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The Battle Behind the Wire

U.S. Prisoner and Detainee Operations from World War II to Iraq

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Summary

In every major extended U.S. military action of the 20th century, including World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, U.S. forces have captured or detained a large number of combatants. While each conflict presented unique challenges, there are many common initial misjudgments on the part of U.S. forces regarding the size and character of the detention population. Lessons from this history of detention operations were not initially incorporated into detention operations that U.S. forces launched in Iraq and Afghanistan. Particularly lacking was guidance on the role of detention operations in counterinsurgencies. The Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal and its successful use by insurgents in propaganda against the United States is a powerful example of how detention operations are not a coincidental product of a conflict but are a central part of shaping the ongoing counterinsurgency campaign and post-conflict outcomes.

In an effort to develop an updated, comprehensive strategy and doctrine on how best to conduct prisoner and detainee operations, Multi-National Force–Iraq (MNF-I) asked the RAND Corporation to analyze detainee operations over time. This monograph fulfills that request. It presents a historical overview of prisoner operations in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. It provides a more-detailed overview of detainee operations in Iraq. Commanders in Iraq afforded RAND researchers unprecedented access in 2007 and 2008 to observe the management of detainee operations. This included observations at eight regional detainee handling areas as well as observations of special detainee populations, including juveniles, females, convicted crimi-

nals, and political refugees. This document also presents the unique top-level perspectives of three successive Task Force (TF) 134 commanders charged with overseeing Theater Internment Facility detainee operations in Iraq.

Historical Operations

World War II

POWs taken by Allied forces during World War II differ markedly from those taken in more-recent conflicts, particularly that in Iraq. Nevertheless, there are parallels between prisoner operations during World War II and those of subsequent conflicts, both in initial missteps and ultimate program goals.

The first misjudgment in handling German prisoners was underestimating the number of prisoners the Allies would take and their speed in capturing them. This meant the United States was unprepared for the scale of operations needed to administer a population that would approach a half-million. Once the German prisoners were taken, U.S. military authorities viewed them as a homogeneous grouping of Nazis. This allowed Nazi leadership to reassert itself within the camps to the detriment of the non-Nazi majority. Finally, U.S. policymakers were slow to realize that prisoners should not simply be warehoused and used to fill labor needs but that they provided an opportunity to help shape both the continuing conflict and postwar Europe.

U.S. policymakers ultimately provided education programs for German prisoners. These efforts were controversial at the time, given widespread beliefs—similar to some current ones about Iraqi insurgents—that soldiers of the Nazi regime would resist such education. Yet the programs succeeded in training several leaders of postwar Germany, inculcating in them positive feelings about both democracy and the United States.

The Korean War

Few lessons the United States learned in administering prisoner populations during World War II carried over to the Korean War. The

U.S. Army had quickly demobilized after World War II, and experienced soldiers returned to civilian life. As a result, in Korea, the Army and the United Nations Command faced many challenges managing prisoners, including a lack of qualified personnel, dependence on less-qualified South Korean guards, a lack of preconflict planning for handling massive numbers of prisoners, an inability to correctly identify political tendencies of prisoners, a failure to see influence of prisoners as part of the battle, and difficulty in applying principles from the new international conventions for handling prisoners.

U.S. forces took a large number of prisoners quickly. Shortly after the Inch'on landing, U.S. forces took nearly 100,000 prisoners, and tens of thousands more after the intervention of Chinese troops. These were housed at a few large camps, where prisoner control problems would recur.

The international law governing detention in time of war had been amended in the Geneva Conventions of 1949, but the United States did not ratify them until after the end of the war. The United States, and other countries, did implement some of their principles, but there were difficulties in applying these, particularly as the conflict moved toward an end and the prisoners were to be repatriated. Many prisoners held by the United States did not want to return to their homelands, and the problem of prisoner repatriation became one of the biggest stumbling blocks to armistice talks.

The education and information programs for Korean prisoners were seemingly successful. Nevertheless, while many prisoners benefited from the programs, especially literacy, agriculture, and news programs, the overall program contributed to polarization among prisoners, with committed communist prisoners, for example, working to disrupt civic education classes.

The Vietnam War

U.S. forces were not directly responsible for prisoner and detainee operations during the Vietnam War. Rather, they supported programs run by the South Vietnamese. U.S. forces did seek to ensure that these programs followed what they deemed applicable conventions, in part to persuade North Vietnamese forces to treat U.S. prisoners better.

(Although the United States maintained that the hostilities constituted an armed international conflict, the North Vietnamese contended the conflict was an internal one and that the Geneva Conventions were not applicable.)

The Vietnam War was the first in which U.S. forces conducted a motivation and morale survey of prisoners and detainees. This assessment showed that insurgents' military power and resources did not appear to have much effect on their morale. The Viet Cong was grossly outnumbered and outgunned by the United States, yet its morale seemed unshaken. More broadly, the motivation and morale survey demonstrated that understanding what makes U.S. enemies want to continue fighting is crucially important for the conduct of the war, particularly when seeking to determine the resilience of unconventional or asymmetric adversaries.

