



---

# A New Theory to Avoid Operational Level Stagnation

By Maj. James Stultz and Lt. Col. Machael Buchanan

“Immobilism: a policy of extreme conservatism and opposition to change” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

“The enemy we’re fighting against is different from the one we’d war-gamed against.... We knew they were here, but we did not know how they would fight.”<sup>1</sup> Lieutenant General William Wallace, Commander V Corps for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) phase III acknowledged a change in the operational environment from which planners designed the operational approach. Reframing should occur, by doctrine, when the commander recognizes the operational environment changes. However, coalition commanders and planners continued on the operational approach largely because of the speed of tactical successes they enjoyed. If one is winning, why change? Tactically winning, however, hid the growing problems within the operational approach.

After a rise of insurgency and years of operationally stagnating, military commanders and staffs eventually reframed and effectively climbed out of their spiraling fall from strategic failure in Iraq. This highlights that the ability to identify when to reframe is a critical skill for commanders and their staffs. Current joint and army doctrine fails to provide a process for identifying when reframing is required, especially when unanticipated success is encountered by commanders and their staffs. Currently there is no staff system to trigger reframing in the face of unanticipated success or failure. The authors’ Operational Immobilism Theory aims to fill the gap in current doctrine by first using two case studies to highlight why the gap is important at the operational and strategic level and then identifying processes that will assist in identifying when reframing must occur.

## Current Doctrine

Perhaps the most overlooked aspect of Design is the continuous process of reframing, which is essential to maintaining a position of relative advantage. It is the activity of revisiting earlier design hypotheses, conclusions, and decisions which underpin the current operational approach.<sup>2</sup> Joint doctrine also explains the importance of revising the approach to ensure successful actions are supporting the overall desired end state: “Planners must look for opportunities or unforeseen challenges that suggest the mission may require revision and a different operational approach may be required to achieve the desired end state.”<sup>3</sup> However, doctrine places too much responsibility on the commander’s intuition to trigger reframing and fails to provide a methodology to recognize when reframing is necessary.

Organizations rely on the commander’s intuition, the art of command, to trigger reframing. Due to the complexity of the current operational environment, there are hundreds of competing demands on the commander’s intuition. General Gerhard von Scharnhorst, Chief of the Prussian Staff at the turn of the 18th Century, envisioned the general staff in order to parlay these risks as well as overcome the rarity of a Napoleon, or military genius who may prevail over such problems with only a brilliant mind.<sup>4</sup> Developing decision support matrixes is an example of a staff helping a commander through the complexity of military operations. However, unlike decision points, which help the commander recognize and anticipate key decisions regarding a specific course of action, there are no “planning decision points” to help the commander recognize the need to reframe despite apparent successes.<sup>5</sup> There are no routine reminders on a matrix or template to revisit earlier hypotheses, conclusions, and decisions that underpin the current operational approach.

Organizations are strongly motivated to reflect and reframe following failure, but they tend to neglect



operational reflection and reframing following tactical actions, especially successful ones.<sup>6</sup> Friendly tactical success implies an adversary's failure and consequently his trigger for an attempt at transformational reframing. As most innovation is a result of failure and frustration, it is critical to conduct reframing without crisis or failure. Reframing must come from a staff system to encourage the commander to reframe despite a natural tendency to bask in success. The risks associated with this doctrinal gap are identified and mitigated by the Operational Immobilism Theory.

### **A New Operational Level Theory: Operational Immobilism**

Operational Immobilism Theory identifies the point of operational level departure between adversaries, called the military point of stagnation. It also describes the risks in terms of tempo and resources lost during the period of disadvantage, called the zone of stagnation. The theory is useful for operational planners and commanders because it highlights the importance of reframing while executing the operational approach as well as it helps explain operational failure despite tactical success.

The Operational Immobilism Theory contends that a military point of stagnation occurs as the enemy changes his operational approach to gain a position of relative advantage without a corresponding change in the friendly operational approach.<sup>7</sup> Within the operational level of war, operational approaches are susceptible to Immobilism, or, a unit's tendency to avoid fundamentally changing the operational approach through reframing and instead focus on minor adjustments to the current operational approach. Immobilism is not the result of an ineffective commander or staff. It is the result of a commander and his staff misunderstanding the ever-changing operational environment in a complex adaptive system.

