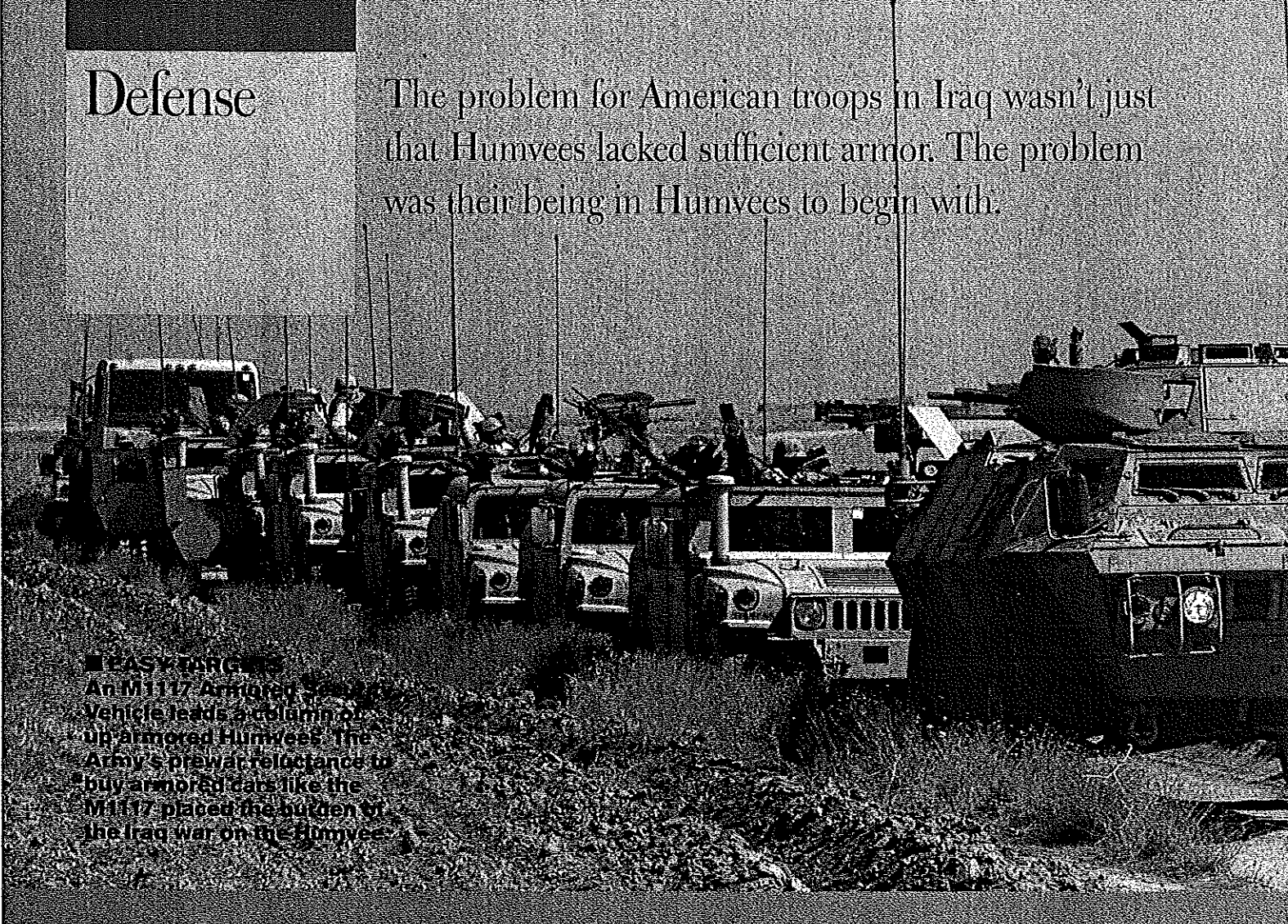


## Defense

The problem for American troops in Iraq wasn't just that Humvees lacked sufficient armor. The problem was their being in Humvees to begin with.



**■ EASY TARGETS**  
An M1117 Armored Stryker Vehicle leads a column of up-armored Humvees. The Army's prewar reluctance to buy armored cars like the M1117 placed the burden of the Iraq war on the Humvees.

# Commuting to War

■ By Sydney J. Freedberg Jr.

