

The Cult of the Persuasive

Rachel Tecott Metz

Why U.S. Security Assistance Fails

In June 2014, the Second Division of the Iraqi Army melted away and a few hundred Islamic State fighters in pickup trucks took Mosul.¹ The fall of Mosul was less a testament to the strength of the Islamic State than to the failure of the United States' multibillion-dollar effort to build an army in Iraq.²

Security assistance is a pillar of U.S. foreign policy and a ubiquitous feature of international relations. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States tried to stand up local security forces so that U.S. forces could stand down.³ Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, the White House and the Department of Defense promote security assistance as an economical tool to build the capacity of partners to address local threats, to influence partners to align with the United States against U.S. adversaries and competitors, to deter adversaries from coercive action against partners, and, if deterrence fails, to weaken adversaries while managing the risk of direct confrontation.⁴ From 1999 to 2016, the United

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1. Michael Knights, *The Long Haul: Rebooting U.S. Security Cooperation in Iraq*, Policy Focus 137 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/long-haul-rebooting-us-security-cooperation-iraq>.

2. Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations since 9/11*, CRS Report RL33110 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2014), <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf>.

3. "Full Text: George Bush's Iraq Speech," *Guardian*, June 28, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jun/29/iraq.usa>.

4. The United States intends security assistance to advance a wide range of objectives. This study focuses exclusively on the goal of building more effective militaries in partner states. Patricia L. Sullivan, "Does Security Assistance Work? Why It May Not Be the Answer for Fragile States," *Modern War Institute Blog*, November 15, 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/does-security-assistance->

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States trained over two million service members from almost every country in the world.⁵ The U.S. Army stood up the first Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) in February 2018, institutionalizing security assistance as an enduring competency of the U.S. Army.⁶

Although security assistance is a routine tool of U.S. foreign policy, the results are mixed at best, and the collapse of the Iraqi Army is more norm than exception. In August 2021, the Afghan National Security Forces—organized, funded, trained, equipped, and advised by the United States for two decades—disintegrated before the Taliban.⁷ Dozens of smaller-scale U.S. military-building projects around the world have likewise produced “Fabergé egg arm[ies]: expensive to build but easy to crack.”⁸

Security assistance is notoriously difficult to execute. Once a certain resource threshold is met, how well a military can fight hinges largely on decisions that political and military leaders make regarding personnel, training, command structures, information management, and resource allocation. To create military power, leaders must implement meritocratic personnel policies, follow a chain of command, root out corruption, and take other steps to facilitate unit cohesion, tactical proficiency, and complex battlefield operations.⁹ Leaders do not always prioritize building militaries that can fight, however. Political lead-

work-why-it-may-not-be-the-answer-for-fragile-states/; John Amble, “MWI Podcast: Security Force Assistance in an Era of Great-Power Competition,” *Modern War Institute Podcast*, July 8, 2020, <https://mwi.usma.edu/mwi-podcast-security-force-assistance-era-great-power-competition/>; Scott Jackson, Franky Matisek, and Renanah Miles Joyce, “The Future of U.S. Security Force Assistance and the Lessons Learned from 20 Years of Training Foreign Militaries,” Irregular Warfare Initiative and West Point International Affairs Forum Event Panel, November 9, 2021, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVK9aos_jc.

5. Theodore McLauchlin, Lee J. M. Seymour, and Simon Pierre Boulanger Martel, “Tracking the Rise of United States Foreign Military Training: IMTAD-USA, a New Dataset and Research Agenda,” *Journal of Peace Research* 59, no. 2 (2022): 286, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234332111047715>.

6. Sierra A. Melendez, “1st Security Force Assistance Brigade Holds Activation Ceremony,” Army News Service, February 9, 2018, https://www.army.mil/article/200403/1st_security_force_assistance_brigade_holds_activation_ceremony.

7. David Zucchino, “Kabul’s Sudden Fall to Taliban Ends U.S. Era in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, August 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/15/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-kabul-surrender.html>.

8. Jahara Matisek and William Reno, “Getting Security Force Assistance Right: Political Context Matters,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 92 (2019): 65–73, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-92/jfq-92_65-73_Matisek-Reno.pdf.

9. Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator’s Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Risa A. Brooks and Elizabeth A. Stanley, eds., *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

ers may fear coups more than they fear the threats that their militaries are intended to combat, or they may be motivated primarily to consolidate political power for their regime. Such leaders may base promotions on loyalty rather than merit, place key units under their direct control, cultivate patronage networks, and take other steps that undermine military effectiveness. Meanwhile, military leaders may view their commands as opportunities for pursuing personal enrichment, selling equipment on the black market, hoarding resources for themselves and their families, and otherwise diverting resources away from the military.¹⁰

In a form of adverse selection, the United States tends to provide the most security assistance to those states that have the weakest political and military institutions—countries more likely to be governed by leaders with strong incentives to implement policies that undermine the United States' advisory mission.¹¹ Thus, the central challenge for security assistance providers is influence. The success or failure of U.S. security assistance depends largely on the United States' ability to influence how recipients use or misuse it.

How do U.S. military advisers aim to influence recipient leaders to build better militaries and what explains their approaches? I conceptualize influence in security assistance as an escalation ladder with four rungs: teaching, persuasion, conditionality, and direct command. In practice, military advisers rarely escalate to conditionality or direct command. Instead, they rely almost exclusively on teaching and persuasion, even when their counterparts routinely ignore their advice and implement policies that keep their militaries weak.

I argue that the bureaucratic interests of the U.S. Army, and the ideology of advising that it has cultivated to advance those interests, help to explain the preference for persuasion in security assistance. Washington increasingly dele-

10. Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army*.

11. Stephen Biddle, "Building Security Forces and Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency," *Daedalus* 146, no. 4 (2017): 126–138, https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00464; Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff: the Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 14, nos. 1–2 (2018): 89–142, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1307745>; Eli Berman and David A. Lake, eds., *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Walter C. Ladwig III, "Influencing Clients in Counterinsurgency: U.S. Involvement in El Salvador's Civil War, 1979–92," *International Security* 41, no. 1 (Summer 2016): 99–146, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00251; Stephanie Burchard and Stephen Burgess, "U.S. Training of African Forces and Military Assistance, 1997–2017: Security versus Human Rights in Principal-Agent Relations," *African Security* 11, no. 4 (2018): 339–369, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2018.1560969>; Eric Rittinger, "Arming the Other: American Small Wars, Local Proxies, and the Social Construction of the Principal-Agent Problem," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2017): 369–409, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx021>.

gates military-building missions to the Department of Defense, and the latter to the U.S. Army.¹² In advisory missions, the U.S. Army aims to protect its core combat mission, maintain the smooth function of its bureaucratic machinery, and preserve its autonomy against civilian intrusion. It prefers to rely on rapport-based persuasion because persuasion helps the army achieve these bureaucratic interests, whereas conditionality threatens them. To encourage advisers to rely on persuasion, the army promotes an ideology—what I call “the cult of the persuasive”¹³—emphasizing both the normative belief that persuasion is right and conditionality is wrong, and the causal myth that persuasion works and conditionality backfires. Army advisers in the field follow the ideology, relying on teaching and persuasion and rarely using conditionality to incentivize their counterparts to follow their advice. The cult of the persuasive persists despite repeated advisory failures because the U.S. Army has no bureaucratic incentive to change course.

This study makes several contributions. First, it advances the growing security assistance scholarship by presenting a novel typology of influence approaches in advising, and by offering an organizational theory to explain adviser choices among them. I shed light on the United States’ broader struggle to build better militaries in partner states by exposing the bureaucratic drivers of suboptimal influence in advising. Second, the study helps to explain why the United States failed to build an effective military in Iraq, a central failing in the Iraq War. Finally, the study revives and adapts organizational theory as a lens through which to understand military behavior and defense strategy. Organizational theory has faded from international security scholarship since its intellectual heyday in the 1980s, a trend in need of corrective, given that bureaucratic interests and organizational behavior continue to shape how foreign policy is formulated and implemented.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. The first section reviews existing literature on influence and security assistance. The second section presents a

12. Susan B. Epstein and Liana W. Rosen, *U.S. Security Assistance and Security Cooperation Programs: Overview of Funding Trends*, CRS Report R45091 (Washington, DC: CRS, 2018), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45091/3s>; Christina L. Arabia, “Defense Primer: DOD ‘Title 10’ Security Cooperation,” *In Focus*, CRS, May 17, 2021, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/IF11677.pdf>.

13. The “cult of the persuasive” adapts Stephen Van Evera’s term, “the cult of the offensive.” See Van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War,” *International Security* 9, no. 1 (Summer 1984): 58–107, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538636>; Jack Snyder, “Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984,” *International Security* 9, no. 1 (1984): 108–146, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538637>.

typology of influence approaches in security assistance and identifies the actors who employ them. The third presents a novel theory to explain adviser influence choices—the cult of the persuasive. The fourth section examines the explanatory power of the cult of the persuasive in a critical case and hard test—the U.S. effort to build the Iraqi Army from 2003 to 2011—and addresses alternative explanations. Analysis draws from over one hundred original interviews with U.S. military advisers and retired Iraqi general officers,¹⁴ oral histories by former U.S. advisers, and recently declassified U.S. Central Command documents. The fifth section discusses the external validity of the argument beyond Iraq. The conclusion summarizes the argument, highlights areas for future research, and presents broader theoretical and policy implications.

Existing Literature

A growing security assistance literature identifies interest divergence between provider and recipient as the fundamental challenge of security assistance. But little scholarship examines how the United States aims to influence recipients to reform their militaries, who precisely is doing the influencing, and why they choose certain approaches to influence while eschewing others. The few scholars who directly address the influence challenge in security assistance emphasize the importance of incentives for effective influence and effective security assistance. The literature demonstrates that U.S. influence in security assistance tends to be more effective when the United States makes elements of its assistance conditional on recipient cooperation and reforms.¹⁵ It also notes the rarity of conditionality in security assistance. Some scholars identify the rarity

14. The interviews were approved through the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Institutional Review Board Protocol no. 1812628779. To mitigate any personal or professional risks for subjects associated with participating in the interviews, I was transparent with subjects about my identity and purpose and took a series of steps to protect the anonymity of all Iraqi subjects and the U.S. subjects who preferred anonymity. I included U.S. subject identities with their permission and when their position was vital to illustrate the significance of their perspective.

15. Accumulating empirical evidence suggests that conditionality—though no panacea—is a helpful ingredient for effective influence and effective security assistance. See, for example, Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker, “Small Footprint, Small Payoff”; Eli Berman and David A. Lake, “Conclusion,” in Berman and Lake, *Proxy Wars*, 289; Ladwig, “Influencing Clients in Counterinsurgency,” 144; Rachel Tecott, “The Cult of the Persuasive: The U.S. Military’s Aversion to Coercion in Security Assistance” (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2021), 132–158, 221–240, 306–326. Additional research is needed to identify the conditions under which conditionality in security assistance is more or less likely to secure recipient cooperation.

of conditionality in security assistance as a puzzle for future research.¹⁶ I address this puzzle. Others attribute the rarity of conditionality to prohibitively high interest divergence combined with inadequate monitoring capacity and bargaining credibility.¹⁷ I offer an alternative explanation.

