers."

Wong flew to Baghdad last April, a year after the supposed cessation of "major combat operations," to find out how the "reactive" and "compliant" junior officers the Army had trained were performing amid the insurgency. He and an active-duty officer flew to bases all over Iraq, interviewing lieutenants, who lead platoons of about thirty soldiers, and captains, who command companies of one to two hundred. These officers, scrambling to bring order to Mosul, Fallujah, and Baghdad, had been trained and equipped to fight against numbered, mechanized regiments in open-manuever warfare. They had been taught to avoid fighting in cities at all costs. Few had received pre-deployment training in improvised explosive devices, or I.E.D.s, the insurgents' signature weapon. None had received any but the most rudimentary instruction in the Arabic language or in Iraqi culture. They were perhaps the most isolated occupation force in history; there are no bars or brothels in Baghdad where Americans can relax, no place off the base for Americans to remove their body armor in the presence of locals. Every encounter was potentially hostile. The chronic shortage of troops and shifting phases of fighting and reconstruction forced soldiers into jobs for which they weren't prepared; Wong found field artillerymen, tankers, and engineers serving as infantrymen, while infantrymen were building sewer systems and running town councils. All were working with what Wong calls "a surprising lack of detailed guidance from higher headquarters." In short, the Iraq that Wong found is precisely the kind of unpredictable environment in which a cohort of hidebound and inflexible officers would prove disastrous.

Yet he found the opposite. Platoon and company commanders were exercising their initiative to the point of occasional genius. Whatever else the Iraq war is doing to American power and prestige, it is producing the creative and flexible junior officers that the Army's training could not.

There may be a generational explanation. While most high-ranking officers are baby boomers, most lieutenants and captains are of Generation X, born in the mid-sixties or after. Gen X officers, often the product of single-parent homes or homes in which both parents worked, are markedly more self-reliant and confident of their abilities than their baby-boomer superiors, according to Army surveys of both groups. Baby boomers moved up the ranks during the comfortable clarity of the Cold War, but the Gen Xers came of age during messy peacekeeping missions in Kosovo, Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti. Gen Xers are notoriously unimpressed by rank, as Donald Rumsfeld discovered in December, when enlisted soldiers questioned him sharply about the lack of armor on their vehicles. This turns out to be a positive development for the Army, because the exigencies of the Iraq war are forcing the decision-making downward; tank captains tell of being handed authority, mid-battle, for tasks that used to be reserved for colonels, such as directing helicopter close-air support.

The younger officers have another advantage over their superiors: they grew up with the Internet, and have created for themselves, in their spare time, a means of sharing with one another, online, information that the Army does not control. The "slackers" in the junior-officer corps are turning out to be just what the Army needs in the chaos of Iraq. Instead of looking up to the Army for instructions, they are teaching themselves how to fight the war. The Army, to its credit, stays out of their way.

Prior to the Second World War, officers heading into combat buttonholed veterans or gleaned what they could over evening beers at the Officers' Club to fill holes in their training. After Guadalcanal, the Army knocked together the insights of soldiers in combat and published them in cheap newsprint booklets called "The Mailing List." The booklets were imprecise, slow to arrive in the field, and unidirectional. "Teach not to waste ammunition," wrote one Marine colonel. "The Japanese fire is not always aimed," a sergeant wrote. "It is harassing fire and scares recruits." The system for recycling combat experience didn't improve much for the next forty years.

Then, in October, 1983, came Operation Urgent Fury, against the government of Grenada, which should have been relatively straightforward but instead was a mess. Communications were so poor that soldiers had to rely on pay phones. Intelligence was so spotty that troops used tourist maps to find their way around the island. Nineteen service

