The Mosul Study Group and the Lessons of the Battle of Mosul

by Major Amos C. Fox, U.S. Army

The Mosul Study Group and the Lessons of the Battle of Mosul

by Major Amos C. Fox, U.S. Army

Land Warfare Paper No. 130, February 2020

The Mosul Study Group and the Lessons of the Battle of Mosul

by Major Amos C. Fox, U.S. Army

U.S. Army Major Amos C. Fox is the executive officer for 3rd Squadron, 4th Security Force Assistance Brigade at Fort Carson, Colorado. He previously served with the 1st Armored Division, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and 4th Infantry Division and at the U.S. Army Armor School. He is a graduate from the U.S. Army's School of Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where he was awarded the Tom Felts Leadership Award in 2017.

Contents

Preface

Operation Inherent Resolve's Battle of Mosul (October 2016–July 2017) was one of the most pulverizing battles in recent times, and it resulted in the tactical defeat of the Islamic State. Looking to capitalize on it, U.S. Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) commissioned the Mosul Study Group to provide a report. The goal of the report was to glean lessons from the battle and get them back out to the force as quickly as possible. TRADOC and the Mosul Study Group succeeded in this endeavor, publishing *What the Battle of Mosul Teaches the Force* a mere two months after it had formally concluded.

However, TRADOC and the Mosul Study Group's haste resulted in missing that Mosul was decisive in relation to the larger campaign to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq. Further, the report failed to articulate the paradoxical role that precision-strike capabilities and precision-guided munitions played. Lastly, the report failed to highlight that it was a block-by-block positional battle of attrition in which steel, sweat and blood saved the day—not new doctrinal concepts, Facebook "likes" or Twitter branding.

In its haste, TRADOC's report, which reads more like narrative reinforcement than actual lessons from the battle, runs the risk of de-legitimizing future "lessons learned" work. The faulty research methods exemplified here—such as issuing a report on lessons learned a mere two months after a battle concludes and reporting that reinforces existing doctrinal predilections at the expense of challenging and assessing doctrinal utility—need to be addressed. Otherwise, reports like this run the risk of telling the Army what it wants to hear and not what it needs to hear.

The Mosul Study Group
and the Lessons of the Battle of Mosul

Introduction

On the heels of Operation Inherent Resolve's Battle of Mosul, the U.S. Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) commissioned a team, the Mosul Study Group, to produce a report. Its stated purpose was to, "Provide immediate impressions of Operation Eagle Strike that may or should directly impact the Army and how it approaches future conflicts."[1] While TRADOC's intent was good, the Mosul Study Group's method and timeline resulted in a flawed report.

The fatal problem with the report lies within its purpose; its focus on immediate impressions resulted in the Mosul Study Group failing to explain the principal impact from the Battle of Mosul. Battles won and battles lost take time to show their true effects, both positive and negative, for all actors involved. Consequently, looking primarily at immediate impressions was the first step in the wrong direction for deriving lessons from the Battle of Mosul. TRADOC should have taken into consideration the battle's gestation period, in which the effects from the battle take shape and slowly present themselves. Doing so would have afforded the Mosul Study Group the opportunity to identify both the battle's true impact on the war to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and what the battle represents in relation to current and forecasted martial trends.

In assessing what the Mosul Study Group missed in its haste to render a report, one finds that the victory in Mosul was decisive in the war to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq. This was not readily understood in the heady aftermath in which the study group rendered its report. Further, while the study group gave tacit acknowledgment of the ironic results that followed the Iraqi and Coalition's reliance on precision-strike capabilities, it did not discuss them adequately. This contradiction, referred to here as the Precision Paradox, arguably increased death and destruction in the city instead of achieving the goal of one shot, one kill. Lastly, the study group failed to illuminate the principal-agent, or principal-proxy, dynamic on the battlefield; instead, it maintained the euphemistic, feel-good language of security force assistance and by, with and through operations.

Furthermore, the report's haste disassociated its findings from trends in modern war. Stepping back from the battle's minutia and looking overall at how it fits within the concept of

modern war in general reveals three distinct trends. First, decisive battles have returned to the battlefield; second, a reciprocal dynamic between layered defenses and sieges has taken root in modern war; and third, proxy wars dominate contemporary armed conflict and will continue to do so into the foreseeable future. Further, land-based positional exchanges of attrition dominate modern war and will continue to decide wars moving forward.

Before examining these points, this essay provides a brief overview of the battle in order to provide context. It concludes with a number of recommendations to make up for the Mosul Study Group's shortcomings.

The Battle of Mosul: A Modern Day Verdun

The effort to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq began in the western desert of Iraq with a slow but successful campaign, including a devastating battle in Ramadi, fought in Anbar Province.[2] Success in Anbar provided the government of Iraq and the Coalition the opportunity to transition its focus to the Islamic State strong-point in Mosul by the fall of 2016.[3] The Battle of Mosul, viewed as the centerpiece of the campaign, began in earnest in October 2016.

