



The Battle of Basrah (2008): A Glimpse into the Future of Warfare

Brigadier Michael Arnold CSC ADC, Commander of the 4th Brigade, spoke to the RUSI of Victoria in Melbourne on 31 October 2013

The Royal United Services Institute of Victoria hosted a presentation by Brigadier Michael Arnold, COMD 4 Brigade. He spoke of the future of warfare.

My presentation is on the Battle of Basrah which commenced on Easter Sunday 2008 - 23 March and continued to April 08. At the time I was DA, Baghdad and halfway through a PhD thesis. The thesis was international relations based, specifically about a future Australian defence policy. Its key premise was based on Professor Philip Bobbitt's proposition that the nation-state is evolving into a new entity – what he called a market-state. It is my belief that Australia like the United States, Britain, Japan and most other developed states is evolving into a market-state. And this has major strategic consequences. I used the Battle of Basrah as a case study within the thesis to show how strategic commanders of market-states will have to conduct military campaigns in the conflicts of the information age.



Background

Multi-National Force, Iraq's (MNF-I), General David Petraeus commanded the Coalition response to PM Nouri al-Maliki's initiation of 'Operation Charge of the Knights' – the 'Battle for Basrah' in March-April 2008. Al-Maliki's ill-conceived operation 'Charge of the Knights' whose aim was to take back control of the southern city of Basra from the Jaysh al Mahdi militia and assorted criminal gangs. The conflict spread quickly from Basra to Baghdad and evolved into a battle for the credibility of both the leadership of Nuri al-Maliki and the Iraqi Security Forces.

What is a market-state?

Philip Bobbitt's work in *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History*; and *Terror and Consent: the Wars for the Twenty-First Century* provide cogent explanation for the current international security environment and offer the foundations of a broad strategic framework for emerging market-states such as Australia.

He explains the current security circumstances within the context of a state evolutionary process. The state, according to Bobbitt, is a dyadic construct, that is, it has two faces — its constitution is its internal face, while its strategic approach is its external one. The two exist together in a symbiotic relationship — major changes in one forces change in the other. These major changes usually occur through the mechanism of epochal war.¹ Epochal war is a major war or series of wars that challenge the

fundamental constitutional structure of the state, ultimately forcing changes to it by connecting strategic innovations to constitutional ones. Examples of epochal wars include: the Thirty Years' War; wars of the French Revolution; and the 'Long War' (1914 to 1990).

The Long War: unleashed five forces with major strategic consequences: (1) the recognition of human rights as norms requiring adherence in all states; (2) proliferation of nuclear weapons (and other forms of weapons of mass destruction); (3) the spread of transnational threats including those that damage the environment or threaten states such as disease, resource shortages and migration; (4) the growth of a world economic order that ignores borders in the movement of capital, limiting the ability of states to manage their own economies; and (5) the continued growth of a global communications network that renders state borders increasingly porous and threatens national languages, customs and cultures. Each of these has caused dramatically exacerbated the economic, cultural and military challenges facing the nation-state. It is becoming increasingly evident that nation-state is no longer capable of providing security to its citizens and, consequently, is evolving into the market-state.

Market-States Versus Nation-States

According to Bobbitt, the nation-state's central promise to its people is that it will improve their material welfare. To do this, it undertakes to manage all sectors of society, focusing the efforts of each so as to be able to wage industrial age warfare. In contrast, the market-state has reduced the scope of this promise to maximizing the economic opportunity of its people. Responding to the forces of globalisation, it has privatized many of what were state activities such as the provision of health, power, public transport, infrastructure construction. This has made representative government more responsive to the market and unlocked vast amounts wealth. This lesser promise has strategic consequences. Paul Monk characterises the difference between the two forms of state as follows:

A nation state is a state defined by sovereignty within territorial borders, the defence of those borders is by means of deterrence or retaliation for violation of

them, and a public policy of large-scale social security for the population within those borders.

