

HAVING ALL THE ANSWERS DOESN'T NECESSARILY MAKE YOU RIGHT

Immediately after December 7, 1941, the man who masterminded the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor expressed severe misgivings about its consequences. “We have aroused a sleeping tiger,” said Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, referring to America’s industrial capacity. And he was right. In the alphabet soup of President Franklin Roosevelt’s new federal boards and agencies created in 1942 was the War Production Board, established to oversee the conversion of the nation’s industrial sector to wartime footing. Within months, major U.S. manufacturers were turning out jeeps, tanks and steel helmets instead of passenger cars and washing machines.

Nobody is suggesting that Iraq is on the scale of World War II, or that the country needs the level of national mobilization that ultimately defeated Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. But if Rosie the Riveter had been waiting for a call to arms in 2003, she’d still be sitting by the phone.

Historians will puzzle over the Bush Administration’s march to war in Iraq, not just for its lack of thoughtful, prudent planning — but for a complete dismissal. The ideologues who agitated for the invasion were evidently so confident in the invincibility of the U.S. military, especially as the instrument of the Administration’s mission to bring American values to the Middle East, they chose to ignore the lessons of history, sociology and geography.

These presumably intelligent people actually believed that transforming Iraq from a tribal-cultured dictatorship with sectarian schisms dating from the mid 8th Century into something resembling the Indiana countryside would take about 90-days; a military *blitzkrieg*, with the enemy simply crumbling under the advancing armies, followed by a succession of welcoming parades with nothing launched at our victorious troops more lethal than rose petals.

Nowhere has the impact of their rather naïve certitude been more appalling or tragic than in the lack of preparation in properly equipping our troops for battle. It led to a failure to mobilize even a modest portion of the nation's industrial capacity to manufacture military equipment, replacements and repair parts. As a result:

- Roughly half of all the ground equipment owned by the U.S. Army is in Iraq or Afghanistan.
- The regular Army has lost so much equipment that they're using Guard equipment as replacements, leaving National Guard units with about one-third of all their equipment.
- Hundreds of thousands of troops were sent into battle without adequate body armor or up-armored Humvees because we couldn't get them over there fast enough;
- Millions of tons of pre-positioned stocks of vehicles and weapons, along with ammunition, fuels and other instruments of war, have been depleted.

Common sense would suggest that, at some point, the U.S. Government will finally wake up and do everything possible to speed up assembly lines and get this equipment — which is literally life and death — into the hands of our troops. But, it hasn't happened yet.

According to Defense Department records, 70% of U.S. deaths and injuries in Iraq are caused by roadside bombs. The good news is we have a new mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicle, or MRAP, that will dramatically reduce these deaths and injuries. The U.S. Army and Marine Corps say they need more than 6,000 MRAPS to replace Humvees in Iraq and save American lives. So, are we dropping everything to get these life-saving vehicles out to our troops in the field? Not exactly. Only a handful of U.S. and Canadian contractors are building them. They hope to deliver 400 by the end of the year. That's less than one-tenth of what's needed.

When it comes to repairing and upgrading existing equipment that's been damaged or worn from nearly continuous combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, our troops are suffering from the same kind of "manufacturing malaise."

At the Corpus Christi Army Depot in Texas, employees work two 11-hour shifts a day trying to keep military helicopters flying, and at the Anniston Depot in Alabama, where they work on tanks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles, armored personnel carriers and other tracked vehicles. But even working nearly around the clock, they can't get equipment back to the front as quickly as they'd like because they can't get parts fast enough. They have to wait for the few companies that have Defense Department contracts to manufacture and ship the replacement parts.

Now, at about the same time the military can't seem to get equipment manufactured or repaired quickly enough to meet the needs of war, DaimlerChrysler announced the layoff of 13,000 employees and the closure of two North American plants. General Motors has closed 12 plants and laid off 30,000 workers; Ford Motor Company has laid off 30,000 workers and closed 14 facilities.

Would it have been beyond rational thought five years ago — or any time since — for someone to see the big picture; to project military equipment needs for two wars; take note of the country's excess manufacturing capacity and growing pool of idle skilled workers and ask, "Gee! Do you think experienced auto workers could be trained to build military vehicles?" "Could automobile assembly lines be converted to turn out MRAPS and Humvees and tanks instead of SUVs?"

In his 2007 State of the Union speech, President Bush characterized the Global War on Terror as a "decisive ideological struggle," and said the "security of our nation is in the balance." But apparently it is not serious enough to justify inconveniencing the American people. The fact is, the United States is not at war. The United States military is. The burdens of Iraq and Afghanistan are being carried by our soldiers — and their families. The rest of us simply observe their sacrifice on TV.