For the Islamic State, engaging the Iraqi and U.S.-led Coalition in open warfare was a non-starter, as doing so would ensure certain destruction. On the other hand, Mosul, the Islamic State's de facto Iraqi capital, provided an excellent location to meet Iraqi and Coalition forces. It was ideal because its dense urban area offered the outmatched Islamic State the opportunity to offset its military shortcomings through a layered positional defense.[4] This allowed the Islamic State to intensify the cost of war for the Iraqis and Coalition, thereby breathing a degree of parity into battle and providing them with a chance at victory. With this in mind, the Islamic State massed its army in Mosul and prepared its defenses.[5] Their numbers there ranged between 5,000 and 12,000 soldiers.[6] Conversely, the government of Iraq and the Kurdish Regional Government fielded a combined force totaling 94,000 soldiers, with an additional 14,000 partisans, for a total of 108,000 combatants.[7]

The battle for Mosul raged white-hot for nine months, with both sides teetering on the cusp of culmination by the summer of 2017. Eventually, the combined industrial might of the Iraqi-Coalition partnership won out, resulting in control of the city slipping from the Islamic State's grasp and its army all but destroyed. Prime Minister Haider Abadi declared victory in Mosul in July 2017, but the fighting carried on at a low simmer until August, when the Islamic State's final holdouts were defeated.[8]

In retrospect, it is easy to suggest that defeat was inescapable for the Islamic State. However, the battle was not decided in advance. Defeating the Islamic State in Mosul required the combined effort of Iraq and the U.S.-led Coalition for a sustained nine months and four days. To put that point in context, World War I's Battle of Verdun, the longest battle of that war, lasted nine months, three weeks and six days. It annihilated several French villages, as well as French and German divisions, relegating them to footnotes in history books.[9] The Battle of Mosul created 10 million tons of detritus, drove out 44 percent of the city's population of 1.8 million and generated a $2 billion reconstruction bill.[10]

Modern technology such as drones, robots and precision strike did not save the day in Mosul. Brute force, willpower and attrition won the day. The battle's interval and ferocity suggest a struggle more tenuous than the one that the Mosul Study Group's glowing account suggests. Above all else, this is what it missed in its report.

The Halcyon Days of Decisive Battle

TRADOC's alacrity in publishing its report on Mosul caused the Mosul Study Group to omit the battle's decisive effect, i.e., the change in trajectory that it triggered on the campaign and the larger war. Consequently, the report obscures rather than elucidates potential lessons learned from the Battle of Mosul.

Individual battles often have ordinal effects beyond mere victory or defeat that take time to surface as they ripple through larger campaigns. In this case, TRADOC's releasing its report a mere two months after Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Abadi ceremoniously declared victory, and a few weeks following cessation of the residual combat, resulted in inadequate time for the battle's second- and third-order effects to germinate and display their reverberations on the campaign.

While decisiveness is absent from the Mosul Study Group's report, it mentions decisive action several times. That begs the question—what is decisive action, and how does it differ from decisive battle?

U.S. Army doctrine defines decisive action as, "The continuous, simultaneous execution of offensive, defensive, and stability operations or defense support of civil authority tasks."[11] The definition is wide-ranging and bereft of tangible thoughts on any particular facet of warfighting. Further, the Army definition misuses the word. A common definition for decisive is, "having the power to decide," or being "resolute or determined."[12] The Army definition, however, mentions nothing about having the power to decide, nor resolute or determined warfighting. To put it another way, there is nothing decisive about their definition.

Military theorists and historians have comparatively sharper parameters. Theorist B.H. Liddell Hart contends that an event is decisive only when its conditions allow a belligerent to gain a decision there.[13] Meanwhile, historian Cathal Nolan, contemplating the macro-level, argues that decision in war is achieved when a battle, operation or campaign achieves a useful strategic or political goal, which in turn results in the long-term maintenance of one's respective interests.[14]

British theorist J.F.C. Fuller provides the most apropos definition. He posits that decisiveness in war, whether at the policy or tactical level, is the result of aggregate action against an opponent that causes it to unwillingly accept the policy in dispute or to change its plan. Its resultant effect is that an opponent thereafter acquiesces because it finds any further resistance futile.[15] To carry the point to its logical conclusion, it is time, above all else, that reveals whether or not a battle resulted in decisive effects.

Mosul's decisiveness in relation to the campaign to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq goes unnoted in the Mosul Study Group's report. This reverberation was not readily noticeable in the waning days of the battle—which was when the study group collected its information. The battle shattered the Islamic State's army; it was both unable and unwilling to stand and fight afterward, as the subsequent battle for Tal A'far illustrated. Reports in late August 2017 indicated that "the battle for Tal A'far . . . highlighted the diminished capabilities of the Islamic State in Iraq a month after it lost the key bastion of Mosul. . . . The swift collapse in Tal A'far was unexpected."[16]

From Tal A'far onward, the Islamic State waged a strategy of evasion and refused battle at all turns. The Iraqi and Coalition campaign plan, which programmed battles in Tal A'far,

Hawijah, the Middle Euphrates River Valley and al Qaim, never materialized because of the Islamic State's strategy of evasion that was brought about by Mosul's decisiveness.[17]

The battle's decisive effects hastened divergent interests between the government of Iraq and the Coalition. Once the Islamic State's defeat became apparent, the government of Iraq began to distance itself from the Coalition. The Iraqi government's expedition to quell Kurdish independence in October 2017, in spite of U.S. opposition, is perhaps the most striking example of how the battle reshaped the partners' policy objectives.[18] Additionally, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Abadi's push to decrease the U.S. troop presence in Iraq following the Islamic State's defeat is another example of the battle's effect not only on the campaign, but on the overall war.[19] Chiefly, Mosul's decisiveness triggered a change in each belligerent's plans, both militarily and politically, and it took several months for those effects to materialize.