A market state, by comparison, is defined by constitutional, economic and strategic adaptation to a world in which the claims of human rights, the reach of weapons of mass destruction, the proliferation of transnational threats to security and well-being, and the emergence of global capital markets that ignore borders, curtailing the power of states to control their own economies; while the development of telecommunications networks that likewise ignore borders, serves to undermine national languages, customs, cultures and regimes.²

A market-state does not have the same ability to focus all sectors of its society to wage war in the way nation-states were able. Consequently, smaller professional defence forces are replacing mass, conscripted ones. Market-states require their military forces to strive for greater economic efficiency. They will seek to wage a precision, information-based mode of warfare that aspires to fewer casualties and less destruction than the wars of the nation-state era. However, this does not mean novel and cataclysmic conflicts generating death and destruction on a scale well beyond that of the major conflicts of the Long War will not occur. Certainly major market-states have the means to achieve this now.³

Wars in the Market-state Era

The nation-state notion of deterrence based on nuclear and/or conventional forces remains relevant in inter-state relations, but has only limited utility against the array of failed state, sub-state and non-state protagonists that now populate the international stage. Likewise, the very nature of the conflict between states as well as states and non-state actors is rapidly evolving. We are seeing the evolution of asymmetric warfighting strategies, swarming and evolving concepts of cyber warfare. These are combining to form a bewildering and I suggest,

² P. Monk, *The Rise of the Market State*, Quadrant online Website, www.quadrant.org.au/magazine/issue/the-rise-of-the-market-state [accessed 5 July 2012]

overwhelming array of security challenges for nation-states. Their inability to cope with the new security paradigm has led to the genesis of the market-state.

According to Bobbitt, the wars of the new century comprise:

[t]hree different but related efforts at prevention and mitigation: an attempt to pre-empt attacks by global, networked terrorists; a struggle to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; and the worldwide endeavour to protect civilians from natural catastrophes and non-natural assaults that result in gross diminutions of humane conditions, including human rights.⁴

The key features of the new wars are their complexity, protracted timeframes, asymmetric nature and targeting of the security of the local civilian population. This was so in the case of Iraq's internecine conflict between Sunni and Shia militias during the period 2004-7.

Enemy groups hide and operate 'within the people', that is they draw succour from, but also target the security of the people to demonstrate the inability of mainly western supported governments to maintain security. Much of the actual conflict was waged in urban environments. The urban environment provides cover and is difficult for high technology western armies to utilise fully their overwhelming advantage in information gathering, firepower and manoeuvre. In addition, detection of enemy fighters is difficult in the complex terrain and 'noise' of major cities. The population and the indigenous security forces were targeted more often than were the professional and 'hardened' western soldiers. The city offers the insurgent a multitude of targets of opportunity as it is difficult for the security forces to protect all the markets, religious gathering places, public buildings, crowds gathered at checkpoints and so on.

The Armies of a market-state, like the Coalition forces in Iraq (under Petraeus), do not claim the right to determine the precise outcome of a

political process but rather try to provide that process with sufficient security so that its citizens can develop within their own polity in their own way.⁵

The Battle for Basrah (March/April 2008) - Market-State Operational Art?

The so-called 'surge' was the last role of dice by the Bush Administration to salvage the deteriorating situation in Iraq. Its aim was to provide sufficient combat power to the Coalition forces to implement a new counterinsurgency strategy whose focus (centre of gravity) was the provision of security to the people of Iraq. By quelling the internecine conflict that threatened to become an all out civil war, and degrading the potency of the broad array of extremist groups in the country it was hoped that the nascent Iraqi government would have sufficient time to reach a political accommodation between Sunni, Shia and Kurdish political factions. Moreover, spread its influence and solidify its grip on the fractious Iraqi state. It was also hoped that the relative security would act as a catalyst to kick-start the economy, foster a growth in employment and improve basic services such as the provision of power sewerage and water.

Likewise, prodigious effort went into growing and training the Iraqi security forces (ISF) to become capable of containing and ultimately, defeating the insurgency. General David Petraeus, one of the authors of the United States Army and Marine Corps 2006 *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* FM 3-24, was selected to put his theories into practice and assumed command of Multi-national Forces, Iraq (MNF-I) in January 2007.