Often the operational approach chosen by the commander is appropriate for the complex adaptive system he faces (See Figure 1). However, as the enemy adapts to achieve a position of relative advantage outside the boundaries of the friendly lines of operations or effort, the friendly commander must reframe the operational environment. As mentioned, tactical success often prevents reframing under the auspices of "we are winning." If the commander and his staff fail to reframe, they trigger a point of stagnation. The enemy gains an advantage because there is no corresponding change in the friendly plan of action.

A zone of stagnation develops thereafter until a friendly plan of action changes, which consumes precious time as the friendly commander maintains the now relatively disadvantageous operational approach. Until the commander and his staff reframes the environment, the problem, and the operational approach, a zone of stagnation remains and the enemy continues to gain the position of relative advantage regardless of his tactical failures. To break the zone of stagnation, in addition to reframing, the friendly commander must apply additional resources to the new operational approach to regain a position of relative advantage.

# Operational Immobilism Theory

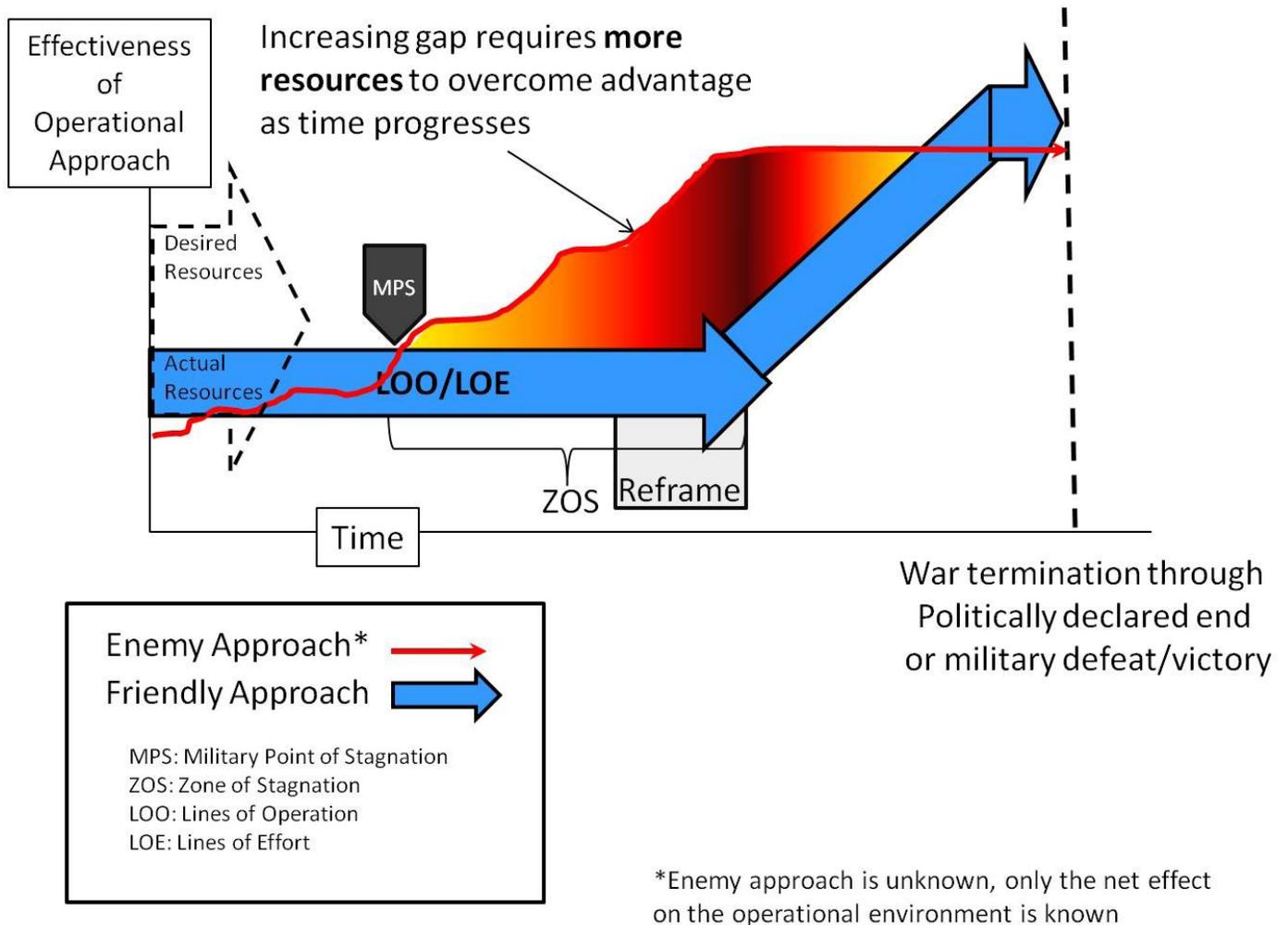


Figure 1

The military point of stagnation (MPS) is the moment in time when a commander fails to change his operational approach to address a change in his enemy's operational approach. The point highlights the beginning of a shift in relative advantage between two adversaries as a result of the lack of change. Thus recognizing the MPS is critical for the commander. The zone of stagnation (ZoS) is defined as the cumulative loss of time as the commander fails to act on his enemy's change beginning with the military point of stagnation.

If the commander has a position of relative advantage, it could be lost during the zone of stagnation. During the zone of stagnation, operational and strategic commanders often enjoy tactical success. However, the operational and strategic success is inversely proportional to tactical success in the zone of stagnation. The zone of stagnation ends once the friendly commander reframes the problem and acknowledges the changed operational environment. The damage done by the zone is the gap between the relative advantages which the enemy created during the zone of stagnation. The gap can be closed by the friendly gain in relative advantage applying additional resources along with a possible change in the friendly operational approach.

As time is the critical requirement, despite the best efforts to overcome the gap in advantage caused by the



zone, public pressure on the National Command Authority often causes conflict termination despite a positive path of relative gain. The following two case studies highlight the importance of identifying the zone of stagnation early to prevent a detrimental loss of time.