Neither monitoring capacity nor bargaining credibility can explain the rarity of conditionality in U.S. security assistance. Often, recipient misuse of U.S. military assistance is obvious. Even when their numbers are limited, teams of U.S. military advisers attached to partner military units bear witness to counterpart policies undermining military effectiveness, which they report up their chain of command. Senior advisers receive adviser reports and communicate regularly with senior partner leaders, who often choose to excuse, explain, and defend rather than hide the corruption, coup-proofing, neglected training regimens, and parallel command structures that rot their militaries. Monitoring capacity has rarely (if ever) been a limiting factor.¹⁸

Security assistance relationships are also conducive to credible bargaining.¹⁹ Security assistance relationships are not binary, all-or-nothing alliance commitments in which the only sticks are the extreme options of proxy replacement or complete abandonment, and the only carrots are unwavering support or suicidal collective defense. In security assistance, the United States has these extreme options, but advisers can also incentivize cooperation through more modest and tailored adjustments to the kind and quantity of assistance. Moreover, security assistance relationships are typically long term, involving iterative interactions between provider and recipient. An extended shadow of the future permits U.S. advisers to establish the credibility of their threats and promises through consistent follow-through²⁰—if they choose to do so.

16. David A. Lake, "Iraq, 2003–11: Principal Failure," in Berman and Lake, *Proxy Wars*, 244; Stephen Biddle, "Policy Implications for the United States," in Berman and Lake, *Proxy Wars*, 267–278; Ladwig, "Influencing Clients in Counterinsurgency," 101.

17. Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff," 94, 129. This explanation aligns with the prevailing view in the alliance management literature. See, for example, Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 165–200; Robert O. Keohane, "The Big Influence of Small Allies," *Foreign Policy*, no. 2 (Spring 1971): 161–182, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1147864>.

18. Host country leaders often tell U.S. advisers what they want to hear, while continuing objectionable behaviors behind the advisers' backs, and/or reforming on paper but not in practice. Most advisers are constantly frustrated, not fooled, by such practices.

19. Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, 165–200; Thomas C. Schelling, "Bargaining, Communication, and Limited War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 1, no. 1 (1957): 19–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200275700100104>; James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 379–414.

20. Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, "Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies

As discussed in the next section, U.S. military advisers have the agency to choose how they aim to influence recipient leaders to reform their militaries, and these advisers tend to eschew conditionality in favor of persuasion.

The Influence Ladder and the Military Advisers Who Climb It

This section presents a novel typology of adviser influence approaches in security assistance.

A FOUR-RUNG INFLUENCE ESCALATION LADDER

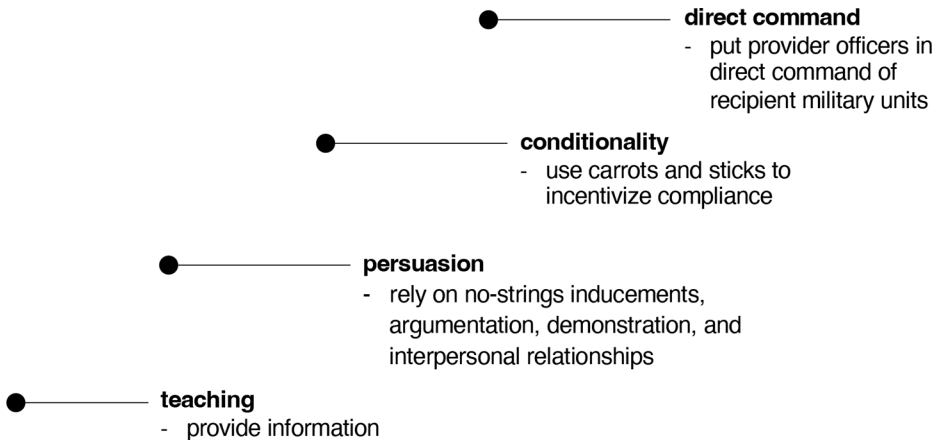
I conceptualize influence in advising as an “escalation ladder” with four rungs: teaching, persuasion, conditionality, and direct command. Teaching, persuasion, conditionality, and direct command are not mutually exclusive. Advisers might first attempt to teach recipients to build a better military. If they encounter resistance, they may try to persuade their counterparts to follow their guidance. If persuasion fails to reduce (or reduces but does not eliminate) interest divergence, advisers may use carrots and sticks to incentivize recipients to follow their advice. Or advisers might give up on indirect influence and take direct command of partner units (or the entire partner military) and try to implement the preferred policies themselves. Providers may rely exclusively on teaching and persuasion, or they may escalate to incentives when teaching and persuasion fail. The question is not whether advisers use persuasion *or* conditionality. The question is whether advisers combine persuasion with conditionality. Figure 1 depicts the four rungs on the influence ladder.

TEACHING. A teaching approach aims to influence recipient leaders by providing them with information that they may need to improve the effectiveness of their militaries. Information could include assessments of officer performance, advice in the development of curricula for officers, training in the U.S. Military Decision Making Process,²¹ and any other instruction designed to provide recipient decision-makers with information that could help them fight better. Teaching is ubiquitous in U.S. security assistance and security cooperation programs, such as the International Military Education and Training pro-

and Institutions,” in Kenneth A. Oye, ed., *Cooperation under Anarchy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 226–254.

21. “Military Decision Making Process: Lessons and Best Practices,” Handbook no. 15-06 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned, n.d.), https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/15-06_0.pdf.

Figure 1. Influence in Security Assistance: A Four-Rung Escalation Ladder



gram. The teaching approach is predicated on an assumption of interest alignment—information, not motivation, as the limiting factor.

PERSUASION. Persuasion refers to several approaches that advisers can use to shape recipient leader thinking and behavior. First, advisers may provide inducements, which are “persuasive measures to cajole the recipient into changing its behavior.”²² The distinguishing feature of persuasive inducement is its reliance on norms of reciprocity instead of explicit or heavily implied conditionality.²³ Second, advisers can argue. They employ “communicative action” to convince civilian and military leaders in recipient countries to heed their advice on the merits.²⁴ A third tool of persuasion is demonstration—advisers try to persuade a recipient to make better decisions by demonstrating “what right

22. Celia L. Reynolds and Wilfred T. Wan, “Empirical Trends in Sanctions and Positive Inducements in Nonproliferation,” in Etel Solingen, ed., *Sanctions, Statecraft, and Nuclear Proliferation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 58.

23. Cicero, quoted in Alvin W. Gouldner, “The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement,” *American Sociological Review* 25, no. 2 (1960): 161–178, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2092623>. See also Robert O. Keohane, “Reciprocity in International Relations,” *International Organization* 40, no. 1 (1986): 4–5, 19–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300004458>.

24. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985); Thomas Risse, “‘Let’s Argue!’: Communicative Action in World Politics,” *International Organization* 54, no. 1 (2000): 1–39, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081800551109>.

looks like.”²⁵ Recipient military and political leaders are expected to observe and then emulate advisers’ behaviors.

Fourth, advisers emphasize interpersonal relationships as a tool of influence in security assistance. The idea is that advisers build rapport, trust, mutual respect, and friendship with partner officers, who will then be more likely to follow their direction. When advisers develop close personal relationships with their counterparts, those counterparts may be more likely to receive their arguments with an open mind, trust that the advice is sound, or emulate their advisers’ approach. This is essentially a theory of influence through personal diplomacy.

CONDITIONALITY. A conditionality approach to influence aims to incentivize partner cooperation by using carrots to elicit compliance and sticks to deter or curb defiance. When recipient leaders implement politically motivated personnel patterns, flout command structures, hoard information, or permit (or encourage) rampant corruption, advisers can threaten to take away a particular service or weapon of value to them, sever assistance to a particular unit, disband a particular unit, reduce assistance overall, or recommend that the United States sever assistance altogether. Conversely, advisers can promise to provide requested weapons, increase aid to a unit, increase overall support to the military as a whole, or bolster the local authority of particular leaders on the condition that the partner implements the provider’s guidance or meets improvement benchmarks.

DIRECT COMMAND. Whereas teaching, persuasion, and conditionality are indirect forms of influence, direct command (as the name implies) uses the command structure to influence recipient partners. In this model, advisers can hire and fire partner personnel, oversee their compensation, manage their training, and otherwise control their decisions and behaviors. The direct command approach aims to resolve the interest divergence problem between provider and recipient by replacing recipient leaders with provider personnel.

It bears repeating. Teaching, persuasion, conditionality, and direct command are not mutually exclusive. Advisers can rely on teaching and persuasion, or they can combine teaching and persuasion with conditionality or direct command.

25. “What right looks like” is a common phrase among security assistance practitioners. See, for example, “Commander’s Perspective CJFLCC-OIR Operations” (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned, May 2, 2018), https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/NFTF_White.PDF.

MILITARY ADVISERS

The constellation of advisers seeking to influence recipient leaders to reform their militaries varies from case to case. This study focuses on security assistance implemented by the Department of Defense, the federal bureaucracy responsible for an increasing share of U.S. security assistance missions.²⁶ Because most U.S. security assistance focuses primarily on developing territorial forces, most U.S. military advisers are U.S. Army and U.S. Army Special Forces (also known as Green Berets).²⁷ Although civilians might make the top-level decisions about whether to initiate or terminate assistance to recipient states, that is often the extent of their involvement in security assistance. Theoretically, civilian actors could liaise with recipient leaders to encourage them to reform their militaries, or they could provide direction to the military advisers about how to influence their counterparts. In practice, however, civilian officials tend to delegate the job of influencing recipient leaders to reform their militaries to the military advisers in theater and to defer to military judgment for most elements of advisory projects.

Precisely what the U.S. military advisers attempt to influence their counterparts to do, and the levers of influence available to them, vary across cases and by seniority. General officers might seek to convince partner heads of state and ministers of defense to alter command structures, formalize and implement meritocratic officer promotion criteria, crack down on ministerial-level corruption, and otherwise modify or overhaul military organizational practices from the top down. At lower levels, U.S. colonels, lieutenant colonels, and majors advising partner division, brigade, and battalion commanders might urge their counterparts to discipline soldiers who do not show up for training, to end the practice of abusing detainees, or to stop stealing soldier salaries.²⁸

Senior advisers have considerable power to manipulate elements of U.S. security assistance to incentivize cooperation. Certainly, decisions to sever assistance altogether, to withdraw entirely, or even to replace the partner head of state are (appropriately) made in Washington and are beyond the authority

26. The Department of State conducts security assistance, as do other federal agencies, including the U.S. Agency for International Development and parts of the intelligence community. Beginning in the 1980s and accelerating after 9/11, however, the Department of Defense has implemented an increasing share of U.S. security assistance programs. Epstein and Rosen, *U.S. Security Assistance*.

27. The U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy implement security assistance and security cooperation projects as well, sometimes jointly with the U.S. Army.

28. Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak, eds., *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, vol. 2, *Surge and Withdrawal, 2007–2011* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2019), 114.

of even the most senior military advisers in theater. That said, civilian leaders may defer to the judgment of their senior military advisers on even these decisions. Below these upper bounds, however, senior advisers have plenty of levers within their complete control. For instance, senior advisers can condition the production of new units on progress in the performance of existing units. They may choose to pause aid to partner divisions, refuse to provide crucial enablers, or even disband partner divisions or their constituent units. Conversely, senior advisers can reallocate additional assistance to divisions, fast-track delivery and distribution of previously halted weapons, or otherwise reward those units that reach certain performance benchmarks.

