

Back from Battle

Student Veterans' Perspectives on the Iraq War

ROUNDTABLE WITH

ROBERT BERSCHINSKI

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JOHN FRICK

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With a much-discussed troop surge now underway, U.S. military operations in Iraq have entered a new phase, and continue to fuel an intense public debate. Meanwhile, the voices of soldiers returning from combat offer an immensely valuable resource for evaluating the progress and future legacy of that conflict. *YJIA* recently asked several Yale University graduate students who are veterans of the Iraq War to discuss their personal experiences and thoughts on the conduct and results of the war. Robert Berschinski, John Frick, and Bryan Groves are students in Yale's International Relations Masters Program; Joshua Bradley is a Masters Student in History at Yale.

Disclaimer: All views represented are the personal views of the respondents, and in no way reflect the policy of the Department of Defense, the U.S. Army, or the U.S. Air Force.

■ **What was your service and rank, and where were you stationed? Insofar as you can say, what were your responsibilities? What was the military situation like in your immediate surroundings in Iraq?**

Robert Berschinski: I was a First Lieutenant and intelligence officer in the U.S. Air Force, although during my time in Iraq I was detailed to a joint special operations unit, so I worked mostly with the Army. I was stationed

in Ar Ramadi, which is the capital of Al Anbar province and the heart of the Sunni insurgency, from late 2005 into early 2006.

My day-to-day job was to try to figure out where local “Al Qaeda in Iraq” and Sunni insurgents were hiding out for the purposes of raiding those locations. This meant combing through all the various sources of human and technical intelligence being collected on my area of responsibility, corroborating reports, and trying to come up with a coherent picture of insurgent operations.

Josh Bradley: I was—and still am—a field artillery captain in the U.S. Army. As part of Operation Iraqi Freedom II, my unit deployed to Iraq in March 2004 and occupied three Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) in southeast Baghdad. I personally lived at the largest of those three FOBs, where I served as the camp Force Protection Officer for the entire twelve month tour. I supervised the hundred or so guards in the towers and at the gates; planned and coordinated security-related projects—like the acquisition and emplacement of protective concrete bunkers, twelve foot perimeter walls, and HESCO earthen barriers; and established the daily standard operating procedures concerning the searching and guarding of the 300-plus Iraqi workers we admitted onto the camp each day. In a nutshell, I was the security officer for the camp.

Given the nature of my duties, I can really only assess the conditions in the immediate vicinity of my camp. The camp itself was located along a major Iraqi highway and across from a crowded gas station, so there was always an incredible, bustling sea of activity along our walls. We suffered mortar and rocket attacks of varying intensities, but there were never any attempts by armed individuals to directly attack the camp. Occasionally, I could hear distant explosions or heavy machine gun fire (usually at night), but never in the immediate area of the camp. Patrols from my unit did encounter Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and come under small arms fire from time to time, so there definitely were some hostile elements in our larger area of operations.

John Frick: I was a captain in the U.S Army; more specifically, a Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha or “A-Team” Leader. In March 2003, my team’s task was to link up with Kurdish peshmerga (militia) in northern Iraq, particularly those belonging to now-President Jalal Talabani’s Patriot Union of Kurdistan, then organize and employ them against Iraqi forces. My higher unit’s purpose was to fix the thirteen Iraqi Divisions stationed in the north and prevent them from deploying south. If they had moved south, our forces attacking from Kuwait would have been vastly outnumbered. My team participated in the battle for the “Green Line” and in the Battle of Kani

Domlin Ridge—the fight for Kirkuk. Vastly outnumbered ourselves—around 250 to one—we attacked the Iraqi forces, mostly by calling in Close Air Support from fighter and bomber aircraft. Returning in 2004, our mission was dramatically different. My team spent most of our time between Mosul and Irbil, combating insurgents and training the new Iraqi Army.