**T**he official announcements that another American has been killed in action in Iraq again and again include this telltale phrase: “... an improvised explosive device detonated near his HMMWV.” In other words, a roadside bomb blew up near a High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle, better known as a Humvee. The armed forces have 125,000 Humvees of various types, more than any other kind of vehicle. And though exact figures are classified, more U.S. troops have died in Humvees since 2001 than in any other vehicle.



No wonder, then, that Congress and the media have focused on the ever-escalating arms race that has the military adding thicker armor and the insurgents building bigger bombs. The latest Humvee model, the M1151, weighs in at more than 5 tons, twice the weight of the original, unarmored M998. Even with radical upgrades to its engine and suspension, the Humvee hits its weight limit at about 6 tons. The military's new "Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected" vehicle program is awarding contracts to build wheeled transports as heavy as 40 tons. Meanwhile, the most powerful "improvised explosive devices," or IEDs—some allegedly made in Iran—can penetrate the armor on a 70-ton M1 tank or even flip it into the air.

"We started out with pretty much nothing," said Sgt. Jason Sanders, whose Marine unit began its tour in Iraq in February 2004 with only unarmored Humvees. The troops put sandbags on the floorboards, and they eventually received a trickle of Humvees with add-on armor, but "it didn't really matter," Sanders said. "If whatever [the insurgents] were building at the time didn't blow up the damn up-armored Humvee, they'd build it three times as big the next time. You had a better fighting chance on foot, where you can take cover."

Adding more and more armor to the Humvees was the right answer to the wrong question. The soldiers' and marines' problem wasn't just that their Humvees lacked sufficient armor: The problem for the troops was being in Humvees to begin with. Like most units in Iraq, though, Sanders's company had no choice. "We had a 25-mile ride to work," said Maj. Trent Gibson, the company commander at the time. Assigned to secure the western border town of Karabila, along the insurgency's supply lines into Syria, Gibson had intended to set up a permanent outpost downtown "and operate from there by foot," he said. "And then a decision was made, above my pay grade and above my battalion commander's pay grade, that there would be no bases in [town]. It was considered 'force protection': If we were too close to the populace, we would be putting our marines at risk."

In fact, "force protection" may have gotten a lot of grunts killed. For Gibson's marines, their isolated base was easy to defend, but it was a long drive from Karabila, along only two possible roads. "Before I could get my guys in [town] and dismount-

ed, where they were safest," Gibson said, "I had to put them on a fixed route in an unarmored or lightly armored Humvee." The insurgents knew exactly where the Americans had to go—and exactly where to place their homemade mines.

Out of about 150 men in his company, Gibson said, "I had seven marines killed. Four of them were killed in an ambush or IED attack on moving vehicles. Two of them were killed in close proximity to their vehicle after they had dismounted in response to enemy contact." Only one was killed when he was moving on foot far from his Humvee: Cpl. Jason Dunham, who received the Medal of Honor posthumously for shielding his comrades from a grenade blast with his body. (See "The Other Three Thousand," *NJ*, 1/13/07, p. 25.) But at the time, Dunham's squad was racing to help another unit that had been ambushed—on the road, in its Humvees.

The day that Dunham died, he and his men had escorted Gibson into town to inspect potential outpost sites next to the Iraqi police station. "Living in [town] was the key to it all," Gibson said. "It would have allowed us to have a much closer relationship with the Iraqi security forces. If you don't have continual presence with these people, they're going to fear the muj"—the mujahedeen, or "holy warriors"—"more than they fear you." But because Gibson's troops were spread too thin, forced to drive back and forth in their Humvees, he never had the resources to establish a 24/7 presence in town. Without offering that onsite protection to the community, he could never cultivate a network of allies and informers. And without that network, he could never uproot the insurgents who were blowing up his Humvees on the roads. It was a classic Catch-22.

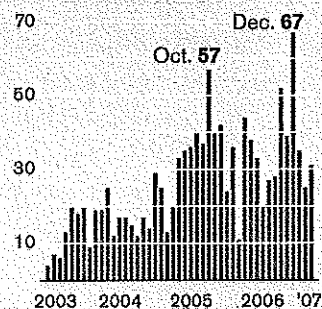
Gibson is hardly alone among the dozens of service members—marines and Army soldiers, regulars and reservists, junior enlisted and senior officers—who spoke to *National Journal*. Take Lt. Eric Everts of the California National Guard, who saw both his company commander and his battalion commander killed on a single day by roadside bombs. Ultimately, his company reduced improvised explosive device attacks by 90 percent in its sector south of Baghdad—not by holing up on a big base or commuting in their Humvees, but by keeping the most aggressive and intimate presence forward, in town

and on foot, that their superiors would permit. "We worked with an Iraqi police station right next to our [outpost]," Everts said. "They had the highest rate of captured insurgents in the entire country for any Iraqi police department."