More broadly, it is important to consider Mosul's decisiveness because the battle is representative of the increasing frequency of decisive battles in modern war. Beyond the deserts of Iraq, the Russo-Ukrainian War's Battle of Ilovaisk in August 2014 proved decisive because it resulted in the Minsk Protocol between the governments of Russia and Ukraine, resulting in a temporary ceasefire between the belligerents.[20] Later, the battles for Donetsk Airport and the siege of Debal'tseve were decisive encounters that drove the Minsk II Agreement and resultant stalemate in eastern Ukraine.[21] Finally, the Battle of Marawi, a five-month positional battle of attrition, shattered the Islamic State in the Philippines and proved decisive in that campaign.[22]

Decisive battle's return is important to note because it flies in the face of the current Information Age prophesying that Facebook "likes," retweets on Twitter and "1 and 0s," are the key to winning the next major battle or war. Those things are little more than tools to help shape the battlefield. Instead, Mosul, when viewed as a data point across contemporary war, suggests that positional battles of attrition among stalwart antagonists will continue to decide the course of campaigns, wars and policy for the foreseeable future.

Positional Battles of Attrition and the Layered Defense-Siege Dynamic

Building upon the previous point, the Mosul Study Group failed to state that the battle for Mosul was a positional battle of attrition in which both sides sought to physically exhaust and morally disintegrate the other. The U.S. Army fought the campaign through a small number of proxies, to include the Iraqi army, Kurdish security forces and various partisans from across the country.

The Islamic State, likely sensing its relative weakness to that of Iraqi and Coalition forces, assumed a defensive posture in Mosul. Its purpose was to bring a degree of parity to the battle by attempting to functionally and positionally dislocate the Iraqi and Coalition forces while increasing Iraqi and Coalition investment costs.[23] In doing so, the Islamic State nudged the scale of war more toward their favor. In most cases, like Mosul, layered defenses are broken through varying degrees of a siege, in which the aggressor seeks to isolate the defender, preventing its reinforcement and simultaneously destroying the defender and its bases of support over time. The siege is the intrinsic reciprocal response to the layered, positional defense (see Figure 1).

Nonetheless, Mosul is one example within the larger theater campaign to regionally defeat the Islamic State. If one looks to Syria, there are multiple examples of positional battles of attrition. Specifically, the sieges of Aleppo, Raqqa, Kobani, Deir ez-Zor and Ghouta fortify

this point.[24] Beyond Middle East battlefields, positional battles of attrition loom large in the Russo-Ukrainian War. The Battles of Donetsk Airport, Luhansk Airport and Debal'tseve are the most striking examples within that conflict.

The point is that while the Mosul Study Group mentioned layered defense within a dense urban environment, they failed to articulate what that really looks like. Mosul was a positional battle of attrition in which one adversary sought to push the other to the point of culmination, while doing their best to parry their own culminating point in the process. This type of combat is on the rise.

Finally, it is instructive to note that the Mosul Study Group also failed to mention that a decisive battle's effects are fleeting. Decisive battles can be squandered if not followed up with action that safeguards military and political consequence.

Figure 1

Layered Defense-Siege Dynamic

The Battle of Mosul highlights this point because Iraq now finds the Islamic State on the rebound and Iranian proxies abound.[25] This is due in large part to insufficient and ineffective constabulary forces, insufficient reconstruction effort and insufficient representation in the government.[26] In unilateral wars, those fought in a non-proxy or non-coalition form, effective follow-through is often a simpler task. In coalition or transactional proxy wars, it is increasingly difficult because one has far less control over the post-battle environment. In either case, failure to plan for the post-conflict peace is the acme of martial bewilderment.

Proxy Wars—Today's Dominant Form of War

The U.S. Army's involvement in the battle for Mosul via proxy is a defining feature of the conflict, yet the Mosul Study Group failed to note this. Instead, the study group echoed the Army's euphemistic security force assistance and advise and assist narratives to soften the character of its transactional proxy relationship with Iraqi and Kurdish forces.[27]

This is important to note because proxy war, not large-scale combat operations (LSCO) or MDO, is the dominant feature in great power and regional power conflict. This is true for two reasons. First, proxy wars permit great powers and regional powers to pursue their self-interests in a strategic environment that is regulated by the specter of nuclear strike. Second, proxy wars provide a means by which a nation can outsource combat in a blood-soaked, destructive war without feeling the full weight of that combat at home. To put it another way, proxy wars empower nation-states to side-step the domestic and political unrest of bloody wars, yet still engage in them.