The difference between the two deployments involved primarily the positioning of the enemy relative to ourselves. In the ground war, we had definitive lines of battle. Saddam Fedayeen elements did make things tricky, as they

IN THE GROUND WAR, THERE WERE CLEAR LINES OF BATTLE BETWEEN THE ENEMY'S TERRITORY AND OUR OWN.

were running around in pick-up trucks and taxis wearing civilian clothes, but we still knew generally the enemy's territory versus our own. Returning in 2004 with the insurgency in full swing, while driving around Mosul, we never were sure when and where we might be attacked. Some neighborhoods were definitely safer than others, but there was no enemy zone

versus friendly zone as mentioned earlier. Except for the U.S. bases, where mortar attacks were frequent but largely harmless, there was no place where one might feel completely safe.

Bryan Groves: I was, and still am a Special Forces Captain. I was in Iraq from November 2004 to June 2005. While there, I served as the Detachment Commander—or Team Leader—for a Special Forces team. I was initially stationed in Fallujah. I spent four months there before transitioning with my team to Baghdad for another four months where we trained the Iraqi Army and conducted Direct Action (DA) operations with them inside the city. The main threat we faced while operating around Fallujah was IEDs. My team was hit on two occasions with them, but never suffered serious injuries. In Baghdad, the greater threat was vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), and occasionally mortar or rocket fire. In both locations, we had a team house on a military base that served as our base of operations.

The situation in Fallujah was unique in that my team began arriving there a week after Operation Al Fajr, the Coalition offensive to reclaim the city, kicked off. All civilians had been told to leave the city and no civilian traffic was allowed on the roads in or around the city. While the majority of forces conducting operations there were Marines, there were also Army and Navy elements, as well as Air Force support. By the time my whole team arrived, most of the city had already been cleared of the hardened insurgents and foreign fighters that remained after most civilians left the town. We supported

the Marines in operations to re-clear certain sections of the town where the enemy had attempted to regain control. Our responsibilities included providing sniper over-watch and conducting sensitive-site exploitation (SSE) in homes and businesses after they were cleared. The goal of the latter was to find evidence of intelligence value that would aid us on future missions. Eventually civilians were gradually allowed reemission into Fallujah and my company was called away to train Iraqi Army units.

Once in Baghdad, each Special Forces team in the company paired up with an Iraqi Army battalion and trained a small element of their unit, forming a Strike-Recce platoon for each battalion. The concept was to provide the battalion with a platoon that could conduct surveillance and surgical raids. Following a month of training, we conducted a number of operations with the platoon, gradually transferring more of the leadership responsibility to them.

■ How was your time in Iraq different from or similar to your previous experiences in combat zones?

John Frick: Previously, I had been deployed twice to Kosovo, in 1999 and 2002. Kosovo was and is labeled a hazardous fire zone, the same as Iraq, but the U.S. Army personnel deployed there only qualified for pay benefits and not any of the awards normally associated with a combat zone. Despite the dangers of serving in Kosovo, after serving in Iraq, I understand largely the reasoning behind this, as the intensity of the fighting and danger there was dramatically higher.

■ What was the general sentiment in your unit at the outset of the war? Did people think the war was wise, unwise, or was the focus on implementing orders?

Josh Bradley: As far as I could see, the focus in my unit was entirely on completing the assigned mission and bringing everyone back home safely. I never heard anyone publicly express his or her opinion about the rightness or wrongness of the overall effort.

John Frick: My unit was extremely motivated to be participating in the initial ground war. As specialists of unconventional warfare, we were presented with the opportunity to employ what has only been attempted a few times in our country's history. We also wanted to help the Iraqi Kurds, who had been severely oppressed by Saddam Hussein's regime for decades. My unit, the 10th Special Forces Group, has a history with the

Iraqi Kurds, having been deployed to northern Iraq in 1991 to assist in the humanitarian mission.

As our deployments were shorter than the conventional units, morale was largely not affected by deployment length. Since my last deployment, however, they have been extended to be more comparable to the conventional army. Working with the “Quiet Professionals” was always a privilege, among whom complaints were rare. Honestly, a Green Beret is happiest when performing SF missions in the service of his country.

■ **Was there a disjuncture between the type of operations you were trained to do, and what was expected of you during your deployment?**

Robert Berschinski: My job in Iraq was significantly different from what I had trained for in the Air Force, which, as you might guess, was usually centered on intelligence related to aerial targeting and keeping aircrew safe. So working with a bunch of riflemen was certainly a change of pace. The Army and Marines were and are so in need of manpower though, that they are happy to have volunteers. Like with many fields, they are short of intelligence personnel, so when I volunteered they were happy to have me.