The power of more junior advisers to manipulate elements of U.S. assistance to incentivize partner cooperation depends heavily on support from their superiors. For instance, advisers who try and fail to persuade their counterpart brigade commanders to strike “ghost soldiers” from the rolls can report the offending brigade commander up the U.S. chain of command, and the senior adviser in theater can then liaise with the brigade commander’s commanding officer and condition continued assistance to the brigade on the offending commander’s course correction or removal. This was the model employed by the U.S. Eighth Army’s Korean Military Advisory Group.²⁹

Without strong support from above, junior advisers have limited ability to leverage U.S. assistance to incentivize counterpart cooperation. Still, junior advisers often have considerable discretion over the distribution of smaller amounts of U.S. assistance and can leverage it accordingly. For example, a division-level adviser might incentivize partner battalion commanders to crack down on battalion soldiers selling U.S. equipment on the black market by threatening to withhold logistical support to the battalion until the behavior stops. In practice, junior advisers’ leverage often lies in their ability to navigate their own bureaucracies to the advantage (or not) of their counterpart units. The degree to which junior advisers can navigate and leverage those bureaucracies is not preordained—it is a design choice made by the providers’ military leaders.³⁰

The next section explains why U.S. advisers tend to rely on teaching and persuasion, rarely escalating to conditionality or direct command to influence their counterparts to reform their militaries.

29. Tecott, “The Cult of the Persuasive,” 198–240.

30. Bureaucratic flexibility to divide, pause, and restart elements of security assistance depends on how security assistance programs are designed, and design is a choice that falls within the authority of the senior military advisers. See Biddle, “Policy Implications for the United States,” 271–273.

The Cult of the Persuasive

I present a novel theory to explain adviser influence approaches in security assistance—the cult of the persuasive. I argue that adviser influence approaches in security assistance reflect the bureaucratic interests and ideology of the U.S. Army.

Washington increasingly delegates security assistance missions to the Department of Defense. That civilians delegate security assistance and defer to the military is unsurprising. Civilian efforts to direct and oversee the military tend to be more energetic the higher the stakes for security.³¹ Overall, even the largest-scale cases of security assistance are relatively low-stakes.³² Moreover, contemporary U.S. civil-military relations are characterized by high levels of deference to the military.³³ Civilians have strong political incentives to avoid disagreements with the most trusted institution in the United States, and relatively low-stakes security assistance projects are unlikely to be the civil-military relations hills that civilians choose to die on. At first glance, security assistance might also seem to be a harmless delegation. After all, what could fall more squarely within the purview of the military than organizing, training, equipping, and advising partner militaries? Building a partner military is a deeply political project, however, and it requires the traditionally civilian competency of achieving influence over partner leaders through non-violent means.

Washington directs its federal bureaucracies to pursue challenging, long-term, often vague goals.³⁴ Unlike for-profit firms, federal bureaucracies lack

31. Michael C. Desch, *Civilian Control of the Military: The Changing Security Environment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). The literature emphasizing the role of civilians in military innovation also emphasizes that stakes can drive civilian intervention. See, for example, Kurt Lang, "Military Organizations," in James G. March, ed., *Handbook of Organizations* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965), 857; Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 57, 224–226.

32. I emphasize stakes from the perspective of the United States, a country that enjoys favorable geography, powerful conventional military forces, and a secure second strike. Massive U.S. investments in capacity building may be high stakes in absolute terms, but they are low stakes relative to other problems that civilians delegate to the military. When civilians are picking their battles with the military, security assistance is unlikely to top the list.

33. Polina Beliakova, "Erosion by Deference: Civilian Control and the Military in Policymaking," *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 3 (Summer 2021): 55–75, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/13988>.

34. James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 116–117.

monetary incentives to work energetically and efficiently.³⁵ Bureaucracies may diligently pursue their official missions, but they may also pursue a variety of bureaucratic objectives, such as autonomy, prestige, resources, and influence in Washington.³⁶ The pursuit of bureaucratic objectives can compromise official missions when the two are in tension. Executives may deliberately subordinate official missions to bureaucratic ones, but more often, they come to believe that their bureaucratic interests and the national interest go hand in hand.³⁷ The degree to which bureaucracies compromise their official missions for their bureaucratic objectives depends on a variety of factors. One factor is the degree to which the official missions fall within, or outside, the bureaucracy's "organizational essence." As defined by Morton Halperin and Priscilla Clapp, organizational essence is "the view held by the dominant group within the organization of what its missions and capabilities should be."³⁸ Bureaucracies tend to be indifferent or even hostile to missions outside their organizational essence, and more likely to prioritize advancement of their bureaucratic objectives above such missions.

Bureaucracies face many challenges in the pursuit of their official and bureaucratic objectives. To advance their objectives (whether official or bureaucratic), bureaucracies develop routines or standard operating procedures (SOPs) to control and coordinate their resources. SOPs combine into programs, and programs into repertoires.³⁹ Often, in a pathology labeled "goal displacement," bureaucracies come to view the routines themselves as the goal, rather than as the means through which the goal is pursued.⁴⁰ Once bureaucracies institutionalize their routines, they tend to stick, even if an evolving strategic landscape or new information suggests they should change. Without external intervention, "bureaucracy does its thing."⁴¹

These bureaucratic and organizational dynamics help explain the U.S.

35. Ibid.

36. Morton H. Halperin and Priscilla A. Clapp, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, with Arnold Kanter, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 25–61, 179–197; Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine*, 45–47.

37. Graham T. Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *American Political Science Review* 63, no. 3 (1969): 710–711, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1954423>.

38. Halperin and Clapp, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, 27, 38–40.

39. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine*, 44.

40. John Bohte and Kenneth J. Meier, "Goal Displacement: Assessing the Motivation for Organizational Cheating," *Public Administration Review* 60, no. 2 (March/April 2000): 173–182, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0033-3352.00075>.

41. Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1972).

Army's approach to security assistance broadly, and its preference for persuasion and aversion to conditionality specifically. The U.S. Army's organizational essence is ground combat—despite rhetoric to the contrary, the U.S. Army does not consider security assistance to be a core mission.⁴²

In conducting security assistance, a primary goal of the U.S. Army is to preserve its autonomy against civilian intrusion. To say that the U.S. Army prioritizes autonomy is not to say that all army executives (general officers) consciously put the goal of building a stronger partner military second. Rather, the army, consciously or not, optimizes its approach to security assistance to the autonomy goal, at times to the detriment of the nominal one. The drive for autonomy is common across federal bureaucracies, but it is especially powerful in the U.S. military, in part because it has internalized Huntingtonian norms of objective control. As Risa Brooks explains, “[Samuel] Huntington’s construct perpetuates a conception that autonomy is an inherent prerogative of the military and that civilian incursions into its sphere of responsibility and authority represent a violation of that prerogative.”⁴³

The U.S. Army enjoys a great deal of autonomy in the conduct of advisory missions, for the reasons described above. Nonetheless, it works hard to keep it that way. The army fears that civilians will intervene if they judge the advisory projects ineffective, or if the advisory mission generates bad press. The army thus works to preserve its autonomy in the advisory mission by projecting a narrative of slow but steady progress, and by avoiding actions that could be portrayed in the press as illiberal.⁴⁴ To project an appearance of progress, the U.S. Army tracks and presents quantitative metrics such as numbers of partner soldiers trained and rifles distributed, even though half those soldiers might be absent without leave (AWOL) and half the rifles might be sold on the black market. But because the progress of an advisory mission is difficult to

42. See Kyle Atwell and Paul Bailey, “Wanna Fight? Pushing Partners Aside in Afghanistan,” *War on the Rocks*, October 11, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/we-wanted-to-fight-incentivizing-advising-over-fighting-in-afghanistan-and-beyond/>.

43. Risa Brooks, “Paradoxes of Professionalism: Rethinking Civil-Military Relations in the United States,” *International Security* 44, no. 4 (2020): 28, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00374. See also Christopher Harig and Chiara Ruffa, “Knocking on the Barracks’ Door: How Role Conceptions Shape the Military’s Reactions to Political Demands,” *European Journal of International Security* 7, no. 1 (2021): 84–103, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2021.30>.

44. The drive to present an appearance of progress and liberalism is by no means unique to the U.S. Army. Federal bureaucracies are responsive to external constituencies that demand they behave within the bounds of specified rules and norms. See Wilson, *Bureaucracy*, 131–132, 205, quoting Michael Blumenthal’s assessment that for federal bureaucracies “appearance is as important as reality.”

measure, and U.S. policymakers lack the information, expertise, and often the energy to judge for themselves, the gap between military narratives of steady progress and the actuality on the ground can yawn wide.

In addition to autonomy, the U.S. Army optimizes its efforts in advising to the goal of protecting its organizational essence—the combat mission. Even if Washington identifies the advisory mission as the priority, the U.S. Army always prioritizes the combat mission. For instance, advancement within the army is heavily contingent on combat experience as opposed to advisory experience, and high performers will avoid advisory tours and vie for combat experience. The army keeps advisory tours short so that advisers can redeploy for combat, and so that advisory tours will not damage the morale necessary for combat. Although prioritizing the combat mission does not directly shape the army's choice of influence approaches, it illustrates the broader point that the U.S. Army does not optimize its approach to security assistance to the goal of building better partner militaries.

The U.S. Army also aims to maintain its advisory SOPs without disruption in security assistance missions. The U.S. Army's bureaucratic machinery of advisory missions consists of the complicated, time-intensive, personnel-intensive, and attention-intensive advisory SOPs for getting U.S. advisers trained, equipped, and into theater, fed, sustained, and protected through their tours, and then sent home. It also consists of the difficult mechanics required to recruit, equip, train, organize, sustain, and advise partner soldiers. The U.S. Army's SOPs are optimized to serve the autonomy objective. These routines serve as the metrics that the army draws on to support the progress narrative and the guardrails on adviser behavior that reduce the risk of bad press. In classic goal displacement, the army comes to view sustaining the bureaucratic machinery of advisory projects (rather than improving the military effectiveness of the partner) as the goal itself.

Persuasion serves the autonomy goal. Senior advisers present friendly relations between provider and recipient as another data point in the progress narrative that they communicate to U.S. policymakers. In contrast, threatening or following through with threats to disband partner units, reduce aid, or cancel training programs jeopardizes the progress narrative. Episodes of threats and paused programs could lead to headlines in the press emphasizing trouble in the advisory mission, which could cause concern about the progress of the project. Confrontations between the U.S. advisers and their counterparts (exposed through the press or elevated directly by the partner) could lead even a deferential White House to meddle with the military's advisory project. To

sum up, a baseline level of civilian deference to the military creates the permissive conditions for army interests to drive security assistance, but by relying on persuasion, the army makes civilian oversight more difficult and perpetuates civilian deference.⁴⁵

By relying almost exclusively on teaching and persuasion, the U.S. Army also advances its bureaucratic goal of maintaining the smooth function of its bureaucratic machinery. The U.S. Army is reluctant to condition the continuation of a unit's training program on reform benchmarks. For instance, following through on the threat to pause the training program if the partner fails to meet the benchmarks would require the army to disrupt its own SOPs. Moreover, threatening partners with consequences to rein in problematic military organizational practices could lead frustrated partners to take action to disrupt U.S. training and advising mechanics. In contrast, by limiting itself to teaching and persuasion, and perpetuating the mechanics of the advisory relationship regardless of whether the partner is strengthening or undermining the military that the United States sets out to build, the U.S. Army meets its goal of maintaining the bureaucratic machinery of the advisory project.