#### *Case Study One: Operation Iraqi Freedom*

An analysis of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) provides an example of the delayed reaction of friendly forces to an enemy change in operational approach which resulted in a MPS and subsequent ZoS. Between June 2003 and February 2004, V Corps (CJTF-7), the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), and the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) provided the operational level headquarters in OIF. Using the beforementioned theory, the point of stagnation resulted from Coalition planners basing their initial operational approach for Phase IV on an understanding of the Phase III operational environment.<sup>8</sup> Not changing their operational approach to the new conditions facilitated a lengthy zone of stagnation. Therefore, the stagnation enabled the enemy to establish a marked position of advantage.

The point of stagnation for OIF occurred at the point of transition from Phase III (dominate) to Phase IV (stabilize) operations on 1st May 2003.<sup>9</sup> The MPS resulted from Coalition planners basing the initial operational approach for Phase IV on an understanding of the Phase III operational environment. Additionally, the lack of capabilities and resources within both civilian and military organizations in theater to conduct stability operations greatly facilitated the MPS.<sup>10</sup> The Coalition execution of Phase III operations was highly successful.<sup>11</sup> However, conditions at the conclusion of Phase III operations changed significantly.

Coalition planners did not fully anticipate the reaction of Iraqis at the conclusion of Phase III operations. ORHA, an agency within the Department of Defense, had planning responsibility for Phase IV operations.<sup>12</sup> Prior to the invasion, examination of the final meeting between ORHA and the division commanders highlights a lack of coordination and planning for any change in the operational environment after offensive operations concluded. A division commander asked a senior representative of ORHA what will happen when military forces arrive in Baghdad. The senior ORHA representative replied, "Just get us to Baghdad and we will take it from there."<sup>13</sup> The combination of coordination issues within the Coalition and the unanticipated reaction of Iraqis degraded the staff's ability to transformationally reframe and instead led to transactional<sup>14</sup> changes to the Phase III operational approach which triggered the MPS. A "we will figure it out" attitude only exacerbated the problem. Figure 2 shows the enemy at an operational level disadvantage throughout Phase III operations. At the MPS, as the enemy's operational approach changed without a corresponding Coalition reframe, the enemy began moving towards operational parity. Given the complex nature of the environment which the military operates, it is expected that the first model of an anticipated operational environment is inaccurate for sequential operations.