members died in the operation, some needlessly. In response, the Army opened the Center for Army Lessons Learned—or CALL—at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. CALL was supposed to gather and distribute more efficiently the insights that soldiers glean from battle. Colonel Larry Saul, who says he is “one of about a hundred Vietnam vets still on active duty,” is CALL’s director. Dark-haired at fifty-four, he shares with most of his colleagues a strikingly direct manner of speaking. For efficiency of conversation, Army officers are tough to beat. Trained to convey critical information under stress, they enunciate like radio announcers, in complete, unhesitating sentences. Moreover, they tend to be good listeners, with a refreshing ability—and willingness—to get to the nub of a difficult issue. Ask an Army officer a painful question and he or she will answer it, provided it doesn’t involve secrets, with a kind of Boy Scout candor all but unknown in, say, the corporate or political realm. I asked Saul what lessons the Army has learned in Iraq, and he said, “Not much, because lessons learned, in past tense, means you’ve modified behavior. Until you demonstrate changed behavior, you haven’t learned a lesson.”

In its early days, the lessons came not from combat but from the training centers in California and Louisiana where troops go to experience a week or two of lifelike combat. CALL would ask trainers what mistakes were being repeated and would write up the results in four bulletins a year, which were then filed away and largely forgotten. The Web changed everything. During the battles of Bosnia and Kosovo, in 1993 and 1999, CALL placed “embeds”—full-time liaison officers—with the soldiers; it now has two in Afghanistan and five in Iraq, and also receives a flood of daily “after action reviews” from line officers. The reviews contain tips on everything from running field kitchens to avoiding mortar attacks. At Fort Leavenworth, thirty analysts, all of them military retirees, digest the reviews, identify trends, and reconcile the lessons with established Army doctrine. CALL still distributes lessons on paper—in binders, in booklets designed to fit in the cargo pocket of a soldier’s fatigues, and on plasticized pocket cards. But the centerpiece of CALL is its Web site, which is restricted to military personnel, Defense Department civilians, and coalition allies. Mostly, officers use it before they are deployed, to train soldiers in Iraq-specific tactics. One CALL lesson on I.E.D.s, for example, opens with a video-game graphic of a Humvee hitting a mine and being fired upon by guerrillas: men scream, blood splatters. The segment ends with a cartoon sergeant grading the answers to a test: “That’s a go, soldier!” or “No go, soldier!” “Some of our soldiers are nineteen years old,” Colonel Saul explained. “This has to be aimed at them.” When CALL wants to distribute highly sensitive material, it uses the Secret Internet Protocol Router Network, or SIPRNET. SIPRNET is walled off from the civilian Internet; its messages travel over separate wires, and only special computers can reach it. (In Iraq, it is available at the battalion level, but rarely at the company level.)

The Army is struggling to figure out the Iraq war even while it’s up to its neck in it. Lieutenant Colonel Ernie Benner is one of about eighty members of the Joint I.E.D. Defeat Task Force, which the Defense Department created in July to analyze the insurgents’ maddeningly simple yet deadly homemade bombs. “There is no technology silver bullet,” Benner told me when we spoke in a windowless conference room at the Pentagon. The task force posts on SIPRNET intelligence that it gathers from all four military services and a hundred and thirty-three different government and private agencies, ranging from the F.B.I. and the Agency for International Development to Kellogg Brown & Root. It uses F.B.I.-style forensics on bombs and fragments to trace their makers and financiers, and it looks for techniques that soldiers can use to spot and disarm them. I.E.D.s first appeared in large numbers along roadsides during an insurgent offensive in Baghdad, in November, 2003, during Ramadan, Benner said. They have also been found in the carcasses of dogs, in vendors’ carts, and strapped behind highway guardrails. Benner showed me a picture of a road sign that had a big bomb hidden inside it. The sign read “Welcome to Fallujah.” Lately, suicide bombers have driven I.E.D.s into control points and Iraqi police stations, and, in September, the tactics for delivering I.E.D.s mutated into what Benner calls moving-vehicle-on-moving-vehicle attacks: a car zips between two vehicles in a rolling convoy and explodes. “The field team investigated and wrote up what tactics, techniques, and procedures could defeat that,” Benner said, “and within twenty-four hours they were disseminated into training for units going to Iraq.”