It is one thing for the U.S. Army to develop a preferred approach to advising, and another to ensure that its advisers implement that approach. Advisers are often loosely supervised and free to develop their own approaches to influencing their counterparts. To encourage advisers to rely on persuasion, the U.S. Army promotes a doctrine of persuasion internally through a variety of formal and informal mechanisms. The field manuals in which the doctrine is officially articulated are less tools of behavior control than they are written encapsulations of preferred behavior. The doctrine is effectively communicated through adviser training, assigned readings, briefings, and informal mechanisms such as statements made by key leaders in public settings. It is made clear to advisers how they should and should not behave.

Through these mechanisms, the military promotes the normative idea that teaching and persuasion are the appropriate approaches to shape the behavior of allies, partners, and friends. This idea, an adaptation of anticolonialism and sovereignty norms, promotes a corresponding distaste for what are often referred to as bribery, transactionalism, imperialism, coercion, and bullying.⁴⁶ It

45. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this framing.

46. In U.S. foreign policy more broadly, the idea of attaching conditions to assistance is closer to being normatively neutral or even positive—the negative valence that the U.S. Army attaches to conditionality in security assistance is striking. The aversion has deep roots in old U.S. foreign policy tradition and legitimization strategies. Attempting to explain U.S. backing of the Government

also promotes the causal myth that rapport-based persuasion is an effective approach to influence, and that escalation to conditionality is likely to backfire. In combination, I call the ideology accompanying the army's advisory doctrine "the cult of the persuasive," in an allusion to "the cult of the offensive" that marched the militaries of Europe to World War I.⁴⁷

Most U.S. Army advisers faithfully implement the advisory doctrine and rely exclusively on teaching and persuasion. Many do so because of professional incentives to conform to the doctrinally sanctioned approach. Advisers who disregard their instructions and escalate to an incentives-based approach risk reprimand and adverse career consequences. Advisers understand that they will meet professional expectations if they do not disrupt the bureaucratic machinery of the advisory process or embarrass the military with bad behavior. Other advisers, in contrast, faithfully implement the doctrine because they genuinely internalize the ideology. For many advisers, it is some combination of the two.⁴⁸ Ideology thus encourages individual advisers to behave in accordance with bureaucratic preferences.

For their part, U.S. policymakers tend to continue to defer to the military no matter how ineffective the advisory projects. Stakeholders in Washington may express skepticism of the military's progress reports and may recognize the gap between such reports and reality. Washington could require real progress as a condition for continuing to fund and delegate a project. Yet, for the reasons cited above (low stakes, political incentives to defer to the military, and the military's inflated progress reports), civilians refrain from enforcing change. Moreover, and remarkably, high-profile, incontrovertible security assistance failures have no discernible impact on public attitudes toward the military. Polls consistently show that the U.S. public holds the military in high esteem.⁴⁹ In the context of civilian deference and reliable public approval, the U.S. Army has no incentive to change course.

of Vietnam in the context of decolonization, U.S. leaders painted U.S. intervention in terms of helping people defend their freedoms, a rhetoric compatible with teaching and persuasion, but difficult to square with conditionality or direct command.

47. Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive." Ideology as commonly understood is a belief system shared by members of a community that governs how those members approach situations and that, once adopted, is difficult to shed. Teun A. Van Dijk, "Ideology and Discourse Analysis," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11, no. 2 (2006): 116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310600687908>.

48. This conceptualization of the causal effect of ideology on conflict behavior aligns with Jonathan Leader Maynard's internalization and structural mechanisms. Jonathan Leader Maynard, "Ideology and Armed Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 5 (2019): 635–649, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319826629>.

49. Gallup, "Confidence in Institutions," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institu>

SCOPE CONDITIONS

The cult of the persuasive is a theory of bureaucratic behavior, and it focuses primarily on one bureaucracy in particular—the U.S. Army.⁵⁰ Consequently, the theory generates predictions about how the U.S. Army conducts security assistance, and not necessarily about how the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Air Force, or other countries' military services conduct security assistance. Nor does the theory necessarily apply to cases of security assistance conducted by either State Department advisers or contractors.⁵¹

I focus on security assistance conducted by the U.S. Army for several reasons. First, the universe of U.S. Army security assistance cases includes three of the most significant examples of security assistance in U.S. history—Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Beyond these three critical cases, the universe of U.S. Army–implemented security assistance cases is large and expanding rapidly. The weight of U.S. security assistance missions has shifted over time from the Department of State to the Department of Defense.⁵² In 2018, the U.S. Army institutionalized the security assistance mission through the formation of the SFABs, which conduct security assistance missions across all five combatant commands.⁵³ Finally, the U.S. Army encourages other armies to emulate its approach to security assistance, and there are signs that they are doing just that.⁵⁴ Focusing on U.S. Army security assistance allows me to examine the actor that not only conducts a large percentage of security assistance around the world but also is likely to have the greatest impact on how other nations approach security assistance.

tions.aspx; David T. Burbach, "Partisan Dimensions of Confidence in the U.S. Military, 1973–2016," *Armed Forces & Society* 45, no. 2 (2019): 211–233, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X17747205>.

50. I draw a distinction between security assistance that is conducted by either the U.S. Army or the U.S. Army Special Forces. In practice, special forces operate as a distinct bureaucracy, with distinct interests and *raison d'être*. I therefore do not expect the same bureaucratic interests to drive both the army and the Green Berets. In fact, because the organizational essence of the special forces is advising, the logic of the cult of the persuasive suggests that U.S. Army Special Forces may conduct security assistance quite differently from its parent organization.

51. Although the cult of the persuasive does not necessarily apply to bureaucracies besides the U.S. Army, it certainly could. U.S. federal bureaucracies with similar bureaucratic interests, tasked with the same problem, may develop similar approaches independently, or they may mimic the army's approach.

52. Epstein and Rosen, *U.S. Security Assistance*.

53. Andrew Feickert, "Army Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs)," *In Focus*, CRS, June 1, 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/IF10675.pdf>.

54. Angela O'Mahony et al., *Prioritizing Security Cooperation with Highly Capable U.S. Allies: Framing Army-to-Army Partnerships* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA641-1.html.

The Cult of the Persuasive: Evidence from Iraq

This section examines the explanatory power of the cult of the persuasive through within-case analysis of the U.S. effort to build the Iraqi Army from 2003 to 2011.

I focus on the U.S. effort in Iraq for several reasons. First, Iraq is a critical case. The United States' invasion and occupation of Iraq, and its failure to rebuild the Iraqi military that it dismantled, was of enormous consequence for the people of Iraq and the direction of the Iraqi state. It is intrinsically important to understand how U.S. military forces operated in Iraq and why they operated the way they did. Understanding U.S. security assistance in Iraq has vital policymaking implications for both Iraq and the United States. U.S. security assistance efforts in Iraq resumed after the 2014 fall of Mosul and are ongoing as of 2023.⁵⁵ Practitioners within the Department of Defense continue to draw lessons from Iraq to inform their approaches to military building in Iraq and elsewhere. It is of immediate policy importance to excavate those lessons.

Second, Iraq is a hard test of the theory for several reasons. First, the U.S. effort to build the Iraqi Army was one of the highest-stakes cases of security assistance in U.S. history. Civilians had strong incentives to oversee and direct the military's efforts to build an army in Iraq because competent Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) were the United States' ticket out of an increasingly unpopular war. If civilians persistently deferred to the military on security assistance in Iraq, it is likely that they would also defer on standard, lower-stakes cases of security assistance. Second, the U.S. population paid relatively close attention to U.S. Army operations in Iraq.⁵⁶ If the U.S. Army prioritized its bureaucratic interests over mission success in Iraq, then it would be likely to do so in lower-profile cases, where failures (or successes for that matter) would be less likely to register with the U.S. public. Third, because of the large scale and long duration of the advisory effort in Iraq, information about the ineffectiveness of persuasion is as plentiful and as unambiguous as battlefield information can be. If the U.S. Army ignored torrential data suggesting that persuasion was ineffective in Iraq, it is likely to ignore more ambiguous feedback from smaller, shorter advisory efforts.

55. Anne Gearan, "Biden, Pulling Combat Forces from Iraq, Seeks to End the Post-9/11 Era," *Washington Post*, July 26, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-iraq-911-era/2021/07/25/619c8fe6-ecb1-11eb-97a0-a09d10181e36_story.html.

56. I discuss the imperviousness of the U.S. Army to high-profile mission failure in the conclusion.

The third and final criterion for case selection was the ability to conduct the original interviews and access the data necessary to code key variables and trace causal mechanisms. In both meeting minutes and oral histories, advisers often report exerting “pressure” on partners to follow their direction. The precise form of that pressure—from gentle suggestion to explicit threat—is often vague in the written record. By choosing a contemporary case, I was able to ask U.S. advisers of all ranks precisely how—through teaching, persuasion, conditionality, and/or direct command—they sought to influence their Iraqi counterparts. To mitigate the risk of biased self-reporting, I also travelled to Jordan and to Iraq to interview Iraqi Army officers for their perspectives. The Combat Studies Institute’s Operational Leadership Experiences (OLE) Interview Collection houses a large number of oral histories with former advisers to the ISF.⁵⁷ The declassification of tens of thousands of documents in January 2019, in particular the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Iraq Documents, opened archival treasure troves, ranging from declassified interviews with Multi-National Force–Iraq (MNF-I) commanders about their interactions with Iraqi leaders, to transcripts of meetings between coalition commanders and Iraqi heads of state.⁵⁸

BACKGROUND

In March 2003, a U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam Hussein. Over the next decade, the United States struggled to build a stable, democratic, U.S.-allied Iraq in the midst of insurgency and civil war. Building effective ISF was a central pillar of U.S. strategy in Iraq and the United States’ exit strategy from the war. From 2003 to 2011, the United States spent over \$25 billion and deployed tens of thousands of U.S. personnel to the training and advisory mission.⁵⁹ Despite the enormous expenditure, the Iraqi Army (the largest ISF service) failed basic tests of competence over the course of the advisory period and after the U.S. withdrawal.⁶⁰

57. Operational Leadership Experiences (OLE) Interview Collection, Combat Studies Institute, Ike Skelton Combined Arms Research Library Digital Library, <https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4013coll13>. Hereafter referred to as OLE Interview Collection.

58. CENTCOM Iraq Papers, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, <https://ahec.armywarcollege.edu/CENTCOM-IRAQ-papers/index.cfm>.

59. *Learning from Iraq: A Final Report from the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 113th Cong., 1st sess. (July 9, 2013) (statement of Stuart W. Bowen, Jr., Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction).

60. For a thorough discussion of the Iraqi Army’s battlefield performance from 2003 through 2011, see Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak, eds., *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, vol. 1, *Invasion, In-*

Interest divergence was a fundamental barrier to effective security assistance throughout the advisory effort. Iraqi political leaders—Ayad Allawi, Ibrahim al-Ja’afari, and Nouri al-Maliki—were motivated primarily to preserve and consolidate their political power while maintaining their personal and regime security.⁶¹ As such, they implemented military organizational practices intended to advance those objectives, at the expense of building a more proficient national army.⁶² They tried to put the most effective units in the ISF under their direct authority, or ignored the chain of command altogether and used their personal cell phones to command units directly.⁶³ They demonstrated little interest in rooting out the corruption weakening the military or in training competent military forces.⁶⁴ Iraqi leaders’ focus on preserving political power (and personal security) is understandable in the context of post-invasion, U.S.-occupied Iraq. It was also directly at odds with U.S. goals of building an effective Iraqi military.