After the MPS, the lack of timely reframing at the operational level allowed the enemy to take advantage of the Coalition's ZoS to establish a marked position of advantage. The zone occurred from the transition from Phase III to Phase IV operations until the effect of the surge began to stem the level of violence in Iraq in the summer of 2007.<sup>15</sup> The transition between the ORHA and CPA provided an opportunity for reframing. However, such an opportunity quickly expired. The CPA arrived in Iraq after stability operations were ongoing and thus initially focused on establishing itself rather than reframing the current operational environment in Iraq.<sup>16</sup>

A similar situation occurred for military forces, as V Corps became the post-conflict military headquarters. V Corps had not planned, staffed, or trained to be the senior military headquarters for Phase IV.<sup>17</sup> In August 2003, V Corps released the Phase IV campaign plan that was nested with Central Command and Coalition Forces Land Component Command documents and reflected the anticipated operational environment for Phase III operations, not the Phase IV operations in which they assumed control.<sup>18</sup> Despite a lack of operational level reframing, and as the operational environment in Iraq descended into a violent insurgency, reframing occurred at the tactical level which resulted in local success. The operations of the 101st Airborne Division in Mosul highlight how tactical reframing led to the establishment of an effective operational approach.<sup>19</sup> Although the 101st



Airborne Division in Mosul highlight how tactical reframing led to the establishment of an effective operational approach.<sup>19</sup> Although the 101st changed their operational approach to match the environment and enemy, V Corps continued to fight the environment CFLCC faced in Phase III. Figure 2 shows the enemy established a marked operational advantage during the zone because ORHA/CPA and V Corps did not reframe like some of its subordinate divisions to adjust their operational approach. The Coalition only made transactional changes to the operational approach for Phase IV using an invalid understanding of the problem and operational environment at a critical time in the war.

Reframing for OIF occurred with a combination of the inculcation of the counterinsurgency ideas and a plan for a significant increase in troop strength. Reframing accurately identified the problem and enabled the formulation and communication of an operational approach which addressed an accurate frame of the operational environment in Iraq. The Combined Arms Center Headquarters coordinated the revised force generation model and included a refinement of scenarios at the combat training centers, the release of revised counterinsurgency doctrine, and the revision of leader development courses to incorporate lessons learned from OIF.<sup>20</sup>

The establishment of the shared understanding created appears to have been a key component of the reframing process. Without this shared understanding the reframing is unlikely to have been as effective as it was. The planning for the surge is best captured as the surge of ideas described by General David Petraeus in “How We Won Iraq.” The article identifies the essence of reframing as a part of either the Military Decision Making Process or design activity.<sup>21</sup> Reframing that occurred as part of the planning for the surge enabled the establishment of an effective operational approach, as depicted in Figure 1. The surge also highlights the advantage of responding after a ZoS with an appropriate level of resources.