The problem with both CALL and the I.E.D. Task Force is that their information is as unidirectional as “The Mailing List” in the Second World War. The Army identifies a need, prepares a response, and hands it down from the top. Officers in the field can e-mail questions to CALL, and usually get a response within twenty-four hours, but most officers told me that the information often seems stale or, having been processed in the maw of Army doctrine, irrelevant. The war in Iraq is so confusing and it changes so fast that there’s often no time to wait for carefully vetted and spoon-fed advice. So officers look for help elsewhere.

Majors Nate Allen and Tony Burgess became friends at West Point in the nineteen-eighties, and at the end of the

nineties they found themselves commanding companies in separate battalions in the same Hawaii-based brigade. Commanding a company is often described as the best job in the Army; a company is big enough to be powerful and small enough to be intimate. But the daily puzzles a company commander faces, even in peacetime, are dizzying, and both Allen and Burgess felt isolated. "If I had a good idea about how to do something, there was no natural way to share it," Allen said. "I'd have to pass it up, and it would have to be blessed two levels above me, and then passed down to Tony." Luckily, they lived next door to each other and spent many evenings sitting on Allen's front porch comparing notes. "How are things going with your first sergeant?" one would ask. Or "How are you dealing with the wives?" "At some point, we realized this conversation was having a positive impact on our units, and we wanted to pass it along," Allen told me. They wrote a book about commanding a company, "Taking the Guidon," which they posted on a Web site. Because of the Internet, what had started as a one-way transfer of information—a book—quickly became a conversation.

"Once you start a project, amazing people start to join," Allen said. Among them was a captain based at West Point who was familiar with a Web site called Alloutdoors.com, which lets sportsmen post questions and solicit advice about everything from how to skin a squirrel by yanking on its tail to how to call a turkey by blowing on a wing bone. Burgess and Allen liked the Alloutdoors model, which allows for lots of unmediated, real-time cross-chat and debate. They figured that such a site for company commanders would replicate, in cyberspace, their front porch.

In March of 2000, with the help of a Web-savvy West Point classmate and their own savings, they put up a site on the civilian Internet called Companycommand.com. It didn't occur to them to ask the Army for permission or support. Companycommand was an affront to protocol. The Army way was to monitor and vet every posting to prevent secrets from being revealed, but Allen and Burgess figured that captains were smart enough to police themselves and not compromise security. Soon after the site went up, a lieutenant colonel phoned one of the Web site's operators and advised them to get a lawyer, because he didn't want to see "good officers crash and burn." A year later, Allen and Burgess started a second Web site, for lieutenants, Platoonleader.org.

The sites, which are accessible to captains and lieutenants with a password, are windows onto the job of commanding soldiers and onto the unfathomable complexities of fighting urban guerrillas. Companycommand is divided into twelve areas, including Training, Warfighting, and Soldiers and Families, each of which is broken into discussion threads on everything from mortar attacks to grief counselling and dishonest sergeants. Some discussions are quite raw. Captains post comments on coping with fear, on motivating soldiers to break the taboo against killing, and on counselling suicidal soldiers. They advise each other on how to kick in doors and how to handle pregnant subordinates. Most captains now have access to the Internet at even the most remote bases in Iraq, and many say they'll find at least ten or fifteen minutes every day to check the site. They post tricks they've learned or ask questions like this, which set off months of responses: "What has anyone tried to do to alleviate the mortar attacks on their forward operating bases?" Here are snippets of conversations posted on Companycommand and Platoonleader in the past year:

Never travel in a convoy of less than four vehicles. Do not let a casualty take your focus away from a combat engagement. Give your driver your 9mm, and carry their M16/M4. Tootsie Rolls are quite nice; Jolly Ranchers will get all nasty and sticky though. If a person is responsible for the death of an individual, they do not attend during the three days of mourning; that is why if we kill an individual in sector, we are not welcome during the mourning period. Soldiers need reflexive and quick-fire training, using burst fire. If they're shooting five to seven mortar rounds into your forward operating base, whatever you're doing needs to be readjusted. The more aggressive you look and the faster you are, the less likely the enemy will mess with you. It is okay to tell your soldiers what the regulation is; but as a commander, you should make the effort to get the soldier home for the birth. A single wall of sandbags will not stop any significant munitions. Take pictures of everything and even, maybe more importantly, everyone. The right photo in the right hands can absolutely make the difference. It's not always easy to reach the pistol when in the thigh holster, especially in an up-armored humvee. If they accept you into the tent, by custom they are accepting responsibility for your safety and by keeping on the body armor, you are sending a signal that you do not trust them. If tea or coffee are offered, be sure to accept the items with the right hand. Do not look at your watch when in the tent. Have the unit invest in Wiley X's—these sunglasses also serve as sun-wind-dust goggles. Supply each soldier with one tourniquet; we use a mini-ratchet strap that is one inch wide and long enough to wrap around the thigh of a soldier. Cotton holds water. Even with the best socks, and plenty of foot powder, your feet are likely to start peeling like you've never experienced. You're more likely to be injured by not wearing a seatbelt than from enemy activity. You need to train your soldiers to aim, fire, and kill. The average local is terrible at trying to read a map; however they do understand sketches—the simpler the better. The second you see your soldiers start to lose interest, or roll their eyes, or not pay attention, your S2 has failed and you, your soldiers, and the mission are in danger. Vary the departure and return times, vary the routes even if the route includes a U turn, doesn't make sense, etc. Let's talk about what not to bring: perishable food, lighter fluid, porn, alcohol, or personal weapons. But you might be able to get away with a Playboy or two as long as you're not stupid about it. The 9mm round is too weak, go for headshots if you use it.

Captain Stephanie Gray was a twenty-four-year-old communications officer in Baghdad when, in January of 2004, she was abruptly ordered to serve as her battalion's adjutant, whose job is to manage pay, evaluation reports, and other personnel issues. She'd had minimal training. On Gray's first morning on her own, a call came in at nine-thirty informing her that one of her battalion's convoys had been struck by an I.E.D. in Sadr City. The commander,

executive officer, and sergeant major—the battalion’s entire leadership—jumped up and sped to the site, leaving Gray in the command tent. She got a call saying that Sergeant First Class Ricky Crockett had been killed—the unit’s first death. “I knew there were a lot of things an adjutant needs to do when a soldier dies,” she told me, “but I had no idea what.” She logged onto Companycommand and clicked feverishly through the site looking for guidance. Finally she clicked “contact us” and explained her situation. “Within thirty minutes, I got my first response, and all day I got e-mails,” she said. “Some were from active military and some retired. One was a chaplain. ‘Look at this regulation,’ they told me, or ‘Here’s what I tried.’ I learned how to report it up, then look in the soldier’s file and generate letters from the company commander, the battalion commander, and the brigade commanders to his family. . . . There were death-benefit papers to fill out, and on and on.”

Two months before deploying to Iraq, Captain Raymond Kimball, of the Seventh Cavalry, learned from Companycommand never to send a vehicle bound for Iraq to the docks before checking its hydraulic lines for leaks. “Even a little trace of hydraulic fluid means it can’t be loaded on a ship or train,” he told me. “The worst thing is, you deploy and find out in Iraq that your vehicle is still on the wharf in Jacksonville.” Captain Jason Miseli learned to stuff a medic into the scout Humvee that travels miles ahead of his tanks, even if it meant hanging gear on the outside to make room. It was a nuisance, but it saved the life of Specialist Timothy Griffin. Lieutenant Brittany Meeks, who chose the military police as a woman’s back door into combat and is in Baghdad, was advised by Platoonleader to memorize the “nine-line” procedure for summoning medical-evacuation helicopters. She took the precaution of writing the procedure on a slip of paper. In a hellish attack on a convoy last April, a soldier was gravely wounded by a rocket-propelled grenade that exploded close to his head. Amid the blood, the screaming, and two burning fuel tankers, the wounded man’s buddies were having trouble remembering what to do, but Meeks pulled her notes on the procedure from her pocket.

