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The Recurring Importance of Prisoner and Detainee Operations

In the course of military actions following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the United States, detainees and how to manage them have been increasingly controversial topics for U.S., allied, Middle Eastern, and other policymakers and publics. “Guantanamo Bay” and “Abu Ghraib” became provocative shorthand terms for examples of how detainee operations could go wrong if clear and current doctrine did not exist.

In many ways, the problems at Abu Ghraib stemmed from a failure within high-level policy circles in Washington to plan sufficiently for detainee operations—i.e., a failure to anticipate the need to detain large numbers of individuals, to have in place an adequate doctrine for doing so, and to have trained and disciplined personnel to understand and execute the doctrine. Such failures have had serious consequences for U.S. military and diplomatic efforts. The Abu Ghraib scandal put the United States in a defensive posture, causing the focus of its detainee operations to shift toward the basics: training military policemen, guards, intelligence personnel, and soldiers to uphold a higher standard with respect to the treatment of detainees.

From the beginning of the U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003, policymakers in Washington and Baghdad who were responsible for detention had improvised plans for detainee operations. They had not expected that the surrender terms dictated by the Coalition to conventionally arrayed Iraqi forces would result in the detention and housing of large numbers of enemy combatants or the need for a parole

system. They were reluctant to accept the existence of a sizable insurgency and, hence, did not have adequate capacity to manage increasing numbers of detainees. The U.S. Army, which had primary responsibility for combat operations in Iraq, lacked an overall counterinsurgency doctrine. When one was developed, it did not fully include doctrine related to detainee operations. Policymakers also failed to appreciate the importance of a multidisciplinary understanding of the cultural, social, political, and economic motivations of the detainees who were captured during the insurgency.

The problems U.S. forces encountered conducting detainee operations in Iraq stemmed from two principal shortfalls: the lack of appropriate technical competencies and the lack of clear policy and doctrine. These problems were not unique to operations in Iraq. Indeed, the history of major U.S. conflicts dating to World War II reveals a typical pattern, including

- belated recognition that prisoners will be taken in significant numbers and will need to be managed
- hasty scrambling for resources needed for prisoner or detainee operations
- a period of crisis management often accompanied by negative incidents
- a concerted but difficult effort to improve operations
- incipient understanding of the opportunities for influence through reintegration of prisoners into their society
- belated education and integration programs, with outcomes that could have been optimized by better and earlier implementation of a comprehensive plan.

This document synthesizes what is known about prisoner and detainee operations. It includes historical reviews of prisoner and detainee operations since World War II, as well as more-detailed reviews of detainee operations in Iraq and the lessons they offer for doctrine and practice.

In the second chapter, we review efforts to persuade nearly a half-million German prisoners of war (POWs) in U.S. detention facilities

of the advantages of democracy over fascism. These efforts were controversial at the time, given widespread beliefs—similar to some current ones about Iraqi insurgents—that Nazi soldiers would resist such education. Instead, camp administrators found that prisoners varied widely in their commitment to the Nazi regime and their openness to other ideas. Many participants in camp education programs contributed significantly to postwar West Germany.

In the third chapter, we review efforts to house and educate prisoners in the Korean War. These efforts occurred at a small number of massive camps, one of which housed more than 150,000 prisoners. Among these prisoners, as in World War II, there was a wide range of beliefs, making it necessary to tailor programs to subsets of prisoners. Later, programs were complicated by the reluctance of some prisoners to return to their homelands.

In the fourth chapter, we review detainee operations during the Vietnam conflict, particularly after the escalation of American military involvement. Like those during the Korean War, these efforts had to address varying levels of commitment to the insurgency by detainees, who ranged from uniformed military personnel openly engaging in military actions to sympathizers or clandestine supporters of the insurgency to defectors who wished to rejoin the side of the South Vietnamese government. Vietnamese detainee operations also included a motivation and morale survey that began to explore the types of information that might be gained from prisoners.

In the fifth chapter, we review detainee operations in Iraq. From the commencement of initial combat operations in Iraq through the Abu Ghraib scandal in 2004, detainee operations were slow to develop. During that period, detainee operations varied by facility and the burgeoning numbers of detainees they housed. Beginning in late 2004, a more-comprehensive attempt was made to uniformly revamp detainee operations across the country, to emphasize links between detainee and tactical operations in the counterinsurgency, and to develop programs for reintegrating detainees into Iraqi society and in anticipation of the transfer of responsibility for detainee operations to the Government of Iraq (GOI).

In the final chapter, we summarize our research and its implications. This includes a summary of technical issues, such as care of detainees, and doctrinal issues, such as the role detainee operations play in prosecution of the conflict (e.g., through information gathered from detainees) or reconstruction afterwards (e.g., through education and rehabilitation of detainees).

Despite the inevitability and ultimate importance of detainee operations in military conflicts, policymakers have repeatedly treated such operations as an afterthought and then struggled to make them more effective. Developing doctrine on what is ultimately an opportunity to be leveraged can improve both military operations and post-conflict reconstruction.