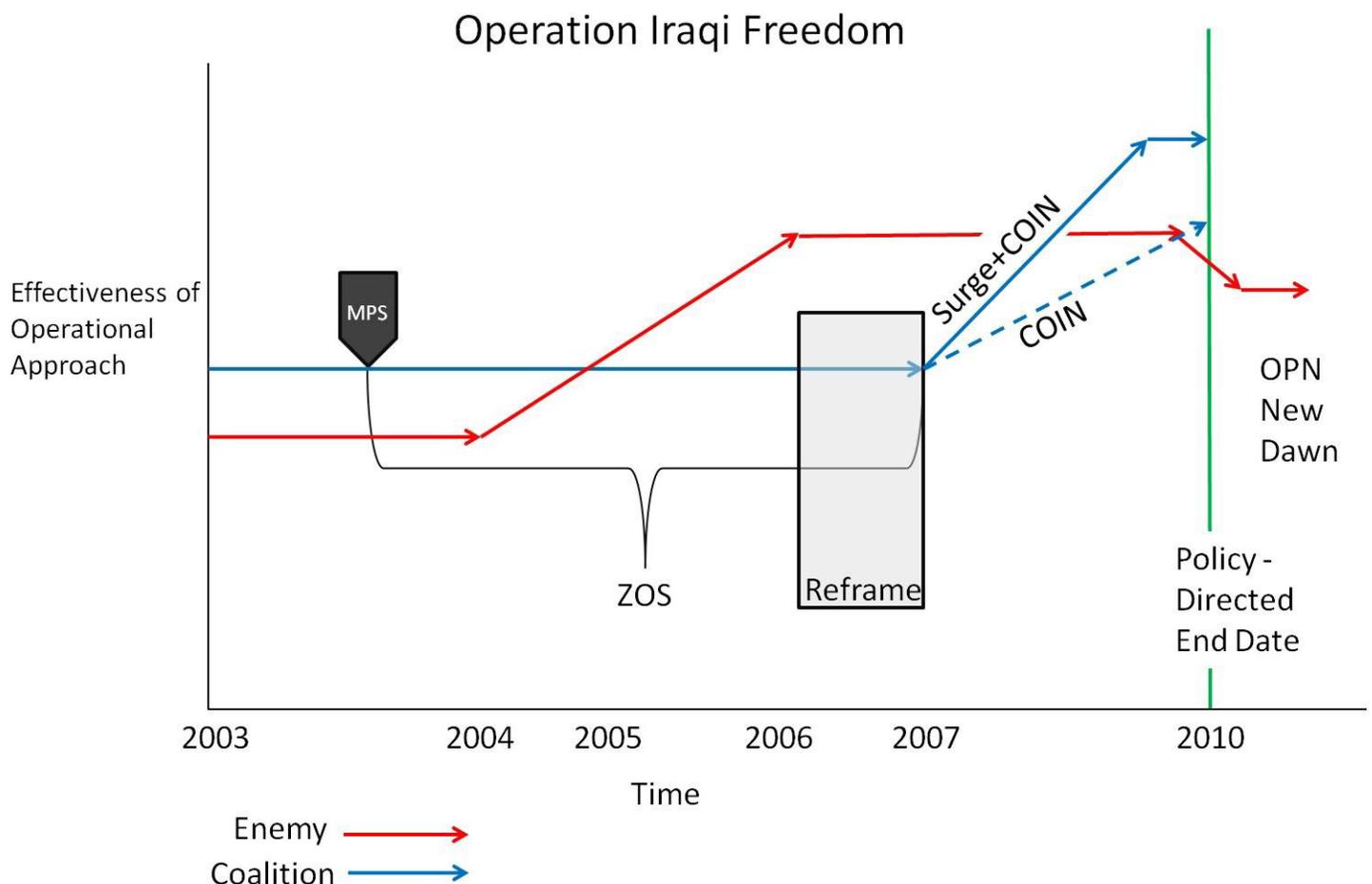


Figure 2



### *Case Study Two: Vietnam War*

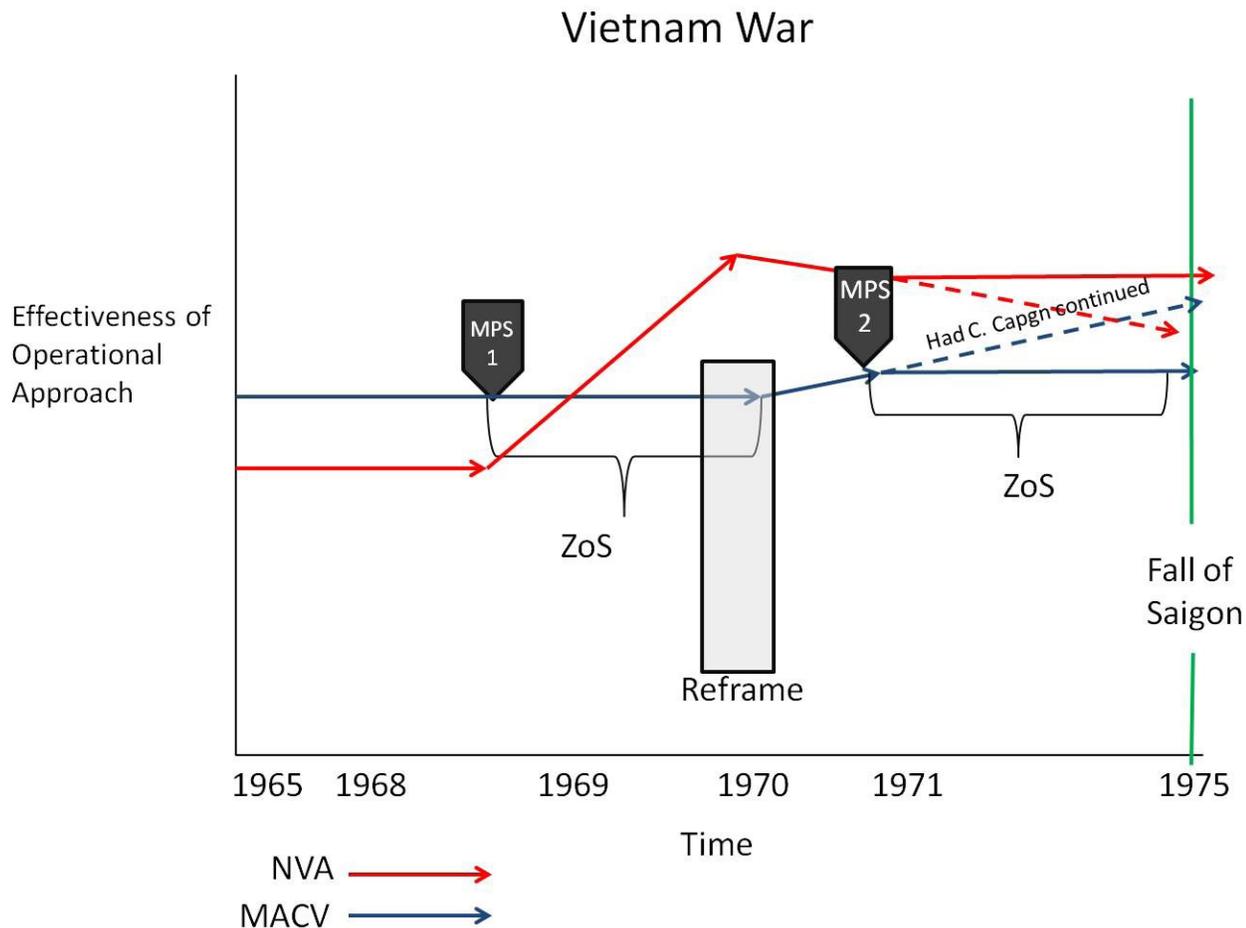
The second case study, the Vietnam War between 1968 and 1975, exemplifies the amplifying effects time has on the risks associated with stagnation. The operational level headquarters in the Vietnam War was the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV).<sup>22</sup> MACV hit the first point of stagnation after a tactical level victory during the Tet Offensive. The subsequent zone of stagnation ended upon reframing with a new approach attacking the enemy's logistics in Cambodia. MACV encountered the second MPS when the national command authority directed the commander to withdraw from Cambodia based on time criteria rather than conditions based criteria. Once the Cambodia campaign ended, MACV once again stagnated and continued in a zone of stagnation until the end of the war.

After the Viet Cong lost tactically during the Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) changed their operational approach.<sup>23</sup> The new NVA operational approach relied heavily upon establishing lines of communication throughout Cambodia to resupply both North Vietnamese divisions and the tattered Viet Cong in South Vietnam. However, MACV did not recognize the point of stagnation because the tactical victory of the Tet Offensive created a false belief in an effective operational approach.

In this case, a tactical victory by the United States Army triggered a MPS and subsequent zone of stagnation. The associated ZoS ran from the end of Phase II of the Tet Offensive until the commencement of Operation TOAN THANG 43. MACV did not initially identify the zone because of the continuing tactical success, particularly Phase III of the Tet Offensive. Although failure often leads to reflection, success rarely triggers any objective reframing/reflection. The zone of stagnation continued after the Tet Offensive, with MACV focusing solely on the implementation of Vietnamization instead of the evolving operational environment. On assuming command of MACV in June 1968, General Creighton Abrams changed the strategy from search and destroy to clear and hold.<sup>24</sup> This change in strategy forced a reframing of the operational approach which led to a transformational change, the Cambodian incursion. Figure 3 shows the first MPS and the ZoS and the effects of the Cambodian incursion on the United States' relative advantage over the NVA. The new operational approach was based on the interdiction of NVA lines of communication in Cambodia, a transformational change compared to the previous approach. The campaign resulted in significant gains for MACV but one could argue that it was too small of an operation and too late in an increasingly unpopular war to change the end result.

