



Lessons from Lincoln: On Being a War President

by

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President-elect Barack Obama is already following Abraham Lincoln's example as he goes about forming his government. Months before the November 2008 election, he made reference to Doris Kearns Goodwin's book about the sixteenth President's appointment of several political rivals to his Cabinet, and in the weeks since the election has been taking much the same approach. The current focus may be on the President-elect's selection of a new *Team of Rivals*, but it will soon be on his war leadership. In that regard he could learn from Lincoln as well.

Lincoln, says author James M. McPherson in *Tried By War*, was a self-taught war President. His study of war correctly identified three important areas upon which to focus his attention. The first had to do with a conceptual framework, the second with the relationship among the elements of the conceptual framework and the dynamism of these relationships, and the third with the personalities—military and civilian—necessary to execute the war.

Lincoln mastered his role as commander in chief on the job—as may the President-elect. The Constitution names the President as “Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual service of the United States.” Nowhere does the Constitution define the roles, functions or powers of a commander in chief; neither does Alexander Hamilton's Federalist Paper No. 69, “The Real Character of the Executive,” which mentions the role of commander in chief but provides little explanation. “Nor did the precedents created by Presidents James Madison and James K. Polk in the War of 1812 and the Mexican War provide much guidance.” Ambiguity meant that “Lincoln would have to establish most of the powers of commander in chief for himself.” Ultimately, Lincoln settled on the following five wartime functions:

- **Policy.** The war aims or political goals of the nation at war.
- **National Strategy.** The mobilization of political, economic, diplomatic, psychological, and military resources necessary to achieve the aims and goals of policy.
- **Military Strategy.** The employment of military forces to win war and fulfill the aims and goals of policy.

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- **Operations.** The management, movements, and campaigns necessary to carry out military strategy.
- **Tactics.** The use of military forces in actual battles.

These five elements became Lincoln's conceptual framework, "principally responsible for shaping and defining policy." Lincoln may have been interested in the theory of war, but he was far more interested in war's practice. In this framework, he found a practical construct to understand what needed to be done in the war he was responsible to win.

He also came to understand that the elements of this framework were related to one another. A commander's tactical choices, for example, could be understood as sound only if such choices contributed to successful operations. In the same way, operations were necessary only if they were part of a larger military strategy that led to the fulfillment of the goals of policy—the political goals of the nation at war. National strategy determined what political, economic, diplomatic and psychological resources the nation at war would have to provide and the ways in which these resources could be made available.

Getting the relationship right among these five elements is hard enough, but it is made harder by the fact that the relationship is constantly changing. Successful operations, for example, and clear progress in execution of a military strategy often increase the available political and psychological resources of a nation. Tactical and operational setbacks, on the other hand, drain political and psychological resources, thereby potentially limiting strategic as well as policy options. Effective diplomacy, as another example, may open strategic options and policy choices; poor diplomacy may close others. Action on the diplomatic front, Lincoln learned, affected policy decisions as well as actions on the battle front—and vice versa. He also learned that actions on the battle front would be constrained or expanded by the economic resources available. Even more complicated: he understood that political and psychological resources went up or down based as much on economic resources as on battlefield successes or failures.

None of the five elements was independent, Lincoln came to conclude, and none was static. War is the ultimate Rubik's Cube. *Tried By War's* accounts of Lincoln's battlefield visits, time at the Washington telegraph station, discussions with his Cabinet and interactions with other political and diplomatic leaders are evidence that Lincoln's wartime leadership recognized the dynamic relationship of the five elements of this conceptual framework he "discovered" in his self-study. Lincoln was constantly in need of the data of reality so that he could balance and rebalance the elements of his conceptual framework, constantly adapting where necessary.

So what does all this mean to the President-elect? On one hand, much has changed since the Civil War. The functions and duties of the commander in chief have been worked out more clearly during the wars America has fought since the 1860s. Also, the subordination of generals to political leaders is more clearly defined than it was during the Civil War period. On the other hand, much remains the same. The President-elect faces a similar conceptual challenge: how to understand our current war, then align what we do with that understanding. He would benefit from using Lincoln's strategic framework and understanding the dynamic relationship among its five elements.

Like Lincoln, the President-elect will be far more interested in war's practice relative to the war we face than in war's theory. And war's practice demonstrates that the probability that battlefield activity will lead ultimately to the achievement of political goals increases when the five elements of Lincoln's framework are kept properly aligned and consistent with the kind of war being fought.