But the next U.S. unit that rotated into that sector pulled back from day-to-day contact with the Iraqis, Everts said, and without American prodding, the local police hunkered down in their station. Meanwhile, the Americans tried to patrol from the apparent safety of their up-armored Humvees, getting out on foot as little as possible. But their caution didn't make them safer. "They took over 20 casualties—lost limbs, testicles, eyesight, hearing—and were eating up all our allotment of the new armored Humvees, as well as all the replacements," Everts said. Without Iraqi contacts or their own men walking the

## ■ The Toll

**U.S. deaths caused by improvised explosive devices**



SOURCE: Iraq Coalition Casualty Count

streets, he said, "inevitably they found the IED when it blew up."

Every successful counterinsurgency campaign—the British in Malaya, the French in Algiers, even the bright spot in Vietnam of the Marine Corps's "combined action platoons"—teaches the importance of foot troops in small units working closely with the locals. "Holing up in big bases gives the insurgents the free run of the population," said Andrew Krepinevich, a leading advocate of classic counterinsurgency doctrine. It is not enough to drive through the neighborhoods, or even to walk through, he argued: U.S. troops have to live with the people. "Instead," he said, "we've relied on armor and IED-buster gadgets—and we've very little to show for it."

Now, after four years of building ever more heavily up-armored Humvees and taking ever heavier casualties, the U.S. military has begun to set up small, permanent outposts within Baghdad, using the troops sent to Iraq as part of the "surge." At least three dozen Iraqi police stations across the capital, including some in the Shiite militia stronghold of Sadr City, are being fortified and reinforced with Iraqi army and U.S. Army troops. That puts platoon-sized pockets of American forces, just 30-50 men strong, living among the Iraqis.

In contrast to the in-and-out sweeps of the past, "the whole concept is constant presence, 24 hours a day, seven days a week," said Brig. Gen. Joseph Anderson, chief of staff for the U.S.-led multinational coalition. And though the small neighborhood outposts are inevitably much more exposed than the big, isolated bases, Anderson said, "the number of attacks has gone down, because the sheer presence of our forces means the enemy is not as capable of conducting attacks"—so far.

But the enemy has proven lethally adaptable in the past. And the surge style of operations—on foot, in town, among the people—is radically different from the American military's mechanized, arms-length habits of the past 60 years. The question is, which side will master the new way of warfare first?

### The Limits of the Machine

Like the jeep in World War II, the Humvee has become the iconic vehicle of the Iraq war. Like the jeep, the Humvee was never meant to fight. They were both designed to be "utility" vehicles, to haul troops, supplies, and heavy equipment up to the fighting line, not to stand and fight themselves.

The Humvee "was intended to be a replacement for the jeep, not for any sort of combat," said Robert Baer, a retired Army lieutenant general who helped to plan the military's 1980s buildup that included the first Humvees, as well as the heavily armored M2 Bradley infantry carrier and the massive M1 Abrams tank. "To be very honest," Baer said, "the insurgency threat was not the major concern: It was the Soviets."

The Humvee was designed as a bigger, better jeep for a World War III envisioned as a bigger, deadlier World War II. More ferocious fighting along the front lines would mean a more voracious demand for supplies from the rear, the thinking went, but the basic distinction between the battlefield and the relatively safe rear area would remain. That mind-set called for distinct types of equipment: heavily armored, very expensive, mechanically complex combat vehicles for the fighting, and unarmored, affordable, mechanically reliable utility vehicles for the fetching and carrying.

The U.S. military was painfully aware that other kinds of conflict blurred those tidy categories—convoy ambushes and ad hoc armored trucks were not unknown in Vietnam—but it did not expect, or want, to fight another guerrilla war. Even as the Army in the 1990s increasingly focused on peacekeeping and urban combat, said Arthur Durante, a tactics expert at the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Ga., "we didn't make the next step—that we won't have front lines, and that means we can't have unarmored vehicles."

