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## ***Innovation, Transformation, and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, Iraq, 2005-2007***

by James A. Russell

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*Innovation, Transformation, and War* is an important and valuable effort to move beyond the clichés and slogans of how the Iraq War was waged and to analyze how US military units reversed the disastrous 2005 situations in Anbar and Ninewa provinces. The book originated as a doctoral dissertation by a career defense professional and, therefore, examines developments in Iraq within the framework of the theoretical literature on military innovation. While such issues will be of concern to a variety of readers, the importance of this work to many national security analysts will almost certainly center on its fine-grained analysis of how a variety of US Army and Marine Corps units adapted to a complex environment in Iraq and reoriented unsuccessful tactics and approaches to those that were significantly more effective. Russell is careful not to overreach and does not maintain that tactical level innovation “won” the war or even that it was the only reason for the reduction of insurgent violence. Other factors including local and national political issues must be included in such an assessment. The rise of anti-al Qaeda citizens’ militias that later became the Awakening Councils was especially important.

While the author maintains that extensive tactical innovation was only one factor in the struggle to move effectively against the insurgency, he also states that without it the United States would have lost the war. Russell notes that innovation occurs when unit leaders believe they are being insufficiently effective using current doctrine and tactics. In Iraq, this situation was apparent by 2005, and radical innovation was required for US forces to move forward in stabilizing the country. In this type of “adapt or fail” environment, he maintains that tactical change can accumulate over time and build a momentum of its own. The author speaks of “informal doctrine” and maintains that best practices often develop from the bottom up and then are shared with other units facing similar difficulties. Russell’s analysis makes use of case studies of US Army and Marine Corps units in varying parts of Iraq including an Army Stryker-equipped brigade, distinct in its organization. The case study discussions are based on the extensive use of primary sources and contain some of the most detailed examinations of US tactical operations in Iraq that currently exists. The author’s deep knowledge of military organizations and changing battlefield tactics are continuously put to good use throughout this study.

The narrative about how units improved their military performance over time is especially interesting. The company- and battalion-sized units in

the field are portrayed as the epicenter for such change. These units are not characterized as struggling against crushing military bureaucracies, but are instead understood as being routinely empowered by higher headquarters to develop their own approaches to accomplishing their missions and finding the right mix of kinetic and nonkinetic tools. One officer is quoted as saying, “You name it, I tried it . . . I had a lot of flexibility and I ran with it.” Such a statement helps make Russell’s point that the biggest successes often occurred by pushing responsibility down the chain of command. Throughout this study, Russell gives high marks to higher headquarters units that resisted the impulse to micromanage their subordinate units.

Some of the innovations the author discusses include vastly improved intelligence and operations interface, dramatic innovation in logistics, improved training including predeployment training and cross-training, and even a lenient attitude toward Iraqi civilian revenue generating activities including smuggling. In intelligence the “need to know” was in many cases replaced with “need to share.” This principle was especially important with local “census” information which involved detailed data on local populations. There was also an effort to take the edge off of military activities that could anger the civilian population. As time went on, for instance, units that needed to search civilian houses distributed small toys, candy, and several two pound packages of sugar as part of these duties. Russell also identifies certain technologies as “enablers” of innovation, especially for the Stryker brigades. Additionally, the author maintains that while the deployed units did not create the split in the insurgency leading to the creation of the Awakening Councils, they took extensive advantage of it. Moreover, in a particularly important set of observations, Russell discusses the role of US Special Forces in training and radically transforming a large number of units within the Iraqi Security Forces.

In sum, this work is an important contribution to understanding how the situation in Iraq was pulled back from the brink of defeat by committed and innovative officers in the field. Russell’s admiration for the US Army and Marine Corps is apparent on virtually every page of this book, and he has provided a work that will clearly benefit a military readership. This work stands as an important contribution to the literature on military innovation, and an especially valuable addition to the literature on counterinsurgency.