In effect, modern proxy wars unhinge Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz's concept of the paradoxical trinity, in which three martial tendencies—the passion and enmity of the people, the chance and probability of armies and the reason or political aims of governments—are in constant balance with one another.[28] Modern proxy war removes the passion, or
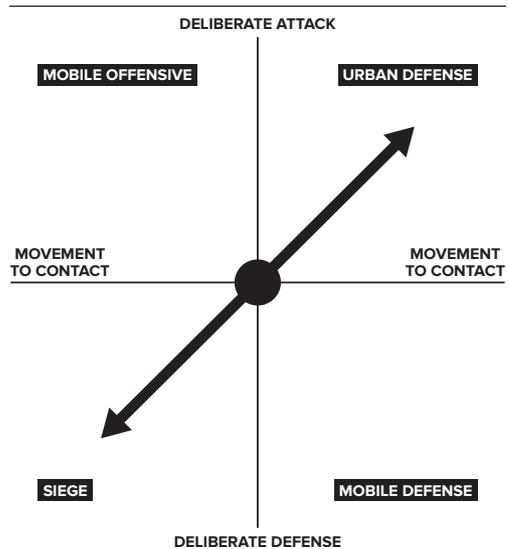
Clausewitz's Broken Trinity

CLAUSEWITZ'S PARADOXICAL TRINITY

Traditional war is balanced by the interaction of policy, those fighting the war and those waging the war.

Proxy war is unrestrained by societal feedback.
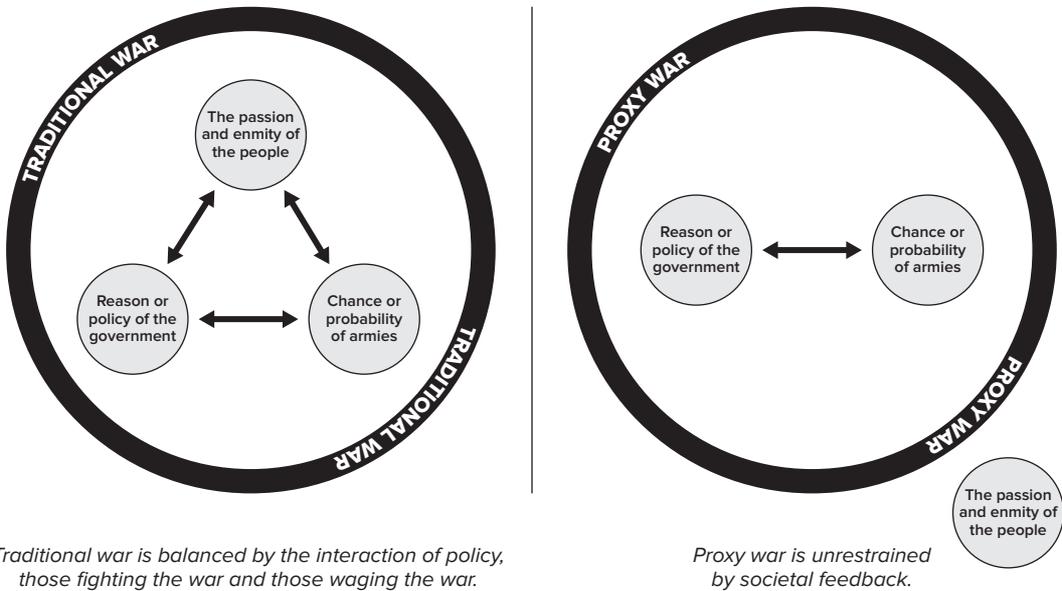
enmity, of the people from a principal actor. This is important to note because, in the past, passion and enmity helped serve to govern policy; today, at least from an American perspective, that governance has been lost (see Figure 2). The resultant effect is little-to-no societal limits on a militaristic foreign policy, which results in regions of the globe, such as the Middle East and swaths of Africa, turning into combat zones that span decades and achieve little in the way of tangible outcomes.

Moreover, Mosul helps illustrate that modern proxy wars are often positional wars of attrition. Looking next door in Syria, a throng of proxy-supported positional battles of attrition dominate the battlespace: the battles for Aleppo (19 July 2012 to 22 December 2016), Raqqa (6 November 2016 to 17 October 2017), Kobani (13 September 2014 to 15 March 2015), Deir ez-Zor (14 July 2014 to 10 September 2017) and Ghouta (7 April 2013 to 14 April 2018) all meet this definition.[29]

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War is another sampling of proxy war characterized by positional battles of attrition. The most notable are the Battle of Luhansk Airport (April–September 2014), the Second Battle of Donetsk Airport (14 September 2014 to 21 January 2015) and the Battle of Debal'tseve (14 January to 20 February 2015).[30] These positional battles of attrition are key factors in the war's 13,000 dead.[31]

Iraq, Syria and the Russo-Ukrainian War are but a few examples of this phenomena dominating modern war—a multitude of other examples also exist. Two conclusions emerge from this understanding. First, proxy wars will continue to be the face of battle for the foreseeable future. Second, so long as proxy wars continue to dominate war, positional battles of attrition (urban defense-attritional siege dynamic) will continue to loom large in war. Therefore,

the U.S. Army should invest time, intellectual energy and resources to developing a theory of proxy war and to understanding these issues.

