Inside Iraq. The troops in Baghdad are making progress—and are likely to emerge as leaders of a post-9/11 America

I spent a week in Iraq recently, and here’s what impressed me most: the Americans. In particular, the quality and character of the American soldiers and Marines who are fighting there and trying to help rebuild the nation. I don’t mean to slight, in some ethnocentric way, the steadfastness and courage of the Iraqi people. But it was meeting and watching the American soldiers at work that I found most interesting.

I’ve served in government, and I’m familiar with Washington, and I’m not an uncritical cheerleader for the American military. Indeed, I’d say that some of our general officers—until this past year, when General David Petraeus and Lieut. General Ray Odierno took over—haven’t particularly distinguished themselves. But the brigade and battalion commanders and the company and platoon leaders I saw in Iraq are really impressive.

Before going to Iraq, I didn’t fully appreciate all the things our military leaders are doing there. Obviously, they’re fighting—and doing so more discriminatingly and effectively than they did in 2003 or 2004. But that’s just the beginning. Now that Petraeus and Odierno are pursuing a real counterinsurgency strategy, their subordinate commanders and officers are spending a lot of time engaging the local population in security, political, and economic efforts. It’s clear from the briefings by colonels and lieutenant colonels at various forward operating bases that they have internalized Petraeus’ counterinsurgency doctrine. Occasionally you’ll hear a leftover Rumsfeld-era talking point about how our job is to get out of the way and transition everything over to the Iraqis as quickly as possible. And I did see a brigade commander who, when asked by an Iraqi shopkeeper why electricity was so sporadic, replied politely that electric power wasn’t his job.

But that was the exception. The rule in Iraq is that brigade and battalion commanders—and even captains and lieutenants—are also taking on responsibilities as diplomats, politicians, development consultants, educators. The limited number of American civilians (and the virtual absence of Europeans) has thrown all the responsibility of nation building—more accurately, community building—on the U.S. military. And rather than complain, the soldiers do it willingly and even cheerfully, and with remarkable competence.

My traveling companions (military experts Fred Kagan and Kim Kagan) and I walked around the Haifa Street market in Baghdad with Colonel Bryan Roberts, commander of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Cavalry Division, and watched him coordinate reconstruction efforts and deftly manage the political-economic interactions with shopkeepers and citizens. We accompanied Colonel John Charlton, commander of the 1st Brigade Combat Team of the 3rd Infantry Division, to a meeting with the mayor of Ramadi. In these and other instances, I witnessed sophisticated political-military leadership.

What does this imply? That the soldiers who have done well in Iraq will be major figures in American life for the next couple of decades. These men and women are no less suited to national leadership than are entrepreneurs, lawyers or local community leaders. In fact, they’ve had to show more courage, they’ve had to operate in a more fluid and volatile environment—and they’ve risked their lives for their country. Just as John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush benefited from their experience as young officers in World War II—and from the high regard in which their experience was held—so the Iraq vets will have every chance to rise to the top of American public life.

It’s true that Iraq is an unpopular war. But hostility to President George W. Bush, or to the war, hasn’t spilled over onto the military. A few weeks ago, the Washington Post Magazine featured an article on the military and its relationship with the broader society. The cover line was alarmist—"Us and Them: As mistrust, resentment and misunderstanding grow between the civilian and military communities, can America wage a just and effective war?" But when you read the piece, the only place you find mistrust, resentment and misunderstanding is among some liberal elites. In fact, in most civilian communities there appears to be pretty unambiguous admiration for the military.

While in Iraq, I kept thinking back to a story that Dean Barnett reported in a recent article on the "9/11 generation" in the Weekly Standard. Barnett attended the commissioning of a Marine Corps lieutenant who had just graduated from Harvard. After the ceremony, the young man returned to his dorm room in full dress uniform and received a spontaneous round of applause from classmates. A campus police officer took him aside to shake his hand. The young man's father observed, "It was like something out of a movie."

Out of a World War II-era movie, to be precise. Whatever the other ways in which one can try to compare Iraq to Vietnam, in this important respect, here at home, the Vietnam era is over. The post-9/11 era is well under way.