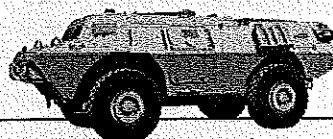
There were warnings. In 1993, a humanitarian relief mission to Somalia became entangled in civil warfare, and U.S. troops

## ■ Heavier and Heavier

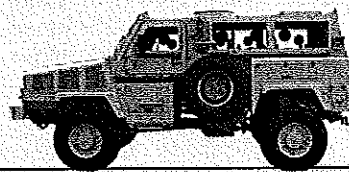
With the Humvee's chassis reaching the maximum weight of armor it can carry, the military has bought hundreds of heavier but less mobile vehicles to defeat roadside bombs. Now the Army and Marine Corps plan to buy 6,200 "Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected" (MRAP) vehicles in three weight classes. Nine contractors are producing sample vehicles, of which three are shown below.



**HMMWV**  
AM General (with Armor Holdings)



**Armored Security Vehicle (ASV)**  
Textron



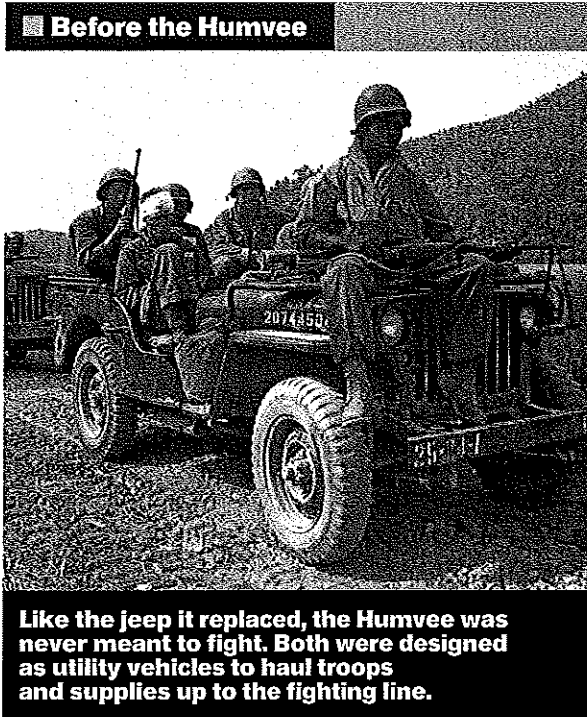
**RG-31 Mark 5**  
General Dynamics Land Systems

	HMMWV	Armored Security Vehicle (ASV)	RG-31 Mark 5
<b>WEIGHT</b> (lbs.)	7,700 to 12,100	29,950	31,290
<b>PAYLOAD</b> (lbs.)	1,800 to 5,100	3,450	8,140
<b>CREW+PASSENGERS</b>	2+3	2+4	2+6
<b>DETAILS</b>	The workhorse of the U.S. military, the Humvee exists in a wide range of variants, but the heavier armored models carry much less cargo and have less ability to move off-road.	This turretless troop-carrier variant of the M1117 armored car (see photo p. 30) is being considered for the lightest category of MRAP vehicle, the urban combat model.	Nearly 200 RG-31s are in U.S. service clearing roadside bombs, and the latest model, the Mark 5, is a proposed middle-weight MRAP model for convoy escort, bomb squads, and troop transport.

sent to arrest aides of warlord Mohammed Farah Aided were ambushed by hundreds of militia. Because the Pentagon had refused to send armored vehicles, the rescue force had to fight its way through downtown Mogadishu in Humvees. Eighteen Americans died. Defense Secretary Les Aspin resigned. President Clinton ordered a withdrawal. The Army hastily ordered its first handful of up-armored Humvees—and then debated whether to build any more.

“There were a lot of reasons why putting extra armor on it was a pain,” Durante said. Designed as a cargo hauler, the Humvee chassis could take plenty of extra weight. But each pound of armor welded on cut permanently into the vehicle’s payload. And, even upgraded, the suspension, the transmission, and the engine suffered from the strain, leading to costlier maintenance and a shorter service life.

Most generals thought the cost of up-armor­ing outweighed the benefits. The exception was the leadership of the Military Police Corps, the one branch tasked with patrolling the “safe” rear area behind the battle line. The MPs forced the rest of the Army to fund a slow but steady production of the (mostly) bulletproof M1114 Humvee. “God bless the military police, because they pushed for the Humvee variant



**Before the Humvee**

**Like the jeep it replaced, the Humvee was never meant to fight. Both were designed as utility vehicles to haul troops and supplies up to the fighting line.**

that was up-armored,” Durante said. “The infantry owes them a debt of gratitude.”

