

The threat of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that has emerged in conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2003 is a contemporary example of conventional militaries being confronted with a tactical surprise with operational—if not strategic—implications. Those implications can necessitate “institutional” responses to avoid strategic defeat in what, for many countries, are “wars of discretion.” Operational surprise, as defined in this examination, differs from strategic shocks as described by Nathan Freier, and the necessary responses are distinct from the military adaptations considered by John Nagl. The paper contends that the 6-year evolution of the IED experience from 2003 until 2009 constitutes a complete cycle of surprise and response, of which the most significant part is the institutional response. A case study of this experience illustrates how conventional military establishments recognize and respond to such surprises, with a particular focus on the experience, respectively, of the U.S. and Australian defense establishments. This case study reveals that institutional response is triggered by recognition of the surprise, which then cues organizational, equipment, training and doctrine, research and development, industrial, funding/ budgetary, and policy actions. Because the IED problem has mostly been a phenomenon of the land environment, this examination tends to emphasize the responses of armies, but the lessons have more general application. This paper contends that both the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and the Australian Defence Organisation (ADO) could have responded quicker than they did: contemporary defense establishments, it seems, may not cope well with such surprises. Despite this, the DoD demonstrated impressive agility in its response, especially for such a large organization, while the ADO was curiously slow to make the necessary institutional adaptations. In both cases, the role of senior leadership was key to mobilizing an effective response. In a fiscally constrained future that lacks the certainty of bipolar, state-on-state threats, the ability to recognize and respond quickly to operational and strategic surprise may be the decisive characteristic of national defense establishments.

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