Furthermore, the Mosul Study Group, in heaping laurels on U.S. Army security force assistance efforts, overlooked the ramification of proxy operations on both its Iraqi proxy and the operating environment.[32] For instance, the manner in which U.S. forces operated with their proxy counterpart during the Battle of Mosul facilitated a number of conditions that resulted in the Islamic State's reemergence in Iraq. The U.S. Army's by, with and through partnership, coupled with contact with an obstinate foe, exacted a deleterious impact on the Iraqi security forces.[33] It did so by attriting Iraqi forces to the point that an insufficient constabulary force remained to police liberated territory after the battle. Indeed, Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service suffered roughly 60 percent causalities in Mosul, while its conventional counterparts suffered over 10,000 casualties in the battle.[34] As a result, the government of Iraq had to turn to a large number of Shia-dominated militias to help regulate liberated areas after the Islamic State's demise.

In turn, the Shia militias continued participation in Iraq after the Islamic State's fall resulted in a tit-for-tat exchange between Iranian-backed Shia militia groups and U.S. forces through the winter of 2019–2020.[35] Therefore it is reasonable to call for a thorough review of how the U.S. Army prosecutes proxy war—and to develop proxy warfare doctrine that clearly provides a framework for waging proxy war that aligns the combat advising mission with its own post-war aims and those of its agent. For, as Liddell Hart reminds the practitioner of war, "The object in war is to attain a better peace—even if only from your own point of view. Hence it is essential to conduct war with constant regard to the peace you desire."[36]

The Precision Paradox

The Mosul Study Group failed to fully illuminate the albatross wrought by precision strike and instead focused on lauding precision strike during the battle. Yet, precision strike proffers a false-positive in relation to the putative intent (i.e., one shot, one kill) and effect (i.e., reducing collateral damage). To put it another way, the Battle of Mosul demonstrated that precision strike was not effective in removing the target from the battlefield on the first attempt, nor was it effective in decreasing collateral damage. To be sure, the Battle of Mosul presents a paradox for precision-strike enthusiasts. The Mosul Study Group briefly alludes to this:

> In Mosul, the destruction of physical terrain did not necessarily equate to comparable effects against personnel or communication nodes. Munition choices in Mosul, amplified by the structural density of the city, were not always proportional to the intended effects on the enemy and, when combined with rules of engagement considerations, on collateral damage. Even when considering overpressure and blast waves from these rounds, ISIS fighters were forced from their defensive positions by shrapnel or direct-fire weapon systems, rather than blast effects.[37]

Open-source reporting is replete with accounts in which initial strikes did not kill all the fighters at the target site, resulting in fighters fleeing to adjacent buildings.[38] The absconding fighters resulted in more precision strikes launched and thus the effected repeated. This paradoxical targeting loop generated a spidering effect from a proximal target location and can be referred to as the Precision Paradox (see Figure 3).

Furthermore, the omnipresent threat of precision strikes propelled Islamic State soldiers underground, tunneling from house to house in order to avoid detection by overhead

Figure 3

Precision Paradox

FRIENDLY LAND FORCE DIRECTION OF ATTACK

Structure

Precision strike

Enemy movement
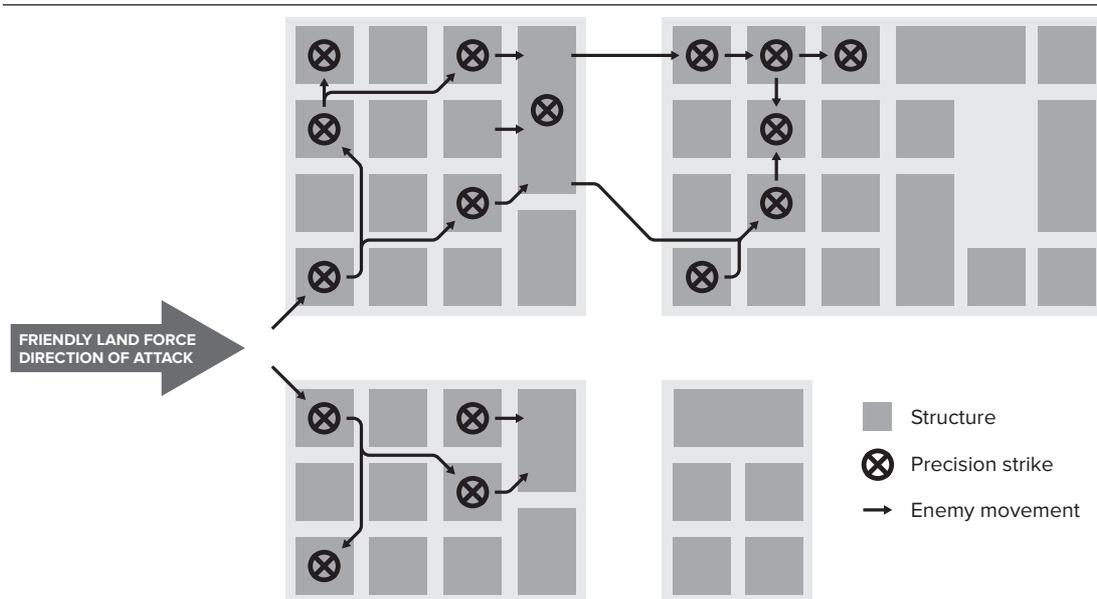
surveillance.[39] In turn, precision strike's second order effect—driving Islamic State fighters into the shadows—further amplified destruction in Mosul.