When the roads of Iraq turned deadly in 2003, only a few hundred M1114s were in the country—but the production line was open. Today more than 20,000 are spread across the Army and Marine Corps.

But the M1114s were not enough, not in numbers and not in armor. Troops used sandbags and welded-on scrap iron to add “hillbilly armor” to the thousands of unarmored Humvees. Then the military developed scientifically designed up-armor kits: first, armored half-doors with no windows, then full doors, then armor for the wheel wells and underbody, armored windshields—ultimately, even a kind of open-topped turret to protect the gunner manning the machine gun on the roof. Ever deadlier insurgent

bombs forced troops to further up-armor even the up-armored M1114s. Models now come off the assembly line with all the latest protection—and the troops still add armor in Iraq.

The Humvee fleet of unarmored utility vehicles had been transformed. When Durante visited Iraq shortly after the invasion, in summer 2003, he rode in Humvees with canvas sides. “By the second time I went, in September 2003, every vehicle I was in, they’d improvised some sort of armor: sandbags and bolt-on stuff,” he said. By Durante’s third trip, in 2004, troops never left their bases in a Humvee that lacked a military-issue armor kit.

But all of the problems that had made the military reluctant to up-armor the Humvee in the first place have cropped up with a vengeance. Maintenance demands have soared, reliability and service life have dropped. Some armor configurations make the vehicles top-heavy and prone to roll over in high-speed turns, causing lethal accidents. Overburdened suspensions make it hard for up-armored Humvees to drive cross-country or travel on dirt roads—limitations that make their movements even more predictable for the insurgent bomb makers.

And the bombs are still a threat, simply because it is easier to add more explosive than it is to add more armor. A big enough blast can flip a Humvee into the air, snapping soldiers’ spines and necks, even if the armor shell remains intact.

“It’s maxed out as far as the weight that it can carry. In a lot of cases, we’re overweighting them by a 1,000 or 2,000 pounds, and it’s still not heavy enough” to avoid being thrown, said Tom Miller, Humvee program manager for the Marine Corps. “And unless you completely redesign the suspension and the drivetrain,” he added, “you can’t get it high enough off the ground” to let a blast dissipate before it hits the crew compartment. “We’re looking at improving the underbelly protection, but we haven’t seen anything yet that actually worked.”

So the Marine Corps and the Army have begun buying an en-

**Buffalo**  
Force Protection

80,000
38,680
2+4

A massive vehicle with a built-in robot arm to deal with roadside bombs from a safe distance, the Buffalo is the sole contender for the heaviest MRAP category.

SOURCES: Defense Department; Force Protection; General Dynamics Land Systems-Canada; AM General; Armor Holdings; Textron

## Under Fire



APRIL 10, 2007

**Even with more armor, the Humvee remains vulnerable to improvised explosive devices, partly because it sits so low to the ground.**

tirely new class of vehicles: huge, heavy, and high off the ground, somewhat like militarized monster trucks. Many are descended from designs that the apartheid regime in South Africa once deployed against guerrilla land mines. Military bomb squads now ride the 26-ton Cougar; combat engineers keep Iraq's highways open in the 15-ton RG-31 and the 40-ton Buffalo, which has a crew cabin so high its driver's feet are above a Humvee driver's head.

The Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected vehicle program is rushing even more models through testing. Rep. Gene Taylor, D-Miss., and other members of Congress have called on the military to replace every Humvee in the war zone with a "mine-resistant" vehicle. But aside from the cost, the services face even bigger obstacles: If the 6-ton up-armored Humvees are cumbersome, maintenance-intensive, and too heavy to drive off-road, the 15-to-40-ton mine-resistant vehicles are even more so. While the military is commissioning a new class of relatively light mine-resistant vehicles—a mere 7 or 8 tons—for urban patrols, the heavier models now in service cannot traverse the narrow streets in many Iraqi neighborhoods. The new mine-resistant vehicles, meanwhile, will not be usable in the rough terrain of Afghanistan. In fact, the Army has ordered a kind of super-dune-buggy, significantly smaller than a Humvee, for use on mountain slopes and narrow passes. The mine-resistant vehicles fill a highly specialized niche in just one country, Iraq.

"They can't operate in other areas of the world," said Kevin McConnell, a top tactical expert with the Marine Corps Combat Development Command. "You'd need a good road network. There's not any real intent of putting those vehicles into Afghanistan, and there is no intent to keep these vehicles, at least in large numbers, when we come out of Iraq."