In the lead up to this period, the so-called 'Sunni Awakenings' had resulted in Sunni tribal sheiks throwing in their lot with the Americans against AQI. It was during this time the 'surge' reached its zenith and the formal rapprochement with Shiite radical group, Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM), was severely tested. AQI was very much on the back foot. Its footprint in the major Iraqi urban centres was reduced dramatically and by April 2008, Mosul was the last city in which the organisation had any degree of freedom to manoeuvre. The

⁴ Bobbitt, *Terror and Consent*, p. 3.

flow of foreign fighters — its lifeblood — transiting through Syria was reduced to a trickle. The organisation's ability to transmit its message was degraded significantly and while it was still capable of conducting so-called spectacular attacks throughout much of Iraq, the frequency of these had attenuated dramatically during the period.



In February 2008 the leader of JAM, Muqtada al Sadr renewed the ceasefire that had been in existence for the preceding six months. JAM was the major Shia militia group with a strong presence in the southern and central provinces, including Baghdad. It had major strongholds in the southern port city of Basrah and the Sadr City region of Baghdad. Sustaining the truce was difficult for JAM's leadership due to the Coalition's concerted campaign against the leadership of the so-called JAM 'Special Groups'. Many of the Special Forces, many were in fact criminal gangs using the JAM moniker as cover for their nefarious activities, or they were under Iran's direct control. Clouding the picture further were reports indicating that some Special Groups were given leeway by al Sadr to attack the Coalition and the ISF. This arrangement gave him 'plausible deniability' while he manoeuvred with the Americans and the Iraqi government for more say in the political process.

In March 2008, Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki at the behest of General Petraeus undertook a fact-finding tour of Basrah in order to assess the extent that JAM, including those elements under Iran's sway, and various criminal elements controlled this strategically important city. So perturbed was al Maliki by what he saw, he mobilised four Iraqi Army brigades, against the

advice of Petraeus and without consulting the senior leadership of the Iraqi Army. On 26 March 2008, he personally led Operation Charge of the Knights, whose aim was to regain control of Basrah.

Basra, a primarily Shi'a city of more than one million people, is the capital of the oil rich al Basrah province. Strategically crucial, it is Iraq's major port and a significant oil refining centre. The nearby port of Umm Qasr provides Iraq's only deep water access. It had become evident that the British, along with the local ISF command had insufficient combat power to control the city and maintain law and order.

The operation's timing could not have been worse for the Coalition, as US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker and Petraeus were fully engaged in preparations for their report to Congress in April 2008. In addition, the Maliki initiative had the impact of ameliorating the fractious relationship that the mainstream JAM had with many of the Special Groups. Mainstream JAM could not stand by as their Special Group brothers were dying in the conflict.

Also exacerbating the situation was the fact that the British, who were responsible for security in al Basrah province, were sidelined. In December 2007, their troops were relocated into the international airport outside of the city, and postured for a complete withdrawal from Iraq. They had effectively ceded control of the city to JAM. A report in *The London Times* indicated that British intelligence had negotiated a rapprochement with JAM. British troops could not enter the city without the express permission of the then Defence Secretary, Des Browne. The delay in the British response to the military action meant that significant numbers of American troops had to be redeployed to assist the ISF control the violence.

A lack of planning and understanding of the extent of the disposition of the forces arrayed against him, ensured that al Maliki's operation quickly faltered. Exacerbating the situation was the fact that a large number of the troops selected by him were from newly raised brigades with little or no combat experience. A humiliating and politically damaging rout, as well as a

subsequent humanitarian disaster would have been the inevitable outcome but for Coalition intervention.

In late March, during the daily Battle Updates and Assessments (BUAs), as well as in a meeting with the Australian HoM, at which I was present, General Petraeus made it clear that MNF-I would not let the Iraqis fail in Basrah. He also indicated that the Iraqi operation presented an excellent opportunity to gain political capital for al Maliki, regain control of the city, and reduce Iranian influence. He also made it clear that MNF-I operations would continue unabated against AQI in Mosul, as he was concerned that the conflict in Basrah would be seen by them as an opportunity to regain the offensive against a distracted Coalition.