The motivations of Iraqi military leaders varied widely over time and across the country, and generalizations are necessarily reductive. It is accurate to say, however, that many Iraqi Army officers believed that the U.S. goal of building a competent, national Iraqi Army was neither important nor desirable. In the words of one retired Iraqi general officer, “No one in the new Iraqi Army actually wanted a strong Iraqi Army.”⁶⁵ Military leaders who were apathetic or opposed to developing a strong, national army in Iraq took steps that under-

surgency, Civil War, 2003–2006 (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2019); Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, vol. 2.

61. This assessment about what motivated Iraqi political leaders is uncontroversial. It is the consensus view among the preponderance of U.S. practitioners and academics focused on Iraq, and it is shared by the fourteen Iraqi generals (retired) and three U.S.-based Iraqi academics whom I interviewed for this project.

62. Al-Ja’afari’s and al-Maliki’s efforts to exclude Sunnis from the officer corps and willingness to permit loyal but incompetent and corrupt Shi’a leaders to maintain commands was well known by coalition leaders and remains undisputed. See, for example, Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, 2: 416.

63. Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, 1: 627; Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, 2: 283–283, 358–363.

64. Author interview with Lt. Gen. (Ret.) James Dubik, by telephone, August 2019; author interview with retired Iraqi general who served under al-Maliki, Erbil, February 2020; author interview with Iraqi general who retired before the U.S. invasion but remained in close contact with many of the Iraqi general officers who served under al-Maliki, Erbil, February 2020.

65. Author interview with a retired Iraqi general officer who now studies the Iraqi Army in an academic capacity, Washington, DC, July 2019. His assessment was shared by fourteen former Iraqi general officers whom I interviewed in Jordan and Iraq, by former commanding generals of MNF-I and MNSTC-I whom I interviewed in Washington, DC, and by Zoom, and by former embedded advisers who recorded their impressions of their Iraqi counterparts in the oral histories for the OLE project of the Combat Studies Institute.

mined it. For instance, Iraqi commanders permitted or encouraged soldiers to reshuffle into units of homogenous ethno-sectarian composition.⁶⁶ These homogenous units often operated independently, unresponsive to the nominal chain of command, responding instead to patronage networks that had little to do with the command structure on paper.⁶⁷ Many commanders used their positions for personal enrichment, keeping ghost soldiers on payrolls or siphoning contracts to family members.⁶⁸ Commanders were often apathetic toward the training of their units and expressed little interest in disciplining soldiers for failing to materialize.⁶⁹ These were some of the patterns of decisions that undermined the U.S. security assistance effort in Iraq—the patterns that U.S. military advisers sought to influence.

To understand how the United States exerted influence in the advisory effort in Iraq, it is important to have a clear picture of the coalition command structure. The coalition organized two subcommands under MNF-I: Multi-National Corps–Iraq (MNC-I), which would manage coalition operations across the country, and Multi-National Security Transition Command–Iraq (MNSTC-I). MNSTC-I organized, trained, advised, and equipped the ISF and developed the institutional capacity of the new Iraqi Ministry of Defense and Ministry of the Interior. The commanding generals of MNF-I and MNSTC-I (all from the U.S. Army) sought to influence Iraqi heads of state, ministers of defense and interior, senior staff, and senior Iraqi general officers to implement military organizational practices that would advance the effectiveness of the Iraqi Army and Iraqi Police.

Below the commanding generals of MNF-I and MNSTC-I, most of the advisory effort in Iraq were conducted by small teams of embedded U.S. advisers.

66. Author interview with Lt. Gen. (Ret.) James Dubik, by telephone, August 2019; author interview with Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Michael Barbero, by Zoom, April 2020; author interview with a former embedded adviser, by telephone, July 2019. The adviser reported that the Iraqi battalion in which he was embedded “apparently started out mixed, but by the time I got there was all Shi’a, maybe 90 percent.” There is reason to believe that the coalition’s emphasis on ethno-sectarian quotas in Iraqi Army units was misguided, ultimately harming more than helping the development of the Iraqi Army.

67. Dozens of former embedded advisers interviewed for the OLE project and by the author described the units in which they were embedded as operating without regard for any centralized chain of command.

68. The “ghost soldier” problem in the Iraqi Security Forces is well known. Dozens of former embedded advisers interviewed for the OLE project and by the author discussed the corruption in their counterpart units. See also Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, 2: 114.

69. Dozens of former embedded advisers interviewed for the OLE project and by the author reported the counterpart commanders’ (and their soldiers’) seeming lack of interest in training.

These adviser teams, first called Advisory Support Teams and then Military Transition Teams, were comprised of teams of approximately ten or eleven U.S. Army officers who paired with Iraqi Army units at the division, brigade, and battalion levels. Individual transition team members paired with individual Iraqi officers. For instance, “chiefs” (team leads) embedded within Iraqi brigades would seek to influence the Iraqi brigade commanders. It was up to the transition teams to convince their Iraqi counterparts to take steps to strengthen their units.

CODING U.S. ADVISER INFLUENCE TACTICS IN IRAQ

The commanding generals of MNF-I and MNSTC-I and the teams of advisers under their command—the main pressure points on Iraqi decision-makers—relied almost exclusively on teaching and rapport-based persuasion to shape Iraqi military organizational practices. Col. Frank Sobchak, co-author of *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, noted: “On the topic of coercion, it seemed to us surreal how rarely we used that tool.”⁷⁰ The nine commanding generals of MNF-I and MNSTC-I rarely employed conditionality.⁷¹ Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker note that “there was little conditionality attached to US SFA” in Iraq, and they identify Gen. David Petraeus’s uses of conditionality during 2007 and 2008 as “notable exceptions.”⁷² Discussion below focuses on Gen. George Casey as a representative of the persuasion norm, and Gen. Petraeus as the conditionality exception.

Gen. Casey—commanding general of MNF-I 2004–2006—epitomizes the persistent U.S. preference for teaching and persuasion in security assistance in Iraq. Casey sought to convince first Prime Minister al-Ja’afari and then Prime Minister al-Maliki to permit competent Sunni officers in the officer corps. He also tried to convince al-Maliki to stop violating the chain of command by issuing direct orders to Iraqi units. Casey explained that he used “relationships” and “cunning and guile,” and “not carrots and sticks” to try to influence Iraqi leaders’ decisions. He established regular (thrice weekly in al-Maliki’s case)

70. Email correspondence between the author and Frank Sobchak, September 6, 2019.

71. I base this assessment on triangulation across four sources: (1) author interviews with U.S. general officers; (2) author interviews with their staff; (3) author interviews with Iraqi general officers over the course of fieldwork in Jordan and Iraq; and (4) recently declassified documents that include accounts of interactions between U.S. general officers and their Iraqi counterparts.

72. Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker, “Small Footprint, Small Payoff,” 116.

meetings to develop close interpersonal ties with Iraqi leaders, empathizing with them and the pressures they faced.⁷³

When contentious issues arose around military organizational practices undermining the Iraqi Army, Casey tried to persuade Iraqi leaders that following his guidance would ultimately serve their interests better than their own preferred approaches. For instance, Casey encouraged al-Maliki to permit Sunnis to serve in the officer corps by trying to convince him that the more serious threat was from the range of insurgent groups, some Sunni and some Shi'a, rather than the Ba'athist resurgence. Only a professional military with a professional officer corps would be able to mitigate that threat, he argued.⁷⁴ Casey also tried to "get them [Iraqi senior political and military leadership] to think whatever I was suggesting had been their idea all along."⁷⁵ Similarly, Casey sought to convince Iraqi leaders that abiding by the chain of command would serve their own interests. Gen. Raymond Odierno recalled how Casey "talked [the Prime Minister and his senior advisers] through the importance of his Army and his police and using them to not having everybody giving them orders but forming a chain of command, having somebody in charge."⁷⁶ Casey ultimately turned to persuasion when the didactic approach failed to keep Iraqi leaders from violating the chain of command, but he avoided conditionality.⁷⁷

Casey had little success with teaching and persuasion. Al-Ja'afari and al-Maliki were deeply motivated to fill their officer corps with loyalists, both to insulate themselves against coups and to consolidate political power, and Casey was unable to persuade them that he understood their interests better than they did. Al-Maliki had strong incentives to skip the chain of command to direct Iraqi units against his personal target list, and Casey's efforts to build

73. Author interview with Gen. (Ret.) George Casey, by Zoom, April 2020. Casey also described his efforts to build a relationship with al-Maliki in George W. Casey Jr., *Strategic Reflections: Operation Iraqi Freedom, July 2004–February 2007* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2012), 98–100.

74. Author interview with Gen. (Ret.) George Casey, by Zoom, April 2020.

75. Ibid.

76. Interview, [name redacted], the Multi-National Corps–Iraq historian with Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno, Commanding General of Multi-National Corps–Iraq, June 24, 2007, CENTCOM Iraq Papers, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, <https://ahec.armywarcollege.edu/CENTCOM-IRAQ-papers/index.cfm>.

77. Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, 1: 412.

trust and rapport with al-Maliki did not, as Casey had hoped, lead al-Maliki to abandon those interests.⁷⁸

Gen. Petraeus's willingness to use carrots and sticks to incentivize Iraqi compliance marked an important exception to the general rule of reliance on teaching and persuasion. First as MNSTC-I and later as MNF-I commander, Petraeus used an "escalation ladder" of influence, beginning with persuasion and then escalating to conditionality if persuasion failed. As commander of MNSTC-I, Petraeus tried to influence the Iraqi command structure, specifically by preventing interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi from taking control of the elite Iraqi special operations forces (then called the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Forces, or the ICTF). Petraeus explained that Allawi "wanted to put the ICTF directly under him. I told him that I would withdraw support for the ICTF if that was done. He was dissuaded by my pledge to cut off funding and resources if that took place."⁷⁹

From February 2007 to July 2008, Petraeus focused on Iraqi personnel practices. Petraeus explained that as "MNF-I Commander, I had a huge issue with the leaders of the Police Commando forces (one three-star, two two-star division commanders, and at least 6 brigade commanders, plus several battalion commanders), each of whom had proven incompetent or intimidated or corrupt or unprofessional during the year or so leading up to the 2007 surge. Once again, I refused resources (for the formal reconstitution of each brigade—which we took about a month to do, pulling the unit off line to do so)—unless the commanders were replaced and removed from the service."⁸⁰ The escalation to conditionality was effective. Iraqi Interior Minister Jawad Bolani and other senior leaders within the al-Maliki government conceded, purging many of the most egregious police and military commanders.⁸¹

Petraeus's successors—Gen. Odierno and Gen. Lloyd Austin—reverted to

78. This assessment of ineffective influence is uncontroversial. Casey himself publicly acknowledges his inability to convince al-Maliki to follow his advice. See also Tecott, "The Cult of the Persuasive," 307–326.

79. Email correspondence between the author and Gen. David Petraeus, February 19, 2020. Iraqi officials corroborated Petraeus's comments. Author interview with retired Iraqi general who served under al-Maliki and interacted with Petraeus, by Zoom, February 2020; author interview with U.S. officer who served under Petraeus, by Zoom, April 2020.