Bryan Groves: No, our units utilized us in accordance with our capabilities. Part of our qualification training for Special Forces involves training on raids and training foreign armies, two of the main missions we conducted in Iraq. Additionally, we received specialized instruction in the months before our Iraq deployment which filled in the gaps.

While on the ground in Iraq, we did adjust certain aspects of our tactics, techniques, and procedures to meet specific challenges. However, the missions we conducted and the principles we utilized were ones familiar to us from our training.

■ **What do you think of the new counterinsurgency manual? To what extent has the U.S. military become effective in fighting counterinsurgency, or are military institutions still adapting?**

Josh Bradley: To me, the true significance of the new counterinsurgency manual is not necessarily what it contains between its covers (although that is important), but what it signifies. I see it as a milestone in the Army’s progress of adapting to the institutional demands of the current fight. As the manual itself states, the Army hasn’t published a counterinsurgency manual for twenty years—and that previous manual did not garner a frac-

tion of the attention that this one already has! So I think this is one of many indicators of a rapidly adapting Army. Some of these other indicators include the drastically different training scenarios at the Army's three large-scale Combat Training Centers, the emphasis on "cultural awareness" in training and operations, and an evaluation and promotion system that rewards performance in previously unheard-of assignments—like my Force Protection Officer job, for example.

In my opinion, all these institutional changes have already resulted in an increased effectiveness on the ground in Iraq. But the enemy changes just as much as we do, so I suspect the Army will have to continue to adapt over the years to come. What makes it all the more difficult, however, is that the Army cannot abandon its more traditional missions involving conventional warfare—"high intensity conflict." So I think there really is a delicate balance involved.

John Frick: In the U.S. Army's Special Forces, we have our own counterinsurgency manuals, tried and proven. Trained as insurgents, we of course need to know how to conduct the opposite: counterinsurgency, also known as COIN. The difference with the new counterinsurgency manual just published is that it lays out a plan specifically for the conventional army. The publishing of this manual was essential in distributing an updated common core of principles and corresponding tactics and strategies across the broad spectrum of what makes up the entire U.S. Army. Through manuals, the Army then is able to institute fundamentals, so all battalions and brigades are on the same proverbial "sheet of music."

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■ **What are your thoughts on the so-called "surge"? Do you believe that it will ameliorate the situation?**

Josh Bradley: I would have liked to have seen the new approach implemented during the time frame I was in Iraq (March 2004-March 2005). I think it could have developed real momentum in the months before and after the first Iraqi elections (January 2005). At this point, though, I honestly cannot tell you whether the elements in this plan will come together to achieve the intended ends or not. Not only are plans like this made with information I do not have, but the dynamics of the situation have definitely changed since my time in Iraq two years ago. I like the explicit focus on counterinsurgency fundamentals, though.

The expectations that have attached themselves to this new approach do concern me, however. As the well-publicized debate over this plan continues in the United States, and the new units only now begin to enter Iraq, I get the feeling that every setback—however minor—takes on such a heightened significance that even the most wildly successful long-term results may not be able to overcome. To truly judge its success or failure, the new approach will need many months, if not seasons, to unfold; in an era of “breaking news” and instant reports on the latest car bombing or mortar attack, it may very well never get the chance. Iraqis and Americans alike might naturally desire a rapid, decisive outcome akin to a 1944 D-Day operation, but this is not that kind of plan and certainly not that kind of war.

John Frick: The most important aspect of the new plan is the implementation of better counterinsurgency tactics and strategy. The troop number “surge” is a relative side-show in my opinion that has unnecessarily garnered the majority of the attention. I do get the feeling that there is a portion of the American population that actually hopes it fails in order to prove a point. I find this perspective, a wishing for failure, to be quite sad.