In this regard, I am sure that the President-elect has already begun a complete strategic review of the global war on terrorism. Will this review, however, be inclusive and comprehensive enough?

An inclusive review will involve our allies and coalition partners—for our war is a global one and the interests of many states are at play. A comprehensive review will produce a complete and coherent understanding of the war we are fighting. The multinational policy and strategy as well as the combined civil-military strategy, operations and tactics can then be derived from and kept aligned with that understanding.

Such an assessment, I believe, will conclude that we are not fighting two wars: one in Iraq, the other in Afghanistan. Rather, we are fighting one war with two active theaters and multiple less-active-but-still-important theaters.

Our enemies are a complicated mix. We are fighting a global network of extremists, sometimes led by al Qaeda and at other times by local groups who are only affiliated with, or motivated by, the al Qaeda ideology or one like it—a complex mix of home-grown and global adversaries. Some affiliates believe in the al Qaeda ideology; others modify that ideology to fit their local situations. Still others just use it as cover and are affiliates in name only. Actions of affiliates and pseudo-affiliates are sometimes aligned with al Qaeda and sometimes not—depending upon the expediency of interest. Al Qaeda is not a nation-state, but it has declared war and acted as if it were one. Some of its affiliates are waging fairly classic insurgencies where they live—sometimes with training, funding or leadership help from the “home office,” sometimes with little or no support. We are also fighting some terrorist organizations not related to al Qaeda at all but sponsored by nation-states surreptitiously through a variety of means. And the fight also includes criminal organizations sometimes seeking legitimacy via the language of jihad or insurgency, sometimes not—often contributing to the violence and instability merely for profit.

Ask almost any intelligence analyst, though, whether independent or part of a governmental organization, and that analyst will map out a network, connecting the dots among these complicated varieties of hybrid terrorist organizations: in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Central and South Asia, as well as Southeast Asia and North and South America. Power, control, religion, greed, crime, anger, revenge, despair, lack of opportunity—all are part of the stew. Sometimes the stew is heated by depressing local economic or oppressive political conditions; at other times the heat is provided from foreigners trained in locations known to most analysts and motivated by a broader, global ideology. Often, it’s a combination of the two. Motivations among the groups may be a fog, but their threat and their connectivity are quite clear.

Analysts will also report that some of these groups were spawned from legitimate complaints against their governments or from appalling economic conditions and lack of opportunity. Others are hard-core “true believers” for whom jihad is a way of life and death. The criminal groups are motivated in yet a third way; for them, it’s “just business.” Each group, and often sub-groups, must be understood both individually and as related to the larger network. From this kind of detailed understanding, one can determine which groups must be fought and which could be potentially convinced to stop fighting. Such an understanding is complicated but necessary work; fortunately it’s work that is mostly done within the set of government and independent intelligence organizations who are watching these groups.

Any worthwhile strategic assessment should produce a view of the war that is as sophisticated and complex as the actual phenomenon. Only then can we—the United States and our allies and partners—be led to an intellectual position from which we can derive practical policies and strategies. Misunderstanding and oversimplification reduces the probability of success.

Some believe that General David H. Petraeus as the commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) will “do for Afghanistan as he did for Iraq.” This belief is naïve and simplistic.

One of the main the reasons for the progress in Iraq is this: General Petraeus and U.S. Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker had a common, comprehensive and coherent understanding of the war they were fighting in Iraq. They translated that understanding into an equally comprehensive and coherent civil-military campaign plan. Last, they were flexible in the application of their plan, keeping constant their objectives but ever changing their tactics and approaches. Their flexibility allowed both the embassy and military coalition teams to adapt to fluid situations without loss of focus. Petraeus and Crocker achieved unity of effort and coherency of actions because they did their intellectual work up front. Intellectual clarity and precision in thought count.

General Petraeus's new area of responsibility, CENTCOM, includes only the two most active theaters of war: Iraq and Afghanistan; he does not have military responsibility for the other theaters. Geography and boundaries count. Take, for example, one of the active theaters—Afghanistan. The “problem” of Afghanistan is really a Pakistan-India-Afghanistan problem; India falls under U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), and NATO, not CENTCOM, is leading the Afghanistan operation. Coordination of military approaches in Afghanistan must, therefore, take place among multiple U.S. headquarters and NATO.

