

WHAT WERE WE THINKING?  
AN ANALYSIS OF DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE  
ADVANCED STUDIES GROUP THESES FROM  
OPERATION DESERT STORM TO OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM I,  
1992-2002

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ABSTRACT

The aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq left little doubt that many military and civilian leaders downplayed or entirely missed the possibility of an Iraqi insurgency. Volumes have been or will be written about the major decisions made by senior civilian and military leaders at the time. Similarly, historians have attempted to record the attitudes of those junior Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Coastguardsmen tasked with implementing the operations derived from those decisions. Absent from the research, however, is a concentrated analysis of countless operational-level decisions made by mid-level officers, or the motivations behind these decisions.

A mixed-methods study investigating the research produced by the 1,124 graduates of each of the armed services' elite Advanced Studies Group planning schools provides an avenue to answer the question, "What issues did key mid-level military officers perceive to be compelling in the 1992-2002 timeframe?" Through a qualitative assessment of graduates' theses and a quantitative review through collation along the Range of Military Operations instrument, the researcher gained important insights into what key mid-level military officers were thinking during the time between the 1991 liberation of Kuwait and the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

A review of the data shows little substantive difference between the graduates of the three schools: one third of the graduates wrote theses concerning conventional warfare and another one fifth wrote about routine military operations. With few exceptions, these officers, studying at three different locations in Kansas, Virginia, and Alabama, thought the same issues were compelling during the last decade of the twentieth century. It is notable that only 2.7% of graduates wrote their papers about the topics that have defined the military operating environment in the first decade of the twenty-first century: terrorism and counterinsurgency.

While the failure to anticipate the operating environment is disappointing, the goals of these schools are not to produce graduates that predict the future, but ones who can engage in double-loop learning and thus adapt quickly to changing circumstances. By discouraging or even restricting students from writing about topics in their primary field of expertise, Advanced Studies Group faculty can better exercise the intellectual flexibility of their students, to the long-term benefit of their graduates, the military, and the United States.