Iraqi Operations

The military victory of the United States in the major combat operations in the Iraq conflict was quick and decisive, but the post-combat occupation was a more extended operation.

Several factors led to some of the early failures of post-combat operations in Iraq. As the insurgency grew, U.S. forces at first assumed that poverty (economic subsistence) and religious extremism were the primary motivators. They designed battlefield strategies and detainee programs accordingly. Later it was learned that, in many cases, infusions of cash into troubled areas merely provided an additional source of income for opportunistic, not impoverished, criminals or insurgents. These assumptions could have been tested by surveying detainees, but this capacity did not exist early on.

In addition, there was a shortage of trained personnel to carry out detainee operations, official doctrine was out of step with the realities of the conflict in Iraq, and there was a reluctant realization that a growing insurgency would require a different approach to detainee operations.

The prisoner abuse scandal at the Abu Ghraib detention facility in 2004 heightened awareness of detention operations and invigorated efforts to update doctrine, training, and leadership. Changes had to keep pace with the growing insurgency and the surge of U.S. forces, which resulted in a sharp increase in the number of detainees housed in Coalition internment facilities. In 2007, the number of detainees nearly doubled, from about 15,000 to more than 25,000. This prompted commanders to undertake several steps to improve detainee operations, including creating a more-refined classification of the detainee population, instituting educational and vocational programs, and attempting to make the detention and release process more transparent.

Several problems plagued these efforts. Within the military, many soldiers and Marines viscerally questioned the release of some detainees, who, in their view, would begin or continue to fight once released from Coalition custody. Initial detainee classification systems were not completely successful, sufficient funding for detainee operations was not always forthcoming from Washington policymakers, and some reintegration and rehabilitation efforts were based on erroneous assumptions about the detainee population, including its religiosity and level of education.

MNF-I commanders realized that detention operations should focus on identifying and separating high-risk detainees (who would eventually be turned over to the Iraqi justice system) from detainees who would inevitably be released and reintegrated into Iraqi society. They also realized that they had an opportunity to turn a strategic risk into a strategic advantage by seeking to understand the motivations and circumstances of the detainee population and by developing a strategic communication campaign aimed at the Iraqi people and the wider regional audience. To both determine how to separate the detainees and to capitalize on this opportunity, in late 2007, U.S. officials initiated a transition-in survey for all new detainees.

Special Populations

Iraq detainee operations also involved several special populations, such as juveniles, women, those convicted by the Iraqi criminal court system, and political refugees. Although juveniles were a small proportion of

all detainees in Iraq, their numbers more than tripled in 2007, from less than 300 to more than 900. Juvenile detainees were of mixed social and educational status and were detained for alleged offenses of varying seriousness. Planning for detainee operations, particularly those for asymmetric conflicts, will likely have to address similar unusual populations and characteristics.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Prisoner and detainee operations in recent U.S. military operations have followed a typical pattern: underestimation of the number of prisoners and detainees which would be held, hasty scrambling for resources to meet the operational needs, and doctrine and policy that did not provide the needed guidance, given the operational reality. Historically, the initial phase of capture and subsequent "care-and-custody" of detainees has included improvisation and crisis management, giving way to an eventual but more concerted and erratic effort to improve operations. During the later phases of military operations, an attempt is often made to educate prisoners and detainees and influence their social and political values. There is some evidence that these programs have a positive effect; however, designing these programs without some basic understanding of the detainee population can lead to missteps and wasted effort.

Prior to detention, U.S. forces must plan how to provide for the care and custody of detainees. In almost every conflict, there has been an underestimation of the number of detainees and a delay in expanding detention operations. Going into a major conflict, policymakers and planners should prepare to monitor changes in the size of the detention population and prepare to fund needed expansion of detention facilities. A surge in troops is likely to lead to a surge in detainees.

Initial interactions with detainees should aim to extract time-sensitive information relevant to battlefield operations as well as collection of "atmospherics" that can provide a deeper or broader understanding of the adversary. Collecting this information during the first hours or days of detention, before the detainee has had a chance to

interact with others in the detention camp, would provide an unvarnished picture of the enemy and allow analysts to gauge changes in motivation over time. This survey can also provide the initial classification of the detainee, assisting in correct placement of the detainee in camp housing.

Once in detention, a more-thorough survey of detainees can help inform detainee programs and assess the risks detainees pose to each other. Coalition officials also need to develop measures of effectiveness for detainee programs; especially important is tracking recidivism rates for released detainees, as well as the effects of a strategic communication plan on public opinion in the host nation and internationally.

In Iraq, doctrinal shortcomings regarding detainee operations contributed to a climate that may have fed into the Abu Ghraib scandal. Doctrine on detainee operations should provide guidance on the legal requirements of detention; legal issues of who should be detained and for how long have affected operations in Iraq, Vietnam, and Korea. Doctrine should be reviewed and updated to provide guidance on how to establish detainee operations and how to integrate detainee operations within a broader counterinsurgency doctrine.