80. Ibid.

81. Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, 2: 283–285; Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker, "Small Footprint Small Payoff," 129; Lake, "Iraq, 2003–11," 239; Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 81, 156, 261, 331.

the institutional norm, relying once again on teaching and persuasion. Like Casey before them, Odierno and Austin had little success teaching and persuading Iraqi leaders to reform Iraqi military organizational practices.⁸²

Below the general officers, from the earliest deployments in 2004 to the last deployments in 2011 and across every province, the MNSTC-I adviser teams embedded within Iraqi Army units almost uniformly sought to teach and persuade Iraqi division, brigade, and battalion commanders to implement more professional military organizational practices.⁸³ In the words of another adviser, "It was really about building relationships. We spent as much time as we could with our Iraqi counterparts. . . . We built those relationships and tried to do our best to guide them and help them make their systems better [rather than] trying to force them to use American systems for doing that."⁸⁴ The advisers encouraged Iraqi officers to reward merit and punish incompetence, corruption, and sectarianism, and to make training regimens more realistic and urgent. They tried to convince Iraqi officers that abiding by the formal chain of command and delegating authority were in their own interests. It is notable, and consistent with the expectations of the cult of the persuasive, that most advisers continued to emphasize the effectiveness of relationship-building in advising, despite their counterparts' routine disregard for their advice.⁸⁵

THE CULT OF THE PERSUASIVE IN IRAQ

What explains U.S. Army advisers' preference for persuasion and aversion to conditionality in Iraq? The cult of the persuasive generates five main hypotheses. First, it expects Washington to delegate the advisory project in Iraq to the U.S. military and to refrain from intruding in the project for its duration. Second, it expects the U.S. Army to pursue its bureaucratic interests in protecting its autonomy by managing its reputation, protecting the combat mission, and sustaining its bureaucratic machinery without disruption. Third, it expects the U.S. Army to promote an ideology of persuasion emphasizing the normative and causal superiority of persuasion over conditionality. Fourth, it expects most U.S. military advisers deployed to Iraq to conform to the persuasion approach because of some combination of professional incentives and genuine

82. Tecott, "The Cult of the Persuasive," 309–329.

83. I base this assessment on my review of 317 oral histories by former embedded advisers who served across the duration of the advisory period and across the different provinces, and original interviews with twenty-two former embedded advisers.

84. Angie Slattery, "Interview with Major John Atilano," March 1, 2012, OLE Interview Collection.

85. For evidence of Iraqi military leaders' consistent disregard for the advice of their embedded advisers, see Tecott, "The Cult of the Persuasive," 313–315.

ideological commitment. Fifth, it expects that frequent episodes of ineffective persuasion attempts, and rare episodes of effective conditionality, will not cause the U.S. Army to significantly reform its approach. The evidence aligns with these expectations.

DELEGATION AND DEFERENCE. After political officials made the fateful decisions to disband and then rebuild the Iraqi Army, the U.S. military was responsible for designing and implementing the U.S. military assistance effort in Iraq. The first Coalition Military Assistance Training Team (CMATT) commander, Gen. Paul Eaton, reported that the only direction he received in his initial efforts to develop the new Iraqi military was a brief PowerPoint presentation that he believed originated at U.S. Central Command. Within the confines of his \$173 million budget, Eaton collaborated with other general officers—principally Gen. James Schwitters and his deputy, Brig. Gen. Richard Sherlock—to get the project off the ground.⁸⁶

Security assistance was central to the George W. Bush administration's strategy in Iraq. As put by President Bush in June 2005, "Our strategy can be summed up in this way: As the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down."⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the Bush administration's close attention to and direction of so many elements of U.S. policy in Iraq, from election timelines to the employment of coalition forces, did not extend to MNF-I's and MNSTC-I's efforts to develop the ISF to actually fight effectively.

This pattern of civilians delegating and deferring to the U.S. military with respect to ISF development held from the Bush to the Barack Obama administrations. Gen. Odierno, MNF-I commanding general, noted approvingly, "We haven't gotten political pressure at all from the leadership, in my opinion. You know, they have allowed us to make decisions and move forward as we see fit."⁸⁸ When I asked, "What role did the civilian executive branch play in the military assistance efforts in Iraq?" a former MNSTC-I commander responded, "None. They were not involved. We would notify them of what we were doing."⁸⁹ Interviews with officials who served on the National Security Councils for the Bush and Obama administrations likewise affirmed, in the words of

86. Author interview with Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Paul Eaton, by telephone, August 2019.

87. "Full text: George Bush's Iraq speech."

88. Interview, [name redacted], the Multi-National Corps–Iraq historian with Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno, Commanding General of Multi-National Corps–Iraq, June 24, 2007, CENTCOM Iraq Papers, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, <https://ahec.armywarcollege.edu/CENTCOM-IRAQ-papers/index.cfm>.

89. Author interview with a former commanding general of MNSTC-I, by Zoom, August 2020.

one official, that “anything to do with the development of the ISF was, thankfully, not our job. That was an MNF-I job. We had enough on our plate.”⁹⁰ U.S. ambassadors to Iraq likewise viewed matters pertaining to ISF development as “MNSTC-I’s lane.”⁹¹

In keeping with theoretical expectations, U.S. civilians consistently delegated and deferred to the U.S. military advisers in theater to influence Iraqi leaders to reform their military.

PURSuing BUREAUCRATIC INTERESTS. The U.S. Army aimed in its approach to the advisory project in Iraq to preserve its autonomy against civilian intrusion through reputation management, to protect the combat mission, and to sustain the bureaucratic machinery of advising without disruption.

Although the White House did not intervene to direct the military’s approach to building the Iraqi Army, the commanding generals worried about political pressure (particularly from Congress) and took pains to assuage the United States’ concerns about the advisory project. Gen. Odierno, for instance, explained:

There is significant political pressure in the United States, and you cannot ignore it. You can pretend like it doesn’t affect you, but it absolutely is not true. . . . You know, one of the major pressures is, as we have gone out in the press, you see people look at every word you say, and they use it to whatever end they might. That has [been] frustrating. I think we have tried to insulate ourselves from making any recommendation or decisions based on any political pressure. . . . However, again, the political pressure being exerted by Congress, the influence they are having, trying to have, on the U.S. population, and the pressure that puts on us has made it more significant, in my mind.⁹²

The U.S. Army tried to project a narrative of progress in the advisory mission, including by releasing a weekly publication called the *Advisor* to promote ISF accomplishments. The publication is extremely positive about the progress of the Iraqi Army, even when the Iraqi Army clearly failed to demonstrate even basic battlefield competence (the contrast between Iraqi Army performance and *Advisor* reporting is starkest in 2006).⁹³ One former MNSTC-I commander

90. Author interview with former National Security Council official, by Zoom, May 2022.

91. *Ibid.*; author interview with a former commanding general of MNSTC-I, by Zoom, August 2020.

92. Interview, [name redacted], the Multi-National Corps–Iraq historian with Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno, Commanding General of Multi-National Corps–Iraq, June 24, 2007, CENTCOM Iraq Papers, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, <https://ahec.armywarcollege.edu/CENTCOM-IRAQ-papers/index.cfm>.

93. Multinational Security Transition Command–Iraq, *Advisor*, University of Florida Digital Collections, 2005, <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00061469/00145/citation>. For discussion of the Iraqi Army’s poor performance in 2006, see Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, 1: 584–

recalled his efforts to “put lipstick on a pig,” by “focusing on metrics that made the ISF look like it was making progress.”⁹⁴ This rosy outlook manifested in the rubric that MNSTC-I developed for evaluating ISF units—the Transition Readiness Assessments. These assessments were widely recognized as a poor evaluation system by all who wrote them and all who received them. At the mention of Transition Readiness Assessments, interviewees would often interject before I could finish the sentence to tell me that they were “trash,”⁹⁵ “[totally] bogus,”⁹⁶ and “way worse than SIGACT [significant activities] data.”⁹⁷ One former adviser explained:

The measures of effects [effectiveness] were coming down from the Coalition, from the force up in Baghdad, were things that were irrelevant . . . like “Is the Iraqi Security Forces fully manned?” I’m like, Yes, it’s fully manned, it’s fully manned with militiamen.” The historical record will be quite entertaining on this . . . because you’re going to find a bunch of categories that are color-coded for good to go. Yet, the text boxes that go with them [are] going to say something horrific like, “Iraqi Security Forces in MND-Southeast are completely dominated by Shi’a militias. They sponsor attacks on the local population against the occupation. They are sponsored by Iran. We have no control over them. Assessment, green.” I was allowed to write what I wanted to in the box as long as the thing was green, because by their criteria it was green.⁹⁸

The Defense Department’s reports to Congress on progress in Iraq always emphasized progress and glossed over fundamental problems. As explained by one incensed reader of these reports:

The first three reports to Congress on Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq failed to meet virtually every possible standard for credibility and integrity. They were a disgrace to the public service and to everyone who participated in drafting and approving them. Giving them a grade of “F-” was charitable . . . the ISF section makes all the usual claims about the readiness of the Iraqi Army, but provides no assessment of problems and risks. The major weaknesses and shortcomings in the Iraqi security forces, police forces, and paramilitary forces are totally ignored.⁹⁹

587. See also Benjamin Connable, *Iraqi Army Will to Fight: A Will to Fight Case Study with Lessons for Western Security Force Assistance* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), 116–149.

94. Author interview with a former commanding general of MNSTC-I, by Zoom, 2020.

95. Author interview with Lt. Gen. (Ret.) James Dubik, by telephone, August 2019.

96. Author interview with a former embedded adviser, by telephone, June 6, 2019.

97. Author interview with a former embedded adviser, by telephone, June 10, 2019.

98. Lisa Beckenbaugh, “Interview with Major Stephen Campbell,” August 27, 2013, OLE Interview Collection.

99. Anthony H. Cordesman, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq. The August 2006 Quarterly Report: Progress but Far from the Facts the Nation Needs and Deserves* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2006), 4–5.

Fearing civilian intrusion, many of the generals responsible for evaluating and communicating developments in the advisory project sought to project an appearance of progress, regardless of the reality.

The U.S. military also focused on setting up and sustaining the bureaucratic machinery of advising so that it would not compromise the combat mission, regardless of whether that machinery was effectively advancing the nominal goal of building a better Iraqi Army. The U.S. Army focused on staffing the advisory roles and cycling personnel in and out of theater.¹⁰⁰ The army did little to change the professional incentive structures that led competent U.S. officers to avoid the advisory mission and inexperienced ones or underperformers to settle for it. Indeed, the U.S. Army excluded the assignment from its 2005 list of “key developmental or branch qualifying” jobs that officers required for promotion.¹⁰¹ Combat remained the key to advancement up the ranks within the army.

The design of the Military Transition Teams is a clear manifestation of the military’s focus on setting up and maintaining a sustainable bureaucracy for the advisory mission, regardless of whether it actually advanced the official mission of building a better Iraqi Army. Personnel selected for the Military Transition Teams were often underperforming junior officers who had no prior deployments or special backgrounds in advising. In reference to their motley nature, transition team members took to calling themselves “mutts.”¹⁰²

That military transition tours were short is also a telling indicator of the military’s commitment to sustaining its bureaucracy over ensuring that it built an effective Iraqi Army. The tours lasted approximately twelve months—usually only nine in theater conducting advisory work. The army rotated the advisers out of theater before they could build the personal relationships upon which their influence was believed to hinge. According to *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, “In many ways, the transition teams had been tasked to rebuild the very sinews of the Iraqi military. . . . Yet it was on the shoulders of these transition teams, ad hoc organizations comprised of a mismatched group of personnel with only eight days of adviser-specific training, that the MNF-I campaign plan rested.”¹⁰³

PROMOTING IDEOLOGY. MNSTC-I’s instruction to its advisers in Iraq overwhelmingly promoted persuasion and discouraged bargaining. The military

100. Author interview with Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Paul Eaton, by telephone, August 2019.

101. Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, 1: 470.