This cause-and-effect loop, or Precision Paradox, creates a situation in which the failed promise of precision strike—one strike, one kill—generates a creeping wave of destruction across the battlefield. Reports vary and it is challenging to get the math to add up correctly, but upwards of 10,000 civilians were killed during the battle, of which 3,200 were from Coalition airstrikes and indirect fire.[40]

The Precision Paradox also contributed to 800,000 residents fleeing Mosul and taking up sanctuary at displaced persons camps in northern Iraq.[41] This number is even more striking when considering that Mosul's population was 1.8 million at the beginning of the battle, meaning that the battle drove approximately 44 percent of the population from the city.[42] In western Mosul alone, 40,000 homes were destroyed.

Additionally, the albatross of precision strike and its slow rolling wave of destruction is a primary factor in the grinding positional battle of attrition that pulverized the city. The sense of security provided by precision strike resulted in Iraqi land forces waiting to advance until Coalition strikes shaped the target area in front of them. This caused the battle, especially in western Mosul, to degenerate into a methodical slog as Iraqi forces attempted to sequentially eliminate threats before moving forward.[43]

The Coalition's precision-strike approach yielded two results. In most cases, as the Mosul Study Group alluded to, over-reliance on it increased death and collateral damage during the battle. Second, it severely cut into the American stockpile of precision weapons. Open-source reporting toward the end of the battle notes that the U.S. military was running out of precision-guided munitions during the campaign to defeat the Islamic State.[44]

Finally, the Mosul Study Group advises that, "Units must be prepared to contend with internally displaced persons during tactical operations," but they did little to explain how the Coalition's precision-strike operations powered the exceedingly high collateral damage in the city.[45] Arguably, the employment of more land forces, and less reliance on precision strike, could have both reduced the death and destruction within the city and minimized precision munitions cost. This thought should be carried forward as the U.S. Army ponders future war in dense urban terrain against a heavily invested enemy land force.

Conclusion

In rushing a product onto the street, TRADOC and its Mosul Study Group overlooked a number of key insights from the Battle of Mosul. First, these are the halcyon days of decisive battle. Similarly, and contrary to what fashionable commentary suggests, decisive battle against non-state actors is not a chimera—it is quite achievable. Indeed, non-state actors massing for large battles happens with regularity today, as battles like Mosul, Marawi, Ilovaisk, Second Donetsk Airport and Debal'tseve illustrate. Yet for far too long, their supposedly universal amorphous method for operating has been used as an excuse to offset U.S. military shortcomings in modern conflicts. This excuse has reached astronomic proportions.[46]

Mosul, a modern day corollary to World War I's Battle of Verdun and the battles mentioned above, illustrates that non-state actors will come out of the shadows and mass for battle if given the time and opportune conditions. Massing promotes destruction because a massed enemy force is far easier to find, fix in place and kill than one operating in the shadows. The goal should therefore be to either allow or cause an enemy force to mass. If done effectively— through physically exhausting an adversary's resources and will to resist—battles against a massed enemy can achieve decisive military and political results.

Further, the positional defense, especially in a large urbanized area, levels the playing field. Mosul's duration and ferocity illustrate this point. A "JV team" of Islamic fundamentalists were able to drag a nation and its 73 Coalition partners into a sordid nine-month attritional affair that left the city pulverized and the Iraqi forces on the brink of culmination.[47] One should therefore assume that potential adversaries have observed this and can conclude that wars will continue to be defensive struggles waged in urban areas. Moreover, so long as the U.S. military is seen as indomitable and in control of all domains of conflict, the more it will encounter positional defenses in urban terrain (see Figure 4). This does not just apply to the U.S. military, but to

Figure 4
Correlation of Strength to Form of Warfare
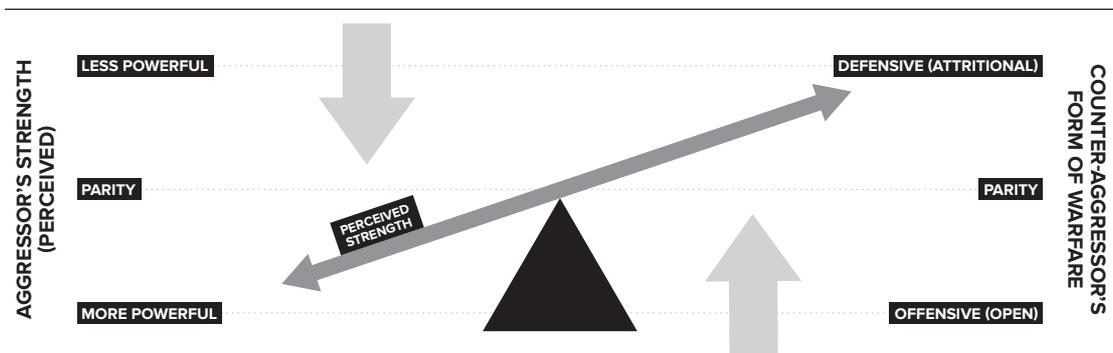
any force that assesses itself to be at a significant disadvantage in relation to its known adversary. This idea is nothing new; Clausewitz believed that defense is the stronger form of war, and that its use is most often charged by one's weakness and need for self-preservation.[48] It is also important to note that as urban defenses continue to rise, so too will their counterpoint, the siege.