General Abrams' transformational reframing to include an additional line of effort against the NVA represents an important aspect of reframing to avoid a lengthy zone of stagnation. Figure 3 shows the second MPS starting after the withdrawal and the ZoS running to the end of the war. Transactional change within the current operational approach is simply not enough to gain a position of advantage over the enemy. Attacking the NVA's critical lines of communication in Cambodia may have prevented the NVA from effecting MACV's critical stability operations. Unfortunately, due to the increasingly war weary American public and their revulsion for any further escalation, the Cambodia incursion's success was temporary as President Nixon announced a firm timetable of withdrawal from the onset of the Cambodia campaign.

Figure 3



### Operational Immobilism Theory's Utility

The Operational Immobilism Theory helps commanders and staffs understand the ramifications of failing to refine and reframe their understanding of their operating environment. This paper argues for “planning decision points” as the primary means of avoiding a lengthy zone of stagnation. Stagnation must also be added to the elements of operational art in both joint and army doctrine to remind staff officers of the inherent risks associated with failing to reframe.

Planning decision points helps remind staffs to periodically relook planning assumptions and their understanding of the operational environment. Similar to operational decision points, priority information requirements (PIR) must be associated with the planning decision points. Like any information collection plan, collection assets must be associated with the PIR to answer questions which trigger reframing. For example, knowing that the Coalition planned to disband the Iraqi army, a planning PIR of “How do former Iraqi Army soldiers and officers respond to the disbandment of the Iraqi Army,” would generate decision points to reframe based on a better understanding of how friendly actions change the environment. By developing planning PIRs in the initial planning process, staff officers avoid some of the aversion to change. In addition to planning decision points, understanding the effects of a zone of stagnation helps commanders and staffs avoid the inevitable resistance to change in the face of tactical success.

### Conclusion

Tactical defeats almost always trigger fundamental change through reframing. Tactical success, on the other hand, mask underlying operational level problems. Given the marked tactical advantage of the United States



military power, repeated tactical defeats are unlikely. Therefore, it is critical to understand the separation between tactical success and operational and strategic victory. This makes recognizing the military point of stagnation all the more difficult and further highlights the importance of developing planning decision points to trigger reframing. Reframing may not just involve the change of the operational approach but incorporate other elements to maximize the effectiveness of the reframing. An example of this point is the Combined Arms Center commanding general influencing several domains of education and training to inculcate the counterinsurgency model.

Francis Bacon once wrote: "...he that will not apply new remedies must expect new evils; for time is the greatest innovator..."<sup>25</sup> Time is the critical component of potential solutions to problems. If time is lost through stagnation, it can never be regained and military leaders must expend resources to recover the loss. The Operational Immobilism Theory suggests that a military point of stagnation occurs as the enemy changes his operational approach to gain a position of relative advantage without a corresponding change in the friendly operational approach. The effects of stagnation begin at the military point of stagnation and amplify with time as long as an organization remains in the subsequent zone of stagnation. Time in the zone plays a substantial factor in determining the resources required to overcome the enemy's advantage. However, tactical success while in the zone often masks the commander and his staff's ability to recognize the need for reframing. Through the Iraq and Vietnam case studies, the authors sought to provide practical examples of recent conflicts which exude the practical implications of the theory. If operational planners and future operational level commanders understand and use the framework for understanding stagnation and develop planning decision points to facilitate reframing, they will prevent the adverse effects of stagnation on military operations.

*Lt. Col. Buchanan and Maj. Stultz were students together at the School of Advanced Military Studies where they developed and refined the Operational Immobilism Theory.*