The Coalition plan that MNF-I crafted and executed on the fly, I put to you is very much a market-state or if you like, an information-age operation. Military Transition Teams (MiTTs), which were essentially military adviser teams, were rapidly deployed by the Americans, and eventually the British, to stiffen the resolve of the Iraqi forces in contact with well-entrenched JAM militias in Basrah. Battlefield enablers, that is, Coalition artillery, warplanes, helicopters, C2 systems, and logistics units were re-assigned to support the Iraqi operation. An American two-star general, with supporting headquarters staff, provided the Iraqis in Basrah with a planning capability. In addition and most importantly, a humanitarian assistance (HA) operation commenced almost immediately. Operation Charge of the Knights had caused the city's markets, which were the main source of food for most of the population, to close indefinitely; and there were fears that the city's water supply would rapidly degrade. Petraeus ensured that the Iraqi Army was the 'face' of the HA operation and appeared to have the lead in the kinetic parts of the campaign. The MiTT teams ensured that achievable objectives were identified by Iraqi commanders, and proper operational planning occurred. Systematic cordon and search missions gradually enabled the ISF and Coalition forces to gain control of previously JAM occupied areas of Basrah. Meanwhile, Petraeus and Crocker worked overtime to cajole key federal political figures to rally around Maiki and make public statements of support — something they were unwilling to do in the early stages of the

operation. Carefully crafted media releases reinforced the message that Operation Charge of the Knights was a bold Iraqi initiative whose aims were to free the citizens of Basrah from the grip of JAM Special Groups and criminal gangs and reimpose the rule of law. The releases were careful to delineate between the 'criminal JAM Special Groups' and al Sadr's mainstream JAM membership. Petraeus maintained throughout the campaign that al Sadr was an important player in Iraq's political future and the operation was not about reducing his political influence.

As Petraeus predicted, Operation Charge of the Knights did not fail, and throughout April and May, the Iraqi government strengthened its grip on Basrah. In addition, they commenced much-needed re-construction to bolster the gains made, recruited significant numbers of Basrah men for the ISF, and raised 'neighbourhood watch' groups; based on the successful Sons of Iraq model used in Sunni dominated areas. In addition, Maliki and his government improved their stocks with the people of Iraq and the ISF, despite their shaky start, improved their credibility.

A Market-State Military Operation

The 'Battle for Basrah' is, I posit, an excellent example of the market-state's agile, nuanced and subtle mode of warfare. A potential catastrophe became a springboard for a series of manoeuvres that resulted in the solidification of the indigenous government's grip on power. It reduced a major rival's sway in a strategically important city and shaped circumstances to pave the way for a major offensive against JAM in its Baghdad stronghold of Sadr City. Petraeus saw opportunity in a crisis and moved with decisiveness and agility to seize it. His primary aim of enhancing the security of the people of Basrah was in perfect alignment with his strategic aim of providing a window of relative security for the Iraqi people so that their political leaders could establish consensual governance.

The scheme of manoeuvre for the campaign included political, humanitarian and kinetic lines of operation. Moreover, it was a true information operation with its key objective being the enhancement of al Maliki's political standing by improving the security of the people of Basrah. Subordinate objectives were the reduction of

both Muqtada al Sadr and Iran's influence in the southern capital as well as the re-establishment of law and order. The Coalition's humanitarian and kinetic operations were launched simultaneously with the Iraqi Army as the 'face' of the former and conducting the actual hand-to-hand fighting in the latter. The Iraqi Army was 'enabled' by Coalition planning and key battlefield capabilities but was not reliant on its combat units. The critical piece was the presence of MiTTs, initially American and then later British, embedded in Iraqi units and formations. In addition to providing Iraqi commanders with access to force multipliers such as ISTAR, logistics, precision weapons delivered by aircraft and artillery and the MiTTs assisted with tactical planning.