The Marine Corps and the Army don't want to replace the Humvee with the specialized, cumbersome mine-resistant vehicles but with an all-new design, something with all of the protec-

tion of the latest up-armored Humvees but with the cargo capacity and off-road agility of the original lightweight models. So far, however, they don't have even a design, let alone a prototype. All they have is a name—"Joint Light Tactical Vehicle"—and a few concept vehicles made by private industry to demonstrate a range of ideas: adjustable off-road suspensions to allow adding or subtracting modular armor; seats suspended from the ceiling to reduce blast impact through the floor; expanded battery power (though probably not a hybrid-electric motor) to power stronger jammers to disrupt a roadside bomb's electronic trigger.

The military will not even formalize its requirements until later this year. Current schedules expect the first vehicles to take the field in 2012 and the last Humvee to be replaced sometime after 2020.

So, technology will not get the United States out of its Humvee troubles any time soon. But inadequate technology never was the fundamental problem. The real cause of all of those casualties in Humvees was not the machine itself, but the way it was misused. The real solution will not be a new machine, but a new style of war.

### The Wrong Kind of War

The invasion of Iraq showcased a novel American way of war: rapid maneuver and precision strike, high technology and a small force. But after the successful invasion, looters rampaged through Baghdad while U.S. troops stood by, and Iraq turned into a different kind of war—a war that the U.S. was not merely unprepared for but also unwilling to contemplate. In the first months after Saddam Hussein fell, American forces occupied the dictator's palaces, barracks, police stations, even abandoned factories—locations that put them right in the middle of Iraqi neighborhoods. "All of our compounds were in town, which means you had constant dialogue with all sorts of leaders and even the regular population," said Brig. Gen. Anderson, who served in the invasion and is now back in Baghdad as chief of staff for the coalition forces. "But the logic was to pull out so we would allow the Iraqis to take charge and take responsibility."

At the same time, however, the U.S. occupiers dissolved Iraq's strongest national institutions, the army and the Baath Party, leaving no power center to stop the growing insurgency. "We had provided very good security in Tikrit—a 100 percent Sunni town, Saddam's hometown, that hated us," said Lt. Col. Steven Russell, now retired, who commanded the Tikrit district in 2003. "That allowed us to train police, to engage the sheiks and citizens, without whose support we would never have caught Saddam." It was Russell's troops, with Special Forces support, who helped to find the dictator in December 2003.

Russell says he managed to “stiff-arm” orders to consolidate his small outposts around Tikrit into a large, isolated base. But when his battalion went home, the next unit followed the pull-out policy. “We just weren’t ready,” Russell said, “and we ceded a lot of ground.”

Iraq’s slide into anarchy, insurgency, and civil war began, in part, because the U.S. military misunderstood its successes in the Balkans. In Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999, the first wave of U.S. forces came in heavy, with M1 tanks and M2 armored infantry carriers, and occupied small, ad hoc outposts in towns—but not for long. “I was the first U.S. commander in Kosovo,” Anderson recalled. “We occupied city halls, former police headquarters, an old barracks, an old officer’s club. But, over time, we pulled out of all that, and now we operate out of Camp Bondsteel, the big base where everybody is.”

Even in Kosovo, some officers had their doubts about that strategy. “At first, we had a rifle company in a gymnasium, right there in the community,” recalled Russell, who was with Anderson in the first wave. “But there were generals that had the notion that if you balled everything up into giant superbases, that was somehow more secure. I disagreed. It isolated us from the people, and we also made ourselves huge targets: If you make a huge base that’s a mile in diameter, even a cross-eyed insurgent with a mortar is going to hit something. And if I was restricted to a few roads [to and from one base], I was very predictable, very vulnerable to ambush.”

As the U.S. military pulled back in the Balkans, it parked its heavily armored vehicles on the newly built superbases. Brutally effective in city fighting, 70-ton M1 tanks and 30-ton M2 troop carriers make poor patrol cruisers for day-to-day security, tending to terrify civilians, rip up roads, and require arduous maintenance. (See “Future Tank,” *NJ*, 9/16/06, p. 32.) Instead, the big bases sent patrols out in Humvees. They were entirely adequate for the war-weary Balkans, where U.S. peacekeepers arrived as the violence was winding down, but they have been fatally vulnerable in Iraq, where the U.S. invasion set off an escalating spiral of chaos.