Though Companycommand and Platoonleader require passwords, they could presumably be hacked, and a determined enemy could learn a good deal about how officers think. A lively discussion thread that began with a plea for “information, advice or comments . . . on convoy training” went on for months, with contradictory views on whether to lay sandbags on the floors of vehicles (they offer protection from mines, but wear out Humvees), admonitions to look upward as well as to the sides (guerrillas may shoot from rooftops and overpasses), and suggestions for replacing vehicles’ canvas doors with 8-mm. steel (“It will stop AK-47 and most frag”). “Hey guys,” one captain wrote. “Remember this is an open-source Web site. Everything you type is being read by the enemy.”

Beyond the how-to details, the Web sites offer the comfort of connection to a brotherhood of officers who are trying to master the same impossible job. “Their stories prepare you mentally for what it is you’ll be facing when you get here,” Meeks wrote in a long e-mail from Iraq. “What they actually did is of limited value,” Miseli said. “It’s the why, and the thought process.” Companycommand’s membership more than doubled last year, to ten thousand, or more than a third of all captains in the Army; they went to the site sixty-seven thousand times and looked at more than a million pages.

Officer after officer told me that they use CALL when they have the leisure, but it’s Companycommand or Platoonleader they check regularly and find most useful. CALL’s director, Colonel Saul, wondered if “maybe captains shouldn’t be spending so much time in front of their computer, but should be with their soldiers.” He pointed out, however, that CALL itself has found Companycommand useful; earlier this year, CALL posted a request on Companycommand for advice on using interpreters in Iraq, eliciting replies that became a CALL lesson on the subject. Saul’s ambivalence about the Web sites is emblematic of the Army’s attitude. “Institutional education has three components,” said Lieutenant Colonel Kelly Jordan, an active-duty officer who also runs the R.O.T.C. program at Notre Dame. “It’s got to have a common curriculum, a dedicated cadre of trained instructors, and common experience.” Companycommand and Platoonleader are free-for-alls of shared experience, with no designated interpreter. “What you get out of it may not be what I get out of it,” Jordan said. “You may get the occasional Napoleon or Alexander the Great out of it, but it does nothing to raise the educational level of the officer corps.”

Little by little, the Army is absorbing Companycommand.com and Platoonleader.org. In 2002, West Point put Platoonleader on its server, and a year later added Companycommand; both sites now have military addresses. The Army also began paying the Web site’s expenses. It sent all four of its founders to graduate school to earn Ph.D.s, so that they can become professors at West Point, where they will run the sites as part of their jobs. And the Army is starting to pay the Web sites the sincerest form of flattery: in April, the commanding general of the First Cavalry Division, Major General Peter Chiarelli, ordered up a conversation site for his officers. Cavnet, as it’s known, exists only on SIPRNET, and is vetted, as an official Army site. “We had a guy put up something that wasn’t within the rules of engagement,” Major Patrick Michaelis, who created the site, told me, “and within half an hour the staff judge-advocate guys put a response up.” But, of all the Web-based means of sharing combat information, Cavnet is the

most immediate. While CALL is used mostly in training units in the U.S., and both Company command and Platoon leader are intended to build leadership skills and share general tips and tricks about fighting in Iraq, Cavnet is oriented, Michaelis said, to “the next patrol, six to nine hours out.” Lieutenant Keith Wilson, for example, read a “be on the look out” posting about insurgents who were wiring grenades behind posters of Moqtada al-Sadr, counting on Americans to detonate the explosives when they ripped the posters down. He spread the word among his men, and a few days later a soldier whom he’d sent to peel a poster off a wall peeked behind it first. Sure enough, a grenade was waiting.

“There go the people. I must follow them, for I am their leader,” Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin is said to have remarked during the 1848 revolutions in France. The Army finds itself in a similar relationship with its junior-officer corps. Leonard Wong worries that an institution as hierarchical and doctrinaire as the Army will have trouble reining in its young officers after the war. “Iraq has released the capabilities that our leaders had, but that we’d dulled and numbed previously,” he said. “It’s one thing for individuals to be nimble mentally. But can the Army as an institution be nimble enough to leverage them? Do we now sit these captains down and treat them as we used to? They all wear combat patches. Have we changed anything in the organization to respond to that? If you go to any school or unit, they’ll say, ‘Yes, we’re doing things right,’ but, really, the Army is struggling.”