Additionally, all the less-active theaters are outside CENTCOM's area of responsibility. These theaters are important, and what happens in each is related to what happens in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, recent attacks and past attacks demonstrate that these less-active theaters may become more active. North and East Africa, a “feeder theater,” has been providing suicide bombers and other fighters to the active theaters. Thus, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) and CENTCOM are linked. So too is PACOM—South Asia and Southeast Asia provide transit and meeting areas. Extremist cells operating in Europe make NATO important beyond its role in Afghanistan, and U.S. European Command (EUCOM) is responsible for activity in Israel even as CENTCOM retains responsibility for neighboring nations. Also important is the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM)/CENTCOM linkage; the expertise in and responsibility for targeting and attacking high-value targets globally lies with SOCOM. We cannot focus on just two geographic areas while those we fight focus more widely.

A thorough strategic review will reveal, therefore, that a family of American military plans is needed, a coherent set among U.S. commands—CENTCOM, EUCOM, AFRICOM, PACOM and SOCOM—and with NATO. No doubt the family of plans will establish priorities of effort. Equally without doubt, however, is this: a single CENTCOM plan, regardless of its thoroughness, is, by definition, too narrow.

Lincoln himself might also suggest that such a plan is insufficient, for he understood the relationship of the theaters in his war. Perhaps more important, Lincoln finally found in Ulysses S. Grant someone who could coordinate actions in multiple theaters. The main effort against Robert E. Lee was undertaken by George G. Meade (south from Fredericksburg, Virginia) and Benjamin F. Butler (west along Virginia's Tidewater Peninsula). The supporting efforts, though—Philip H. Sheridan's operations in the Shenandoah Valley, William T. Sherman's March to the Sea and then north through the Carolinas (including George H. Thomas's focus on the forces of John B. Hood), and Nathaniel P. Banks in Texas and along the Gulf Coast—were also important and contributed to success of the main effort even if some weren't successful themselves. As Lincoln said of Grant's multi-theater plan, “Those not skinning can hold a leg.”

Our war is certainly different, but not in every regard.

First, the war we are fighting is not a just military problem. In fact, it's not even primarily a military problem. Concerted intra- and inter-theater military action is absolutely necessary now, and military action will be needed for the foreseeable future. The type and level of military action—as

well as who conducts it—will, of course, vary based upon the actual situation in a particular theater or part of a theater. Military action alone is insufficient, however. Lincoln’s trial by war taught him that military action—tactics, operations and military strategy—must be in concert with diplomatic, political and economic action as well as national strategy and policy. General Petraeus, in coordination with other combatant commanders, may pull together a coherent set of military plans, but who will be his “Ambassador Crocker” to add the “civil” to civil-military?

In the kind of war we are fighting, quality of governance, improvement of economic conditions and protection of citizenry are the main efforts. Military action must support diplomatic, political and economic actions taken not only in the two most active theaters—Iraq and Afghanistan—but also in the less-active theaters. CENTCOM has the responsibility and authority to plan and execute military operations within its geographic area, but where is the mechanism strong enough to plan, coordinate and execute similar, regional civil action? Petraeus and his fellow combatant commanders can coordinate and execute inter- and intra-regional military operations, but how will similar political, economic and diplomatic actions be coordinated and executed? A “civil” arm, able to coordinate and direct cross-nation and cross-region action in conjunction with a corresponding military organizational construct, will increase the probability of success. Yet no such organization exists.

Second, the war we are fighting involves more than the United States. Any civil-military strategy that is solely American will, by definition, be insufficient. Even Lincoln’s Civil War had a multinational dimension; how much more so ours? We are fighting a global war whose most-active theaters and less-than-active theaters are in areas vital to the industrial and post-industrial economies of the world. We need a coherent, multinational civil-military approach with a corresponding set of multinational civil-military coordination mechanisms.

Furthermore, this broad, multinational civil-military approach must reflect the best that democracies have to offer. Our political goals cannot merely be negative ones based upon fighting and fear. Rather, they must be positive, must inspire practical action and unite allies in a common cause. These policy objectives also must provide an attractive alternative to the extremist ideologies that too many find motivating—an alternative that makes sense to them and results in tangible improvements in their daily lives. Our policy goals must help both to solve some of the conditions that spawn terrorist activity, and to split terrorist groups internally and one from another. Finally, part of that policy must increase our strategic flexibility by reducing overall oil consumption among developing as well as developed industrial and post-industrial economies. In sum, our policy must place us on the moral high ground—and keep us there. We cannot kill and destroy our way out of the war we are in. Killing and other tactical actions are necessary, but only useful if linked to meaningful civil-military operations that, in turn, are tied to a coherent civil-military strategy that contributes to achieving policy objectives and is resourced by a comprehensive multinational strategy—vintage Lincoln.