■ **In light of escalating sectarian violence between Shiites and Sunnis, to what extent is the U.S. military still capable of achieving victory in Iraq?**

Bryan Groves: The U.S. military achieved military victory in Iraq in the spring of 2003. That is when we liberated the country from the oppressive rule of Saddam Hussein. Since then, the U.S. military has been providing the Iraqi government with well trained security forces and the time it needed to write and ratify a constitution, hold elections, and establish itself. In my opinion, the onus is now on the Iraqi government to take the next step and make the political compromises necessary to bring about national reconciliation and political victory.

Robert Berschinski: I define victory in terms of a stable and peaceful nation controlled by a legitimate government that is able to control its borders and not act as staging ground for transnational terrorists. Given the situation as it currently stands, I see no likely outcome that successfully achieves any part of this recipe. I think we’ve moved beyond the point of Iraq having a military solution.

I think the “surge” we are seeing put into place right now will only increase U.S. casualties while, at best, forcing the various combatants to go underground for a while. The new counterinsurgency methods championed by

General Petraeus are certainly an improvement over what's been tried before, but unfortunately they're going to be fielded at the wrong time in the wrong conflict. The crux of the Iraq conflict today is not the insurgency; it is the sectarian war. The best counterinsurgency strategy in the world is not going to align the interests of the al-Maliki government with our own, because al-Maliki and the Dawa and SCIRI parties aren't interested in a political settlement along U.S. lines. The notion that we need to stabilize Baghdad so that the al-Maliki government can gain a foothold is ludicrous. He's beholden to the Shia militia groups and has no interest in U.S. success outside of pacifying the Sunni areas.

■ **Since your return from Iraq, has coverage by the American press resonated with own experiences, or deviated from them?**

Rob Berschinski: I think the media has done a reasonable job of covering what is certainly a difficult war to depict to the American people. It was my experience that every soldier, airman, and marine in Iraq is interested in getting his or her job done and making progress. That was certainly the case with me, and on a micro level, I think my team and I did a good job. We took some insurgents off the streets and did some damage to the "Al-Qaeda in Iraq" leadership.

Bryan Groves: I have both identified and disagreed with segments of the American press coverage of the Iraq War. From what I have seen, the press does not provide adequate coverage of the positive actions taken by our military, the Iraqi military, or the Iraqi government. Most of the air time allotted to the war focuses on the violence that occurred that day, not on the bad characters that were removed from the streets, the infrastructure projects that were completed, or the political negotiations conducted. The press could be more balanced in that regard.

That said, the press has well conveyed the difficulty of the situation facing both the American, and the Iraqi governments. However, I do think the broadcast media could do a better job in highlighting the political sticking points that the Iraqi government needs to navigate in order to achieve national reconciliation: oil-revenue sharing, revision of de-Baathification, demobilizing militias, and amending key points of their constitution, all of which the Iraq Study Group Report explains well. Those are the issues of the day. They are of utmost importance for Iraq and America alike. Their outcome will determine Iraq's fate and whether America's involvement there is ultimately regarded as a success or a failure.

■ **What has the transition to the quietude of the ivory tower been like for you? How about the transition back to civilian life more generally?**

Josh Bradley: I have always considered myself integrated into civilian life through my wife, family, and friends, as well as my off-duty time, so the only noticeable transition for me has been adapting to the much more flexible schedule of graduate school—and expanding my wardrobe, since I cannot wear a uniform every day! Attending Yale has been a wonderful experience for me so far. I enjoy meeting new friends, learning from great professors and classmates alike, and taking advantage of all the activities that Yale and this whole area of the country have to offer.

Bryan Groves: The transition to graduate school at Yale has been a great opportunity for me. All of my professors, classmates, and the staff have been extremely warm and helpful. Returning to the academic environment after a number of years in the working world has presented some challenges, but it has been a good growing period for me.

As a newlywed, I am enjoying more time with my wife, Richelle. As a consumer, like Josh, my civilian wardrobe has grown significantly as well, as Richelle attempts to clothe me appropriately for student life. Richelle also appreciates the fact that I no longer wake her daily at 0530—rather, 5:30 a.m.—to leave the house for physical training. Personally, I am adjusting to the culture shock associated with a vocabulary consisting more of full words than acronyms, realizing that my professors' first names do not correspond with a military rank, and students showing up late for class—or skipping it altogether—seemingly without penalty! What a concept!