“If I was going into a high-threat place like Ramadi itself, I would always have a tank,” said Maj. Daniel Gade, who commanded an armored unit in the Ramadi district. But outside of the city proper, he said, “I would normally take a Humvee.” The winding streets of many Iraqi towns and the dirt roads through the irrigated countryside are barely wide enough for a Humvee, let alone a tank. Where the heavy tracked vehicles can pass, they often tear up the roads in the process, leaving them impassable both for patrols and for the re-

“We’re looking at improving the underbelly protection [of the Humvee], but we haven’t seen anything yet that actually worked.”

—Marine Corps program manager Tom Miller

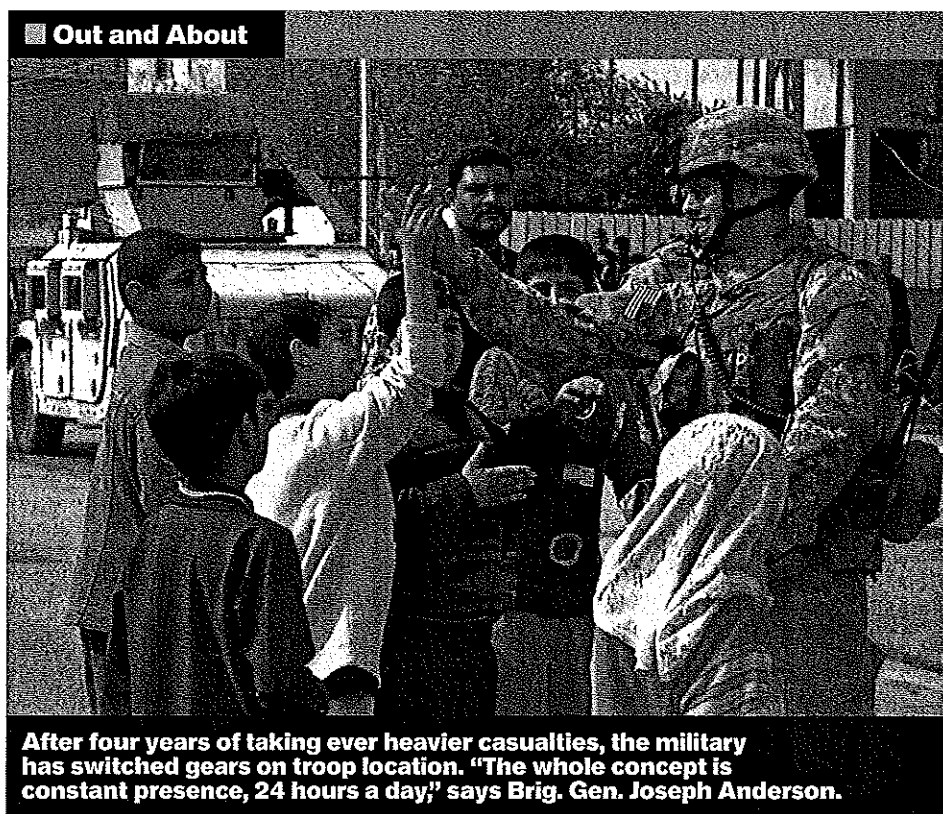
venge-prone locals. And for counter-guerrilla raids, Gade said, “a tank is literally useless,” because insurgents can not only hear a tank force coming, they can hear the noisy vehicles start their engines all the way back on the bases.

So it was in his Humvee that Gade was hit by a roadside bomb. “I was in a [factory-built] up-armored Humvee,” he recalled. “I would have been dead in an add-on armored Humvee.” With the maximum protection possible in a Humvee, Gade lost only a leg, which had to be amputated at the hip. He

has one of the most extensive prosthetics among officers still on active duty.

The dilemma that cost Gade his leg, and so many others their lives, was which tool to use for the job. “A tank can take almost any IED out there, and at least the crew is going to survive, or you can have a Humvee that can sneak up on people. It’s fast, it’s mobile, but they get taken out all the time,” Gade said. “We had a hammer and a scalpel, but we had no steak knife—something really big and something really small, but no real balance of the two.”

The irony is that many modern armies do have that in-between class of vehicle. The British patrolled Northern Ireland, and the French their former African colonies, with armored cars—vehicles that were much heavier and better protected than any jeep or Humvee, but far lighter and more road-mobile than a tank. The Russians sped into Kosovo in wheeled armored vehicles and seized the Pristina airport in 1999, preempting the slow-moving NATO peacekeepers.