No matter how clever its captains and lieutenants are becoming in the face of the insurgency, the Army may never be able to declare victory in Iraq. Thirty years after the fall of Saigon, the military finds itself thrust into another war with limited public support, insufficient resources, and a murky definition of success. It remains to be seen whether its appetite for learning the lessons of Iraq will extend to analyzing how it got into such a war in the first place. When General Shinseki failed to persuade Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to allocate more troops to the initial effort, he appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee, where, under cover of answering a senator’s question, he went public with his estimate that the war would require “several hundred thousand” troops. His move failed. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz called Shinseki’s estimate “wildly off the mark,” and the Army invaded Iraq with about a hundred thousand soldiers.

Marybeth Ulrich, a professor specializing in civil-military relations at the Army War College, said it’s too soon for the Army to be analyzing whether Shinseki could have played his hand better, or whether generals might lobby more forcefully in the future. “The Army’s pretty busy right now,” she said. But the lieutenant colonels and colonels who attend the War College will eventually find themselves analyzing those early days of 2003, to learn, as she put it, “what steps were taken to get the Army’s point of view across.” Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution makes the military subordinate to the civilian leadership, and there’s an undefined line between the two that the Army never crosses, Ulrich said. “Was the Army ten steps behind the line? Or did the Army go all the way to the line? I don’t know.”

Thomas White, who was fired from his job as Secretary of the Army in May of 2003 for clashing with Rumsfeld on a number of issues, including how many troops would be needed, told me that the lesson the Army needs to take away from the run-up to Iraq is precisely the one no officer wants to learn. “If I had it to do again, what Shinseki and I should have done is quit, and done so publicly,” he said. White called it a measure of Rumsfeld’s contempt for the Army that he didn’t name a permanent Secretary of the Army to replace him until this past November. “To spend more than a year at war without a Secretary of the Army is unthinkable,” White said.

A week before the Presidential election, the Association of the United States Army held its annual convention in Washington. Membership in the association is open both to Army personnel and the corporations that sell things to the Army, and the gathering transformed the lower level of the Washington Convention Center into an arms bazaar. Attractive women posed fetchingly beside Bradley Fighting Vehicles, Volvo displayed its trucks, Barrett Firearms showed off its new .50-calibre sniper rifles, and the Gallup Organization offered an array of “business improvement services.” Upstairs, professional-development experts gave officers tips on everything from “actionable intelligence” to unit finance. Officers mingled in the hallways in dress-green droves, those who had been in combat distinguished by unit patches on the right arm rather than the left. The talk of the convention was a book published in 1997 that the officer corps has recently rediscovered. Many carried the volume under their arms, and no fewer than six urged me to read it: “Dereliction of Duty,” written by an Army major named H. R. McMaster. Using once classified Vietnam-era documents, McMaster finds fault not just with Robert McNamara, then the Secretary of Defense, who dismissed warnings from the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the Vietnam War would be hard to win, but with the four Chiefs themselves, who were complicit, because they failed to publicly voice their misgivings. “Each one of those four went to their graves thinking they didn’t do enough to protest,” White told me. “They should have put their stars on the

table and said, 'We won't be part of this.'"

The officers fighting in Iraq are, most of the time, remarkably enthusiastic. This is their war, the only one they may get in their careers. It follows an attack on the United States, even if the connection between the attack and the war has been questioned. Within the tiny sliver of the war each sees, examples of brilliance and bravery abound. They're proud to be a part of "the most beautiful Army in the history of the world," as one recently returned captain put it; he praised his immediate commander for wisdom and compassion, and his company for being so disciplined and professional that it could turn off the violence "like a good hunting dog." They brag about the Q36, a computerized weapon system that is so sophisticated it can spot an enemy mortar or rocket in midair, trace its trajectory backward, and fire a response before the enemy round lands. But they will also tell you that the war is excruciating. Despite their Buck Rogers technology, they are losing friends to weapons made from RadioShack gizmos, and the people they've been sent to help seem to hate them more every day. They can't imagine when or how they will earn a victory parade. ♦