The local and international media were artfully manipulated to portray Maliki as a decisive leader who was willing to confront JAM, in particular its so-called 'Iranian backed Special Group criminal' elements and criminal gangs, in order to re-establish the rule of law in Basrah. Much was made of the Iraqi Army's ability to mobilise over a division's worth of troops and then launch a major offensive within a two to three day period. Coalition leaders suggested that it demonstrated the Iraqi Army's growing professionalism. The initial poor performance of many ISF units, particularly the police, tended to be glossed-over or downplayed. The overall message was simple and powerful, the Iraqi government and by association the ISF, cared about the local people's wellbeing. Likewise, as the ISF, under Coalition guidance, became more systematic in its operational approach, and thus increasingly successful in clearing militia elements from former strongholds within the city. MNF-I's media messaging emphasised that this was an ISF-led mission with only 'minimal' Coalition input and that the successes achieved were indication of increasing Iraqi professionalism. Six months later MNF-I's information operation appeared to have worked so well that Nuri al-Maliki himself was seemingly convinced that Knights Charge was an Iraqi only operation! No mention was made of the Coalition's role in subsequent media interviews.

It was described thus in the *Washington Times*:

Knights Charge was a carefully integrated political-military operation. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki

made it clear Knights Charge was planned and executed by the Iraqis themselves. Mr al-Maliki and his government know they are waging a political war, and Knights Charge was a military operation with major political objectives. One was to further isolate Muqtada al-Sadr and his Shia thugs. Another key political objective was to solidify Mr. al-Maliki's nationalist credentials.⁶

Conclusion

Petraeus demonstrated his understanding that his key aim was the security of Iraqi people, which helped enhance the Iraqi government and its security forces' credibility with the people. The information campaign played to multiple audiences, including; American elite and public opinion, which was critical given the Congressional hearing that Crocker and Petraeus were to attend in April 2008; Iraqi public and elite opinion; and the broader Muslim world. In addition, Petraeus saw an opportunity to reduce JAM and Iranian influence in Basrah and roll back JAM's control of Sadr city. He understood too, that al Qaeda in Iraq would seek to exploit the opportunity created and he took steps to prevent this eventuality.

The Iraq war has been a harsh learning experience for the United States military. It discovered that its myopic focus on conventional operations had left it ill prepared for the complex post-invasion insurgency in which it found itself. By the time General Petraeus confronted the al-Maliki induced conflict against JAM, the American military was well on the pathway to becoming an agile information-age organisation. In Basrah, it demonstrated both its adeptness in counter insurgency operations and way in which military forces of market-states must perform in the complex conflicts of the new era.

Biography:



BRIG Michael Arnold graduated from the Royal Military College in 1981 into the Royal Australian Signals Corps. He transferred to the Army Reserve in 1989. From 1992 to 1995, he commanded a rifle company at the 5th/6th Battalion, Royal Victoria Regiment, later commanding the battalion from 1999 to 2000. He was Director Army Personnel Agency, Melbourne from 2005 to September 2007. His training appointments include postings as: Coy 2IC Melbourne University Regiment; Officer Commanding, Officer Cadet Company and Operations Officer at Monash University Regiment; Senior Instructor, Pre-Intermediate Officer's Course at 3rd Training Group; and Chief Instructor, Reserves at the Australian Command and Staff College, 2001 to 2003. He is currently working with Joint Capability Coordination branch on the development of a Strategic Common Picture for the Defence Force's senior leadership. He was appointed Honorary ADC to the Governor-General in January 2010. He commanded the 4th Brigade, from 2008 to 2009. During the period 8 February to 31 March 2009, he commanded JTF 662 – the joint taskforce raised to coordinate the Australian Defence Force's response to the Victorian bushfire emergency. For his performance as commander he was awarded the Conspicuous Service Cross. From October 2007 to April 2008 he was posted to Iraq as

Defence Attaché, Baghdad. He received a Chief of the Defence Force Commendation for his performance in this role. Brigadier Arnold's civilian occupations are defence contractor with the consultancy, KPMG and casual lecturer with Deakin University.