#### ■ Out and About

After four years of taking ever heavier casualties, the military has switched gears on troop location. “The whole concept is constant presence, 24 hours a day,” says Brig. Gen. Joseph Anderson.

AP/GETTY IMAGES/AL VUSSEF

That debacle, and the Americans' own embarrassing difficulties in deploying, prompted Gen. Eric Shinseki, then the Army chief of staff, to procure an eight-wheeled, 19-ton armored troop transport for his troops: the controversial Stryker. But Shinseki sold his Stryker and its "Future Combat System" successor as vehicles for all missions, capable of replacing heavy tanks, instead of as medium-size vehicles to fill the yawning gap between the nimble wheeled Humvees and the massive tracked armor. The notion that the gap even needed filling was alien to the U.S. Army, which was still stuck in a binary mind-set that saw a conventional battlefield and a safe rear area but failed to see the guerrilla-warfare gray zone in between. That mind-set, which included a disdain for wheeled armor, had hardened over generations.

"The U.S. Army did build the M8 armored car in World War II," said historian Steven Zaloga, "but they absolutely hated it." After embarrassing mechanical breakdowns and brutal battlefield losses, the Army turned to heavier, tracked vehicles that were better able to go off-road to fight the German Panzers. The M8's defects soured the Army on wheeled combat vehicles—including Shinseki's Stryker—for 60 years.

When the Iraq war began in 2003, the Army had grudgingly fielded just one operational brigade of about 300 Strykers. It had only 49 of the even lighter and less popular M1117 Armored Security Vehicle, a 13-ton armored car bought—like the up-armored Humvee—at the insistence of the Military Police Corps. Now the Army has more than 770 hastily built Armored Security Vehicles patrolling roads and leading convoys in Iraq, with new variants proposed for the Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected vehicle contract; the Stryker troop carriers have proven remarkably resilient in combat in the cities of Iraq.

For World War II, and for the World War III that never came, the Army had no need for medium vehicles, because

there was no medium threat. The Army built a relatively small number of heavily armored vehicles to hold the front line; they were to be supplied with fuel and ammunition in vast quantity by fleets of jeep-type trucks, which were to operate out of centralized, highly efficient bases. The Army then tried to apply the same model to what its theorists called, tellingly, "low-intensity conflict": a few superbases, a spearhead of heavy armor, and lots of minimally protected Humvees.

The United States got away with it in the Balkans, but not in Iraq. The light forces were too fragile, the heavy forces too few. Maj. Gibson's Humvee-mounted marines took over their sector from an Army unit that had heavily armored vehicles but too few foot troops to patrol and hold the town. On his second day in Karabila, before the Army had pulled out, Gibson said, "we got ambushed, and a couple of Bradleys [armored troop carriers] responded. I told the vehicle commander to dismount his infantry and help me clear out these buildings, and

he said, 'This is all we got—it's just me and the driver.'"

The Marine Corps, by contrast, could bring to bear an overwhelming force of infantry: In the marines' most intense battle with the insurgents, a few days after Jason Dunham's death, they swept the neighboring town of Husayba on foot, block by block, without suffering a single death. But without outposts in town—without enough troops to garrison outposts in every town where they were assigned—they were compelled to shuttle back and forth in vulnerable Humvees.

Now at last, and perhaps too late, the U.S. military is surging additional forces into Iraq and concentrating them in Baghdad. For now, Moktada al-Sadr's Shiite militia seems to be cowed into cooperation, and the Sunni bombers appear to lying low. But soon enough, someone will test the new urban outposts.

"I've been in a few little places like that that were overrun," said retired Army Col. Patrick Lang, a military intelligence officer who served in Vietnam and is an expert on the Middle East. "The insurgents have shown the ability to mass 60, 70, 100 men, and a couple of suicide bombers" against a single target, he said. With clever use of car bombs to divert or block U.S. reinforcements, the insurgents could isolate and assault the 30 or 50 Americans troops at a neighborhood base.

The surge into Baghdad brings real risks. But the cautious approach—commuter patrols, big bases, "force protection"—was already losing the war. "We often forget that infantry organizations are designed to survive in the field and sustain themselves," said Lt. Col. Russell. "We've lost our way. We decided not to trust commanders to have [small] formations all around town. You have to trust your junior leaders to carry the water."

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