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"Policy Placement" and Iraq: Women in Combat

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It is common practice for Hollywood producers to ask the Department of Defense for help in filmmaking. The asks range from helicopters to technical advice -- the decision rule for the DoD is whether or not the product placement will boost recruitment. Hence, the more explosions and shiny metal, the better. And the viewing public gets to pay for their own defense industry brainwashing twice, once by paying taxes and twice with the price of admission.

No surprise, then, that the more important work of movie-making -- the human perspective of real soldiers -- is happening with independent films. With less emphasis on commercialism and more care for social implications, product placement is not as important as what you might call policy placement. This happens when filmmakers ask the question: How is the story emblematic of much broader changes? One example is the film *Lioness* by Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers. The tag-line reads "There for the Action. Missing from History". This title refers to a group of Army women who were deployed in Iraq in 2003-04. The story follows the lives of five female soldiers who went to Iraq in support roles: clerks, mechanics and heavy equipment operators -- but returned a year later as America's first female combat veterans. "Team Lioness" is the name of the ad hoc program that was not officially approved by Washington. In fact, official defense policy bans women from direct ground combat. This despite the 182,000 tours of duty served by women in Iraq and the 95 women who have been killed there. Yet Lioness Teams have become a necessary feature of ground operations in Iraq as the spread of the program from the Army to the Marines indicates. Commanders noticed how tensions would explode when male soldiers interacted with Iraqi women during house raids. By bringing female support soldiers along, they were able to reduce the level of violence. Building on this success, they began to temporarily attach pairs of women to all-male combat units and "Team Lioness" was born.

Lionesses became an integral part of America's counter insurgency strategy -- and this is where the broader implications of this development becomes clear. The main feature of counter insurgency warfare is civilian protection. Indeed, if the recent violence reduction in Iraq can be attributed to anything it is that our military is putting into practice a basic lesson of social psychology: don't use coercion when persuasion will work.

Putting strategy and resources behind persuasion is not only necessary in Iraq, it is the fundamental shift that must happen in American national security strategy if we are to meet the challenges revealed to us by 9/11. The silver lining of our experience in Iraq lies in the lessons of Team Lioness. First, that our official approach to solving security problems is backward looking. We are stuck in the past, still trying to protect ourselves with the tools used to defeat the Soviet Union: tools that were orderly, technical and linear. Today's security problems look almost opposite: random, human and chaotic. Nearly all our international public servants who have served in Iraq and testified before Congress say that Iraq's problems cannot be solved militarily -- that political violence requires political solutions. And that can only be accomplished by human beings. During the Cold War era, hardware dominance and coercive force were common policy fare. Iraq (and to a lesser extent Afghanistan) have often proved this strategy a failure for today's threats.

From reaction to pro-action, from coercion to persuasion, from hardware to people, these are the shifts happening in our world. A common theme runs through this list -- one that defines the major characteristic of security in our age of globalization: Our own security depends on the safety of people as much as traditional needs of the nation-state. This is true not only in counter insurgency doctrine at the tactical level, but also at the grand strategic "big picture" level. I'm not saying that borders and an Army have become unimportant. To the contrary, they remain significant. However, it is clear that our emphasis needs to broaden as we contemplate military strategy and its role in our national security from Iraq onward.

And why are women so important to this change? Although the importance of women in national security is impossible to quantify, anecdotes like Team Lioness suggest that perhaps women bring an additional perspective to a situation -- one that sees the extra value in social networks and relationships, one that empathizes with the human need to feel safe when the world is random and chaotic. To learn to see the world as linked rather than ranked is probably the most helpful skill we can learn as we move away from the past 50 years of Cold War strategy.

Just in time for this discussion, the [Initiative for Inclusive Security](#) last week released the research results from 3 years of study about women's leadership in Rwanda in its post-genocide era. Rwanda is first in the world in numbers of women elected to the legislature (the USA is 71, Iraq is 33, Afghanistan 27). Rebuilding the country after a violent catastrophe has been the task--and the results so far are promising when held up next to the shifts needed for security strategies that rely on pro-action and persuasion rather than re-action and coercion. A few findings: women legislators tend to enable and support participatory process, women favor public consultations to build legitimacy and employ dialogue to sensitize and educate the public through culture, both with government initiatives and with fellow citizens, men and women working together are more effective overall, women frame issues as broad social problems rather than narrow concerns, women working together enhance the legislature's attention to social issues, good governance improves (less corruption, for example). The study also determined that international support is indispensable in this process. These small steps forward in documentation should have significant consequences for how we conceptualize women's role in achieving security. Indeed, women are agents of change at every level, from the tactical to the strategic. We need to learn to be more intentional about harnessing this positive influence as we move forward.

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