102. *Ibid.*

103. *Ibid.*, 1: 475.

promoted the ideology primarily through training, briefings, and recommended readings.

Training for the embedded advisers was initially brief and haphazard, but it increased in duration and intensity over the course of the advisory period. The senior leaders directed the advisers in the normative and causal superiority of persuasion. Schwitters was convinced that the most important element of the advisory effort was to cultivate the ability of advisers to persuade Iraqi decision-makers to follow their advice. In an interview for the OLE project, Schwitters explained:

The core aspect of what [the advisers] had to do was something we don't usually do as soldiers—that is, to develop human relationships with individuals and small groups. . . . We needed people who were temperamentally and experientially trained to go in, put their arms around a bunch of folks and develop relationships from which they could then influence action and behavior and develop capabilities.¹⁰⁴

Schwitters developed a makeshift pre-deployment curriculum for incoming advisers at Camp Taji. Schwitters's curriculum emphasized "Iraqi-specific cultural understanding"¹⁰⁵ as a foundation for the relationship-building that was believed to be prerequisite—and sufficient—for effective influence.

Brig. Gen. Sherlock, the deputy commander of the CMATT under Schwitters and the person responsible for managing the process of "turning soldiers from the 98th reserve division into military advisers," stated that "in the Iraqi culture, everything is done on a personal relationship basis."¹⁰⁶ In his briefings to every incoming adviser team, Sherlock explained that their mission was "not to coerce and force Iraqis" to make certain decisions, but rather to build the "foundations of trust" necessary to persuade Iraqi officers to follow U.S. guidance.¹⁰⁷

Pre-deployment training for the advisers evolved quickly from the makeshift briefings at Taji in 2004 to an iterative effort emphasizing the centrality of relationships to influencing Iraqi decision-making. In 2005, Lt. Col. John Nagl developed pre-deployment training for the adviser teams at Camp Atterbury

104. Steven Clay, "Interview with Brigadier General James Schwitters," August 27, 2013, OLE Interview Collection.

105. *Ibid.*

106. Steven Clay, "Interview with Brigadier General Richard Sherlock," November 16, 2006, OLE Interview Collection.

107. Author interview with Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Richard Sherlock, Arlington, VA, August 2019. Sherlock's rank had changed by the time the interview was conducted.

in Indiana. The curriculum that Nagl developed focused heavily on establishing relationships with Iraqi counterparts. The training even simulated dinner encounters with counterpart Iraqi commanders, complete with interpreters and Iraqi food, to troubleshoot the transition team members' approach to building rapport.¹⁰⁸ Once they arrived in Iraq, advisers received further training at Camp Taji and at the Phoenix Academy, where they were taught that the keys to the relationships upon which their influence would hinge included cultural sensitivity and avoiding cultural arrogance.¹⁰⁹ Lt. Gen. Frank Helmick, commanding general of MNSTC-I from 2008 to 2009, set up a week-long training course for incoming adviser teams that focused heavily on relationship-building and demonstrating what right looks like.¹¹⁰

The U.S. Army also assigned readings to indoctrinate the embedded advisers. Dozens of advisers (and several general officers, including Casey¹¹¹ and Schwitters¹¹²) identified T. E. Lawrence as a role model.¹¹³ Former embedded adviser Maj. Ryan Ledlinsky, for instance, said that all embedded advisers should read "*Seven Pillars of Wisdom*; it's gospel. T. E. Lawrence was a smart dude."¹¹⁴ The embedded advisers embraced Lawrence of Arabia's conviction that effective advisers helped their counterparts achieve their own goals rather than those of their advisers, and that understanding Arab culture would form the foundation for establishing relationships, trust, and influence.¹¹⁵ Lawrence, in some sense, was the cult leader at the center of the cult of the persuasive.

FOLLOWING THE DOCTRINE. The cult of the persuasive expects the general officers and embedded advisers to rely on persuasion and to eschew conditionality either because they internalize the ideology that persuasion is normatively right and conditionality wrong, or because they understand that their professional incentives are best served by following the doctrine. The norma-

108. Author interview with Lt. Col. (Ret.) John Nagl, by telephone, August 2019.

109. Author interview with Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Richard Sherlock, Arlington, VA, August 2019; *ibid.*

110. Author interview with Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Frank Helmick, by telephone, May 2020.

111. Casey, *Strategic Reflections*, 51.

112. Steven Clay, "Interview with Brigadier General James Schwitters," December 13, 2006, OLE Interview Collection.

113. T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*, subscriber's ed. (London: Herbert John Hodgson, 1926). One former embedded adviser, Maj. Christopher Lawson, explained in his OLE interview that *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* had been assigned reading. See John McCool, "Interview with Major Christopher Lawson," October 31, 2006, OLE Interview Collection.

114. Jenna Fike, "Interview with Major Ryan Yedlinsky," March 21, 2011, OLE Interview Collection.

115. See, for example, Laurence Lessard, "Interview with Major Jon-Paul Maddaloni," January 24, 2008, OLE Interview Collection.

tive language employed by the U.S. advisers to explain their choice of influence approaches aligns with these expectations.

When pressed on the subject of why he did not escalate to conditionality when al-Maliki ignored his efforts at persuasion, Casey said, “I was an advisor in a sovereign nation, my role was to advise my partner, and even when it was frustrating it was up to them to decide.”¹¹⁶ Casey explained in *Strategic Reflections* and in multiple interviews that he often disagreed with how al-Maliki made sectarian-based promotions and disregarded the chain of command. But he did not want to use U.S. security assistance as leverage because he viewed al-Maliki as a partner who deserved “respect and deference.”¹¹⁷ When Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asked Casey to exert stronger pressure on al-Maliki, Casey refused on the grounds that his role ought to be to provide military advice and defer to al-Maliki’s decisions, rather than to use U.S. security assistance to incentivize al-Maliki to take steps in accordance with U.S. interests.

The Military Transition Team advisers used similar language to explain their approach. In the words of one former embedded adviser, “Iraq is a sovereign nation. We weren’t there to force them to do what we wanted, we’re not imperialists. They weren’t always going to do things our way and that’s okay. It’s up to them. We do our best to earn their trust so that when we explain why we’re saying what we’re saying they’ll listen, but it’s their decision.”¹¹⁸ Another adviser described his job in this way: “We had to . . . determine where they wanted to be in the future and how we could help them get there.”¹¹⁹ Not all advisers internalized the ideology—others followed the script because conformity was the safe approach from a career perspective. In one example, an adviser explained: “We were supposed to advise, coach, train, and assist” and to “implore them to do things we wanted them to do that they didn’t necessarily want to do,” and “we were supposed to respect the fact that they were a sovereign nation.”¹²⁰ The repeated use of the word “supposed to” suggests that he simply followed instructions (regardless of whether he believed that they made sense) in order to get through his tour without incident.

In stark contrast and as a rare exception, Gen. Petraeus’s response to the

116. Author interview with Gen. (Ret.) George Casey, by Zoom, April 2020.

117. Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, 1: 640.

118. Author interview with a former embedded adviser, by telephone, July 2019.

119. Lessard, “Interview with Major Jon-Paul Maddaloni.”

120. John McCool, “Interview with Major Paul Esmahan,” November 2, 2006, OLE Interview Collection.

question, “Why did you choose the strategies of influence you chose?” was “Because it was clear that one would work better than the other. Tended to use a ladder of escalation: persuasion first, conditionality next (most often for personnel issues), threat to withdraw resources and support last . . . situations were different, to be sure, but those are the generalities.”¹²¹

PERSISTENT PERSUASION. The cult of the persuasive expects the U.S. Army’s approach to influence to remain fixed despite evidence of the ineffectiveness of persuasion and indications that escalating to conditionality could be productive.

U.S. advisers, from MNF-I commanding generals down to Military Transition Teams’ battalion commanders, expressed frustration with their Iraqi counterparts’ routine disregard for their advice. Nevertheless, the institutional approach to the interest divergence problem—persuasion but not pressure—never budged. As discussed in previous sections, almost all U.S. advisers in Iraq continued to rely on persuasion. The consistency is all the more remarkable given the relative progress made by generals Petraeus and James Dubik when they combined persuasion with conditionality. Rather than learn from their more successful predecessors, generals Odierno and Austin reverted to the institutional norm, relying on teaching and persuasion, and instructing their chain of command to do the same.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS: VISIBILITY AND BARGAINING POWER

The cult of the persuasive explains the rarity of conditionality in security assistance in Iraq—and the occasional exercise of conditionality—better than alternative explanations. The prevailing view in the alliance management literature holds that patrons fail to incentivize weaker clients to cooperate when they lack bargaining credibility.¹²² Similarly, a prominent explanation in the security assistance literature centers on variation in interest divergence, monitoring capacity, and bargaining credibility. Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker argue that conditionality was rare in Iraq because the United States lacked the monitoring capacity or bargaining credibility to overcome interest divergence and incentivize Iraqi leaders to make necessary reforms. They attribute Petraeus’s escalation to conditionality to the circumstances of the surge. The authors argue that the larger number of troops in theater temporarily provided the massive intelligence gathering apparatus that was necessary to detect Iraqi

121. Email correspondence between the author and Gen. Petraeus, February 19, 2020.

122. Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, 165–200.

disregard for U.S. direction. They also argue that Iraqi dependence was higher during the surge, increasing U.S. bargaining credibility.¹²³ Upon close inspection, however, the evidence from Iraq contradicts these arguments.

The visibility factor cannot explain the infrequent use of conditionality. Iraqi military organizational practices were highly visible to U.S. advisers not only during the surge, but from the beginning and for almost the duration of the advisory effort. Repeated efforts by the MNF-I commanders before the surge (Gen. Casey) and after the surge (Gen. Odierno) to persuade Prime Minister al-Maliki to implement more meritocratic personnel policies, abide by the chain of command, and curb corruption make clear their acute awareness of the problems. Former Military Transition Team advisers—deployed before, during, and after the surge—likewise report in their oral histories their frequent frustrations with specific measures taken by their counterpart division, brigade, and battalion commanders that undermined the development of the Iraqi Army.

Bargaining credibility is also not a persuasive explanation for why the United States so rarely used conditionality to incentivize Iraqi leaders to reform the Iraqi Army. Prime Minister al-Maliki feared that the United States might help Sunni elements stage a coup against him.¹²⁴ Al-Maliki also understood that his bid to remain in power despite his loss to the Iraqiyah party in the March 2010 election hinged on support from the United States.¹²⁵ Al-Maliki believed that the coalition had enormous leverage over him. Rather than leveraging al-Maliki's existential fears of U.S. abandonment as a bargaining chip, U.S. military leaders instead repeatedly assured him of the United States' stalwart commitment. As David Lake summarizes, "Replacement of the proxy was also possible. Due to the deep involvement of the United States in Iraqi politics, and its large role in handpicking al-Maliki as its proxy, Washington could in theory have replaced al-Maliki—if not at will, given its reliance on elections, then certainly with some relatively modest cost. This ability was affirmed in the 2010 election when the United States could have tipped the scales against al-Maliki and again when it helped push him out of office in 2014."¹²⁶

123. Biddle, Macdonald, and Baker, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff," 129.

124. Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2015), 237.

125. Rayburn and Sobchak, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, 2: 508; author interview with an Iraqi army expert who served in Iraq, Arlington, VA, July 2019; Sky, *The Unraveling*.