The U.S. Army should factor these features—decisive battle against state and non-state actors, the dominant role of the positional defense in future war and the resultant siege—into its ongoing doctrinal revisions that feature future warfare and LSCO. Additionally, the U.S. Army should clearly articulate the fleeting character of decisive battle and move away from the jargonistic and intangible phrase "consolidate gains," which in its current form consists of nearly any activity short of LSCO.[49]

Moreover, Mosul and the campaign to defeat the Islamic State are but one data point in a panoply of data points that clearly illustrate the veracity and profitable future of proxy war. Contemporary proxy war is the byproduct of two variables: the first is those situations in which the cost to defeat an ensconced enemy requires great human cost; the second is those instances in which great powers and/or regional powers come into conflict with one another but do so through indirect means. Given proxy war's prodigious role in future conflicts, the U.S. Army must focus on developing both a theory and a doctrine for it; knowing how one *must* fight is more important than conjecturing about how one *wants* to fight.

This, coupled with the previous two points, demonstrates that the U.S. Army should reevaluate the manner in which it conducts combat advising. Advising should accomplish the mission, but not destroy the proxy, especially in transactional proxy relationships. Further, to avoid counterproductivity to the overall goals of warfare, advising must be done in a way that keeps in mind the conditions of regional post-conflict security and peace.

Additionally, the U.S. Army should invest in studying the Precision Paradox to further fill in the concept's margins. Planners, staffs and leaders must account for it during campaign and tactical planning. Doing so will help Army leaders to more correctly weigh the costs associated with a proxy campaign fueled by precision strike.

TRADOC's report, published surprisingly quickly after the Battle of Mosul, suggests that it did not take the necessary time to gain a true appreciation of the battle's effect. In the future, researchers should be able to take the time to better understand and so communicate the battle's real impacts. Otherwise, the U.S. Army runs the risk of telling itself what it wants to hear instead of what it needs to hear.

Notes

1 Eagle Strike was the 101st Airborne Division's name for the operation to defeat the Islamic State in Mosul. Mosul Study Group, "What the Battle for Mosul Teaches the Force," no. 17-24, September 2017, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Primer-on-Urban-Operation/Documents/Mosul-Public-Release1.pdf.

2 Jane Arraf, "How Iraqi Forces Drove ISIS from Ramadi," *Newsweek*, 25 February 2016.

3 "Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State," *Wilson Center*, 30 April 2019.

4 Laris Karklis, Aaron Steckelberg and Tim Meko, "The Uneasy Mix of Forces Battling the Islamic State," *Washington Post*, 24 October 2016.

5 Michael Knights and Alexander Mello, "Defeat by Annihilation: Mobility and Attrition in the Islamic State's Defense of Mosul," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 4, (April 2017): 1–4.

6 Nick Paton Walsh, Max Blau, Emmanuela Grinberg and Time Hume, "Battle for Mosul Begins with Gunfire and Car Bombs," *CNN*, 17 October 2016, https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/17/middleeast/mosul-isis-operation-begins-iraq/index.html; "Over 12,000 ISIS Militants Fighting for Mosul, *ARA News*, 27 June 2016.

7 Walsh, Blau, Grinberg and Hume, "Battle for Mosul Begins"; Tamer El-Ghobashy and Mustafa Salim, "As Iraq's Shiite Militias Expand Their Reach, Concerns About an ISIS Revival Grown," *Washington Post*, 9 January 2019.

8 Helene Cooper, "Revived After Mosul, Iraqi Forces Prepare to Battle ISIS in Tal Afar," *New York Times*, 18 August 2017.

9 Raoul Blanchard, "The Battle of Verdun," *The Atlantic*, June 1917.

10 "Global Report on Internal Displacement: Iraq," *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre*, 2018, http://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/2018-05/GRID%202018%20-%20Figure%20Analysis%20-%20IRAQ.pdf; Igor Kossov, "Mosul is Completely Destroyed," *The Atlantic*, 10 July 2017; Raya Jalabi and Michael Georgy, "This Man is Trying to Rebuild Mosul. He Needs Help – Lots of It," *Reuters*, 21 March 2018.

11 Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2019), 1-1.

12 Merriam-Webster Online, "decisive," https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/decisive.

13 B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Ghost of Napoleon* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 111.

14 Cathal Nolan, *The Allure of Battle: A History of How Wars Have Been Won and Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.

15 J.F.C. Fuller, *The Foundations of the Science of War* (London: Hutchinson, 1926; repr., Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1993), 107–110.

16 Tamer El-Ghobashy and Mustafa Salim, "Iraqi Military Reclaims City of Tal Afar After Rapid Islamic State Collapse, *Washington Post*, 27 August 2017.

17 Hillary Clarke and Hamdi Alkhshali, "Battle for Tal Afar Begins as Civilians Flee Iraqi City," *CNN*, 20 August 2017.

18 "Iraqi Forces Enter Kirkuk as Kurds Flee," *BBC*, 18 October 2017; Maher Chmaytelli and Raya Jalabi, "Iraqi Forces Complete Kirkuk Province Takeover After Clashes with Kurds," *Reuters*, 20 October 2017.

[19] Susannah George and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "US Begins Reducing Troops in Iraq After Victory Over IS," *Associated Press*, 5 February 2018.