## NOTES

1. Rick Atkinson, "General: A Longer War Likely," *The Washington Post*, March 28, 2003. The statement was made by Lieutenant General William S. Wallace, Commander V Corps commented during Phase III of OIF. The comment was made on 28th March 2003. Land operations began on 20th March 2003.
2. Department of the Army Headquarters, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], 2012), 2-11; United States Joint Forces Command, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Operational Planning* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2011), II-19. Army doctrine states: "Conditions will change during execution, and such change is expected because forces interact within the operational environment. Recognizing and anticipating these changes is fundamental to Army design methodology." Headquarters, ADRP 5-0, 2-11.
3. United States Joint Forces Command, JP 5-0, *Joint Operational Planning*, II-18.
4. Peter Paret, *The Cognitive Challenge of War, Prussia 1906* (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2009), 83.
5. US Army Headquarters, ADRP 1-02: *Operational Terms and Graphics* (Washington D.C.: U.S. GPO), 1-17.
6. Current doctrine regarding Army Design and reframing in particular address several factors that trigger a decision to reframe to include "A Major event that causes catastrophic change in the operational environment." Additionally, another factor is unanticipated success or failure (ATP 5-0.1, 1 July 2015, 6-2). However using the Iraq Case study later



in the paper, it is evident reframing during catastrophic success is not on the forefront of commanders' and planners' agenda.

7. In reality, it is the net effect of the enemy's operational approach which changes as friendly forces rarely, if ever fully understand the enemy's operational approach until they write a book about it afterward. Often friendly forces only recognize the effect of the enemy's approach on the operational environment.

8. Rick Atkinson, "General: A Longer War Likely," *The Washington Post*, March 28, 2003. Lieutenant General William S. Wallace, Commander V Corps commented during Phase III of OIF "The enemy we're fighting against is different from the one we'd war-gamed against."

9. Donald P. Wright, *The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom, May 2003-January 2005: On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008), 19. President Bush announced the completion of major combat operations on USS Abraham Lincoln. The concept for Phase IV operations was announced by General Tommy Franks, Commander of CENTCOM, in a speech on 16th April 2003.

10. Senior commander on the ground, interview by authors, Fort Leavenworth Kansas, 7th February 2014.

11. Donald P. Wright, *The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom, May 2003-January 2005*, 14-19.

12. Wright, *The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom, May 2003-January 2005*, 13; *United States, After Saddam: Prewar Planning and the Occupation of Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Arroyo Center, 2008), 53- 60. ORHA consisted of four functional components and three geographic components. ORHA did not control the CJTF remaining to provide security.

13. Senior commander on the ground, interview by authors, Fort Leavenworth Kansas, 7 February 2014.

14. Refinement of the approach without major reform.

15. Peter R Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

16. United States, *After Saddam*, 70 - 72.

17. Wright, *The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom, May 2003-January 2005*, 146-148. General Wallace, Commander V Corps stated that he did not recall being the indication that V Corps would assume the JTF mission. He began receiving word of the change to V Corps mission in late April. V Corps took the role of CJTF-7, for clarity in this this paper

18. Ibid., 159-163. General Ricardo Sanchez, Commander CJTF-7, commented that while the intelligence cell worked hard to adapt to the new environment, their forte was a conventional fight. It took time for the type of analysis required in a counterinsurgency environment to be learned. This limited the ability of CJTF-7 to conduct reframing.

19. Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 228-232.

20. Lieutenant General David H. Petraeus. "Combined Arms Center – An Engine of Change... dxfEnabling the Road to Deployment" PowerPoint presentation. Accessed 7 Feb 2014.

21. "How We Won in Iraq," *Foreign Policy Magazine*, October 29, 2013, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/10/29/david\\_petraeus\\_how\\_we\\_won\\_the\\_surge\\_in\\_iraq](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/10/29/david_petraeus_how_we_won_the_surge_in_iraq).

22. Lawrence E. Grinter and Peter M. Dunn, *The American War in Vietnam: Lessons, Legacies, and Implications for Future Conflicts*, vol. 67 of *Contributions in Military Studies* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 36-37.

23. John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War*, in the Modern war Studies series (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 5-17.

24. J.R. Bullington, "Iraq and Vietnam: Some Sad and Sombre Rhymes," *American Diplomacy: Foreign Service Despatches and Periodic Reports on U.S. Foreign Policy*, January 2007,



[http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2007/0103/bull/bullington\\_sadsomber.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2007/0103/bull/bullington_sadsomber.html).

25. Francis Bacon, *The Essays of Francis Bacon*, ed. Mary Augusta Scott, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), [www.stmarys-ca.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/files/Essays.pdf](http://www.stmarys-ca.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/files/Essays.pdf).