126. Lake, "Iraq, 2003–11," 243. It is worth emphasizing that if the threat to remove al-Maliki

The timing of U.S. advisers' occasional exercise of conditionality in Iraq also contradicts the argument that an increase in U.S. monitoring capacity and bargaining credibility associated with the surge explained the choice. Gen. Petraeus escalated from persuasion to conditionality not only during the surge as commanding general of MNF-I but also before the surge as commanding general of MNSTC-I. Moreover, Petraeus's commanding officer in 2004, MNF-I commanding general Casey, had, if anything, more visibility and leverage than Petraeus did, but, like most advisers in Iraq, he elected to rely on persuasion. In keeping with the cult of the persuasive, rare adviser decisions to escalate to conditionality in Iraq had less to do with structural changes in the environment than with the idiosyncrasies of individual advisers.

Beyond Iraq

The cult of the persuasive permeates the U.S. Army and drives its approach to influence in security assistance beyond Iraq and around the world. The easiest test of external validity should be the "most similar" case—U.S. security assistance in Afghanistan. Both efforts were of central importance to the United States during the long wars of the post-9/11 period, and, commensurate with the stakes, both were massive in terms of dollars spent and advisers sent. The U.S. Army's approach to influencing Afghan leaders to build a better Afghan National Army aligns with the expectations of the cult of the persuasive. Washington largely delegated the effort to build the Afghan National Army to the Defense Department. The U.S. Army prioritized preserving its autonomy, combat mission, and bureaucratic machinery. It taught its advisers to rely on persuasion and to avoid bargaining in their efforts to convince Afghan leaders to take steps, such as curbing corruption, to professionalize the Afghan National Army.¹²⁷ U.S. advisers were acutely aware that Afghan military organizational practices were stymying the progress of the Afghan Army. Rather than escalate to conditionality, however, coalition commanders generally reported slow but steady progress to Washington. For its part, Washington

from power was credible to al-Maliki, he would likely have considered (and indeed did consider) the more modest threats to pause or withhold elements of U.S. assistance to be credible as well.

127. Sarah Chayes, *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), 41, 45–47; John F. Sopko, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (Arlington, VA: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2017), esp. 107–141.

passed along the military's optimistic reports to the U.S. public and continued to defer to the military rather than intervene to force change.¹²⁸

The factors that make Iraq and Afghanistan outlier cases also make them hard tests of the theory. There are strong indications that the cult of the persuasive permeates the U.S. Army, driving its advisers' approach to influence in security assistance all over the world, far beyond Iraq and Afghanistan. The contemporary doctrine that describes how U.S. Army advisers should conduct security assistance generally prescribes teaching and persuasion and proscribes conditionality and direct command. Several field manuals emphasize the importance of relationships, rapport, and trust, demonstrations of cultural understanding, and people skills. The forward to *FM 3-07.1* states: "Advising establishes a personal and a professional relationship where trust and confidence define how well the advisor will be able to influence the foreign security force."¹²⁹ *FM 3-22* instructs advisers to "accomplish their mission by building relationships and rapport" because it is through "their interpersonal skills and rapport that they will positively affect counterpart action." But be careful, *FM 3-22* warns, "genuine rapport is developed slowly, but it can be ruined in an instant."¹³⁰ Doctrine provides evidence of ideology not because it shapes how advisers think—doctrine is not necessarily widely read—but because it reflects the beliefs of the organization.

Beyond army doctrine, there are strong indications of the cult of the persuasive in the founding, training, and public statements of the U.S. Army's new Security Force Assistance Brigades. In 2018, the U.S. Army announced that it would institutionalize the security assistance mission by forming six new SFABs under the Security Force Assistance Command. The cult of the persuasive expects the U.S. Army's approach to security assistance to optimize to protecting the combat mission. Indeed, the U.S. Army formed the SFABs explicitly to protect the army's combat mission from being diluted by the advisory mission.¹³¹ As explained by U.S. Army readiness officer Maj. Nick

128. Peter Beaumont, "U.S. Lies and Deception Spelled Out in Afghanistan Papers' Shocking Detail," *Guardian*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/09/afghanistan-papers-military-washington-post-analysis>.

129. Department of the Army, *FM 3-07.1: Security Force Assistance* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2009), 2–8.

130. Department of the Army, *FM 3-22: Army Support to Security Cooperation* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2013), 6–2.

131. C. Todd Lopez, "Security Force Assistance Brigades to Free Brigade Combat Teams from Advise, Assist Mission," U.S. Army, September 19, 2017, https://www.army.mil/article/188004/security_force_assistance_brigades_to_free_brigade_combat_teams_from.

Clemente: “The previous method of providing advise and assist capability cost the Army decisive action readiness. . . . The creation of SFABs is intended to help alleviate this challenge by providing a purpose built advise and assist force while freeing up our BCTs [Brigade Combat Teams] to be ready for their primary mission.”¹³² In keeping with the theory’s expectations that the U.S. Army leaders involved in security assistance are likely to focus on avoiding reputational damage, the 1st SFAB commander stated that “advisor misconduct remains the largest strategic and organizational risk for the SFAC [Security Force Assistance Command].”¹³³

The cult of the persuasive expects the training and public statements of SFAB leaders and advisers to reflect and reinforce the normative belief that persuasion is right and conditionality wrong, and the efficacy belief that persuasion works and conditionality backfires. Indeed, the training program for the SFAB advisers at the Military Advisor Training Academy at Fort Benning discourages conditionality, prohibits direct command, and encourages rapport-based persuasion. The recommended reading list for the SFAB advisers includes Stuart Diamond’s *Getting More: How to Be a More Persuasive Person in Work and Life*, Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, and T. E. Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.¹³⁴ Former SFAC commander Maj. Gen. Scott Jackson repeatedly emphasized his faith in an approach to influence based on personal relationships.¹³⁵ Senior SFAB advisers report that “the strength of the 3rd SFAB is the ability to build relationships with allies and partners at the personal level.”¹³⁶ A July 2021 *Army Times* cover reads “Looking for Friends: Army SFAB Footprints Found across the Globe.”¹³⁷ Ac-

132. Brian Hamilton, “Army Moves Closer to Establishing First Security Force Assistance Brigade,” U.S. Army, May 18, 2017, https://www.army.mil/article/187991/army_moves_closer_to_establishing_first_security_force_assistance_brigade.

133. Kyle Rempfer, “Scandals in U.S. Adviser Brigade Alarm Leaders behind Closed Doors,” *Army Times*, August 10, 2022, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2022/08/10/scandals-in-us-adviser-brigade-alarm-leaders-behind-closed-doors/>.

134. “Combat Adviser Training Course Recommended Reading List” (Fort Benning, GA: Military Adviser Training Academy, n.d.), <https://www.benning.army.mil/armor/316thcav/MATA/Content/pdf/CATC%20Recommended%20Reading%20List.pdf>.

135. See Maj. Gen. Scott Jackson’s panel presentation in Jackson, Matisek, and Joyce, “The Future of U.S. Security Force,” 5:34; Lopez, “Security Force Assistance Brigades.”

136. Jessica Jackson, “3rd SFAB Supports CENTCOM Objectives,” Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Defense Exports and Cooperation, August 9, 2021, <https://www.dasadec.army.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2724716/3rd-sfab-supports-centcom-objectives/>.

137. “Looking for Friends: Army SFAB Footprints across the Globe,” *Army Times* 83, no. 2 (February 2022).

ording to one official SFAB Twitter account, “Influence is a byproduct of mutual trust forged in the field and in the classroom, shoulder to shoulder with our partners.”¹³⁸

Conclusion

Security assistance is a ubiquitous feature of international relations and a reflexive tool of U.S. defense strategy, and yet the United States struggles to build more effective militaries in partner states. Security assistance is hard because recipient leaders are often strongly motivated to implement policies that keep their militaries weak. In the context of interest divergence, the United States builds better militaries when it successfully influences recipient leaders to reform their militaries, and U.S. security assistance fails when U.S. influence fails.

This study typologizes U.S. influence approaches in advising and presents a novel theory to explain adviser choices. U.S. advisers can climb an influence escalation ladder comprised of four rungs: teaching, persuasion, conditionality, and direct command. I have shown that the United States’ preference for persuasion and aversion to conditionality in security assistance can be traced to the bureaucratic interests of the U.S. Army and the ideology that it has developed—what I call the “cult of the persuasive”—to advance those interests. I find strong support for the theory in the critical case and hard test of the U.S. effort to build a military in Iraq, and I present evidence of the theory’s external validity beyond Iraq. The study thus exposes the bureaucratic drivers of the United States’ struggle to build better militaries in partner states.

The findings have policy implications for the United States, which promotes security assistance as a panacea for fragile states and great power competition. It is difficult to build stronger militaries in fragile states, and prospects for improvement depend largely on whether recipient leaders prioritize military effectiveness above competing concerns. U.S. advisers are unlikely to convince unmotivated recipient leaders to cooperate through teaching and persuasion alone and will likely do better if they combine persuasion with conditionality to incentivize cooperation. Whether such tactics would meaningfully improve the recipient military depends on the nature of the threat and its sig-

138. The 5th SFAB’s Twitter account (@5thSFAB) may have deleted the tweet. The author can provide a screenshot of the tweet upon request.

nificance to the provider. The scale of U.S. investments, the duration of advisory tours, and even the caliber of advisers (all frequently cited as important determinants of security assistance outcomes) will have little bearing on U.S. influence and security assistance outcomes without direct civilian involvement in efforts to reform partner militaries, or fundamental reform of the U.S. military's approach to advising. The findings suggest, however, that reform is unlikely without civilian intervention. Finally, the study suggests that as long as U.S. policymakers remain reluctant to play a serious role in Defense Department–led security assistance, the United States should be more selective about where it deploys advisers to build partner capacity.

This study also proposes several areas for future research. It would be productive to compare the U.S. Army's approach to advising with that of U.S. Army Special Forces. In contrast to its parent organization, the Green Berets regard advising as part of its organizational essence.¹³⁹ Theories of bureaucratic politics and organizational behavior suggest that the Green Berets might approach the interest divergence problem quite differently than the U.S. Army. Future research could investigate whether the other military services, other U.S. federal bureaucracies (such as the State Department), and other nations' federal bureaucracies find their interests served by reliance on persuasion in advising. Outside the security assistance context, future research could also explore how bureaucratic pathologies like those driving the U.S. Army's approach to advising may distort the services' approaches to security cooperation, deterrence, and operational planning, with serious implications for the likelihood of war and escalation.

This article has focused on pathologies in U.S. Army security assistance, but the cult of the persuasive is a symptom of broader trends in U.S. civil-military relations. U.S. policymakers task the Defense Department with an ever-expanding set of missions that are further and further afield from the services' *raison d'être*.¹⁴⁰ Meanwhile, civilian deference to the military erodes the links that tether U.S. foreign policy goals to the military tools of national power.¹⁴¹ It is striking that high-profile failures to build militaries in Iraq and Afghanistan

139. Even within the Green Berets, however, there is duality between competing identities: advising on the one hand and direct action on the other.

140. Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017); Harig and Ruffa, "Knocking on the Barracks' Door."

141. Beliakova, "Erosion by Deference"; Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012).

did not precipitate meaningful dips in the U.S. public's trust in the U.S. military,¹⁴² serious efforts by civilian leaders to adjust course, or civilian decisions to curtail Defense Department-driven security assistance. Understanding civilian deference to the U.S. military in the United States—and the behavior of the military in the context of civilian deference—is crucial for comprehending how U.S. foreign policy is formulated and implemented.

142. Gallup, "Confidence in Institutions"; Burbach, "Partisan Dimensions of Confidence in the U.S. Military."