[20] Vlacheslav Shramovych, "Ukraine's Deadliest Day: The Battle of Ilovaisk, August 2014," *BBC*, 29 August 2019.

[21] Amos Fox, "Cyborgs at Little Stalingrad: A Brief History of the Battles of the Donetsk Airport, 26 May 2014 to 21 January 2015," *Institute of Land Warfare*, Land Warfare Paper 125 (May 2019): 5; Alec Luhn and Oksana Grytsenko, "Ukrainian Soldiers Share Horrors of Debaltseve Battle After Stinging Defeat," *The Guardian*, 18 February 2015.

[22] S. Petersmann and H.C. Ostermann, "Philippines' War Against IS: The Ruins of Marawi," *DW News*, 18 December 2018.

[23] Positional dislocation is the rendering of "enemy strength irrelevant by causing the enemy to be in the wrong place, in the wrong formation, or facing in the wrong direction." Functional dislocation is forcing an opponent to fight in a manner it is not designed for or that off-sets its strength. Robert Leonhard, *The Principles of War for the Information Age* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 2000), 64–65.

[24] Amos Fox, "The Reemergence of the Siege: An Assessment of Trends on Modern Land Warfare," *Institute of Land Warfare*, Land Power Essay 18-2 (June 2018): 2–3.

[25] "Building Pressures Risk Tearing Apart Iraq's Fragile Government," *Stratfor*, 25 September 2019.

[26] "ISIS Re-Establishes Iraqi Sanctuary: March 7, 2019," *Institute for the Study of War*.

[27] Mosul Study Group, 41–49.

[28] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and eds. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 89.

[29] Robin Wright, "The Battle for Aleppo, Syria's Stalingrad, Ends," *The New Yorker*, 13 December 2016; Alan Taylor, "The Battle for Raqqa," *The Atlantic*, 12 October 2017; Ben Wedeman, "Kobani Determined to Rebuilt After ISIS Siege," *CNN*, 7 December 2015; Fredrick Pleitgen, "Deir Ezzor: Relief in Parts of Syrian City After 3-Year ISIS Siege is Broken," *CNN*, 16 September 2017; "Siege of Syria's Eastern Ghouta 'Barbaric and Medieval' Says UN Commission of Inquiry," *UN News*, 20 June 2018.

[30] "The Ruins of Donetsk Airport: Russian Roulette (Dispatch 95)," *Vice News*, 18 February 2015, video, 5:53, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OP1GN_oMd48; "Ukraine: The Fall of Debaltseve," *CNN*, 31 March 2016, video, 2:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zpcmJteiFA; "Luhansk Airport Completely Destroyed in Fighting in Ukraine," *AFP News*, 12 September 2014, video, 1:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Qw52GSx38M.

[31] Agnia Grigas, *Frozen Conflicts: A Tool Kit for U.S. Policymakers* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, July 2016), 6.

[32] Mosul Study Group, 23–25, 43–48.

[33] Joseph Votel and Eero Keravuori, "The By, With, and Through Operational Approach," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 89, (2nd Quarter 2018): 40–47.

[34] David M. Witty, "Iraq's Post-2014 Counter Terrorism Service," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Focus 157, (October 2018): 54.

[35] Jennifer Cafarella, Brandon Wallace and Jason Zhou, "ISIS Second Comeback: Assessing the Next ISIS Insurgency," *Institute for the Study of War*, (June 2019): 18–24.

[36] B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Meridian Books, 1991), 353.

[37] Mosul Study Group, 57.

[38] Susannah George, "Airstrikes Fuel Mosul Gains as Iraq Pushes for Quick Victory," *Associated Press*, 19 May 2017.

[39] Holly Williams, "Civilians Flee Mosul as Iraqi Fighters Smash Remaining ISIS Fighters," *CBS News*, 9 March 2017.

[40] "AP: Death Toll in Mosul 10 Times Higher Than Acknowledged," *CBS News*, 20 December 2017.

[41] "Global Report on Internal Displacement: Iraq," *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre*, 2018.

[42] Igor Kossov, "Mosul is Completely Destroyed," *The Atlantic*, 10 July 2017.

[43] Dan Lamothe, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Laris Karklis and Tim Meko, "Battle of Mosul: How Iraqi Forces Defeated the Islamic State," *Washington Post*, 10 July 2017.

[44] Jeff Daniels, "ISIS Fight Shows US Military Can Use Lower-Cost Weapons with Lethal Results," *CNBC*, 19 July 2017.

[45] Mosul Study Group, 21.

[46] Haim Malka, "The Challenge of Non-State Actors," in Craig Cohen and Josiane Gabel, ed. 2015 *Global Forecast: Crisis and Opportunity* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018), 58.

[47] Brian Ross, Alex Hosenball, Cho Park and Lee Ferran, "ISIS 2 Years Later: From 'JV Team' to International Killers," *ABC News*, 29 June 2016; Cheryl Pellerin, "On Third Anniversary of ISIS Fight, 5 Million Are Free from Terrorist Army," *U.S. Department of Defense*, 7 August 2017, https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/News/Article/Article/1270692/on-third-anniversary-of-isis-fight-5-million-are-free-from-terrorist-army/.

[48] Clausewitz, 358.

[49] ADP 3-0, 8-1–8-4.