Our President-elect has an opportunity to reevaluate the intellectual work done to date and derive from it a comprehensive, coherent, civil-military approach—bipartisan and multinational. This reevaluation and associated decisions will not be easy, especially given current economic conditions and overly partisan political behavior. Difficulty, however, does not mitigate necessity. The already difficult economic situation will worsen if those we fight succeed or appear to be succeeding. A well-constructed national and international strategy may even help us economically and assist in building bipartisanship—if it is driven not by ideologies but by pragmatism, doing what works against our common enemies and in support of our common interests.

The kind of war we are fighting simply will not submit to a unilateral military solution. We need a national and international strategy aimed at mobilizing the resources—political, economic, diplomatic, psychological and military—of multiple nations to support a civil-military strategy and

help achieve the aims of a common policy. We must have the moral and political courage to confront the tough issues.

Our predecessors shed preconceptions, created new organizations, developed new coordination mechanisms and aligned priorities of multiple nations to fight World War II, their global war. They crafted a “common enough” policy. They melded national and international strategies. They sufficiently aligned military strategies with operations and tactics across multiple theaters. Like Lincoln, they found practical solutions to the problems they faced. Some of what they created became permanent institutions; other innovations faded away when their utility diminished. None of these was perfect, and reasonable people disagreed. All were practical solutions, however, to the problems our predecessors faced, all were necessary at the time and all were “good enough” to win.

World War II was easier to understand because it was a conventional war of one set of nation-states versus another set of nation-states. Front lines were clear and progress relatively easy to measure. On one hand, our current war is different, less clear. On the other hand, nothing has changed: Our current war is global, our national interests are at issue, as are those of our allies and partners, and we must innovate. To do so, we need a solid and complete understanding of the war we are facing. Then we must derive from that understanding coherent policies, national and international strategies, as well as civil-military strategies. Only then will our inter- and intra-theater civil-military operations and tactics hope to achieve the unity of effort necessary to win. A comprehensive and inclusive strategic review will set us on this firm, coherent and pragmatic foundation.

In 1864, McPherson points out, Soldiers were tired of the war, but they did not want their sacrifices to be in vain. Today’s Soldiers are no different. They and their families have sacrificed much in this war. These sacrifices, and those of many others, eliminated the Taliban’s oppressive regime in Afghanistan and Saddam’s in Iraq. These sacrifices, among other factors, have brought us to a better situation in Iraq. We have a Rubik’s Cube to solve; we need a strategic review inclusive and comprehensive enough to solve it. We shouldn’t improve our effectiveness in one theater by eroding successes in another. Lincoln gave us a good model. Perhaps with it, we will bring coherence to our global war and ensure that our Soldiers’ sacrifices will not have been in vain.

Endnotes

- ¹ Jake Tapper, “Obama Proposes ‘Team of Rivals’ Cabinet,” *Political Punch* blog, ABC News online, 22 May 2008, 9:14 p.m., <http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalpunch/2008/05/obama-proposes.html>.
- ² Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).
- ³ James M. McPherson, *Tried By War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).
- ⁴ Alexander Hamilton, The Federalist No. 69, “The Real Character of the Executive,” *New York Packet*, Friday, March 14, 1788, <http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa69.htm>.
- ⁵ McPherson, *Tried By War*, pp. 4–5.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ⁸ McPherson, *Tried By War*: Examples of Lincoln’s near-constant dialogue with generals, Cabinet members and other leaders can be found throughout the book. See selected examples on pages 52–54, 62–63, 65–66, 72–73, 75, 80–82, 97–98, 100, 109, 112, 116, 129–30, 135, 146, 174, 186, 195–97, 213, 228 and 261. Similarly, examples of Lincoln’s recognition of the dynamic relationship among the elements of his conceptual framework can be found throughout the book. See selected examples on pages 9–10, 22, 32–34, 40–41, 42, 86–88, 106–109, 120, 127–28, 132, 142, 149, 158–60, 170–73, 187–89, 206–08, 217, 219–221, 234, 241–42, 244 and 250–51.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 214.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 249–50.

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