

Another Winning Formula for Iraq

If my comments in my last essay on the suggestion of Scott Gerwehr and Nina Hachigian on how to turn around insurgents “with a little tenderness” depressed you, be of good cheer. All is not lost. I have just read about another winning formula: “How to Win in Iraq” by Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr. in the current issue of *Foreign Affairs*. We have to take it seriously because *Foreign Affairs* probably is and certainly was the pre-eminent American journal in the field. So we should be grateful to Mr. Krepinevich for offering us a way to win.

“Although withdrawing now would be a mistake,” he writes, “simply ‘staying the course,’ by all current indications, will not improve matters either. Winning in Iraq will require a new approach.”

What went wrong and what should now be done?

Mr. Krepinevich says that since we had no “clear strategy in Iraq,” we have had no way to say whether or not we were winning. This, he points out, has confused the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the U.S. commander on the ground and even Vice President Dick Cheney. Each of them pronounced the war in the “last throes.” But “...according to the most recent polls, nearly two-thirds [of Americans] think the coalition is ‘bogged down.’” Since, also according to surveys, most Americans do not even know where Iraq is, they must have relied on common sense.

Not having a clear strategy certainly makes it hard to keep score. That is reprehensible, but much worse is the opinion of those who think the current policy is a failure. All they “have offered as their alternative ‘strategy’ [is] an accelerated timetable for withdrawal. They see Iraq as another Vietnam and advocate a similar solution: pulling out U.S. troops and hoping for the best. [But] Radical Islamists would see the U.S. departure as a victory, and the ensuing chaos would drive up oil prices.”

Perhaps Mr. Krepinevich has not been reading the press over the last six months or so: Chaos is not “ensuing;” it already exists. To drive from the fortified American enclave, the “Green Zone,” out to Baghdad’s airport can be done only in armored cars, with a military escort and under the cover of helicopters. No westerners go out into the streets without a posse of guards. Journalists who dateline their dispatches “Baghdad” are almost as isolated from Iraq as though they were writing from New York. And the price of oil, even before Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, was up at least double over what it was before the invasion. Moreover, Mr. Krepinevich seems to have been confused about the “Radical Islamists.” Until a few months ago, we used that term for the Shiis, the friends of that pivot of the axis of evil, Iran, who want to revert to their particular brand of religious fundamentalism; the people against whom we were fighting *were* secularists as, indeed, was the *Baath* government. Now, in fighting against us, we *presume*, although we have learned so little about them we cannot be sure, that the insurgents too have become religious fundamentalists.

But I do not mean to quibble about what Mr. Krepinevich knows or does not know about Iraq. Let us consider his winning formula:

What we need is what he calls an “oil-spot strategy.” (Aesthetically, I wish he had chosen another term!) What he means is “Rather than focusing on killing insurgents, they [U.S. and Iraqi forces] should concentrate on providing security and opportunity to the Iraqi people, thereby denying insurgents the popular support they need. Since the U.S. and Iraqi armies cannot guarantee security to all of Iraq simultaneously, they should start by focusing on certain key areas and then, over time, broadening the effort – hence the image of an expanding oil spot.”

Again, I do not mean to quibble and certainly don’t mean to fall into the category of those so deprecated by Mr. Krepinevich for comparing Iraq and Vietnam, but this *does* rather sound like one of the tactics we tried in Vietnam. There we called it “regroupment.” Indeed, Mr. Krepinevich conjures Vietnam by saying that the “search and destroy” tactics used there still appeal to the U.S. military in Iraq. But, he goes on, “hunting down and killing insurgents [is ineffective because] even when an attack manages to inflict serious insurgent casualties, there is little or no enduring improvement in security once U.S. forces withdraw from the area.” That was certainly true in Vietnam.

Something else seems to be called for. What would the “oil spot” strategy entail? How would it be carried out? What would be the effects? And what are the alternatives?

Mr. Krepinevich answers the first question by saying “it would require a protracted commitment of U.S. resources, a willingness to risk more casualties in the short term, and an enduring U.S. presence in Iraq.” Before we jump into a policy with those rather vague price tags, let us consider the requirements:

First, on the size of the military commitment. Mr. Krepinevich suggests that his proposed policy would require fewer American soldiers -- *only* 120,000 instead of 140,000 now there. He does not make clear why he is so optimistic. Military experience suggests that a static defense usually requires more troops than a mobile attack. That experience suggests we may be talking about many, many more men on the ground. But, even if he is right, keeping *only* 120,000 troops in Iraq is a major commitment. He hopes that the force could be reduced *over time* to a final number of 20,000 as area after area is pacified.

This is a difficult point for the strategy he proposes or any other strategy that requires large numbers of Americans to stay in Iraq. As he writes, “If confidence in the war wanes, veterans will vote with their feet by refusing to re-enlist and prospective new recruits will avoid signing up in the first place. If this occurs, the United States will be unable to sustain anything approaching its current effort in Iraq.” The American troops, he admits, are today “140,000 targets” and the American public is unhappy about this fact.

The policy, Mr. Krepinevich proposes would, he says, “risk” more casualties. “Risk” is not the right word – more casualties would be a certainty. Parenthetically, allow me one comparison with Vietnam. In the first three years of each war, America suffered at least five times as many casualties in Iraq as in Vietnam. Whether or not we adopt Mr. Krepinevich’s strategy, it seems likely that casualties will not diminish. Indeed, if his strategy is adopted, he foresees “longer U.S. casualty rolls.”

And, second, what is the meaning of Mr. Krepinevich's phrase "enduring presence?" He answers honestly and unequivocally: "Even if successful, this strategy will require at least a decade of commitment..." That is, again to compare, a longer period than the large-scale American involvement in Vietnam. Such a long-term commitment will undoubtedly have profound, unpredictable but pervasive influences on American society; it is difficult to believe that they could be beneficial. Scores of thousands of young men and women will be subjected to the brutalizing effects of guerrilla war and in the almost inevitable periods of disillusionment, anger and disagreement, all Americans will be severely stressed and probably bitterly divided from one another. As I have pointed out, it is precisely the revolutionary aspects of such conditions that appealed to Leon Trotsky in his plan to tear apart Western society and which appeal to the Neoconservatives in their desire to reform America and the rest of the world on their radical new pattern.

And, third, the money cost? Again, Mr. Krepinevich is up-front with the answer, "hundreds of billions of dollars." As I pointed out in my previous essay, "A Little Tenderness," former Assistant Secretary of Commerce Linda Bilmes has estimated the cost of five years of the Iraq war at 1 trillion and 372 billion dollars; is the next five years Mr. Krepinevich estimates for his strategy likely to be much cheaper? He does not think so. Neither do I.

Meanwhile, as he points out, not just Arabs or just Muslims but peoples all over the world have come to dislike and fear America and "Indeed, citizens in Canada, France, Germany the Netherlands, Russia, Spain and the United Kingdom now hold more favorable views of China than of the United States." The trend is toward greater distrust of Americans. This, as I and others have emphasized, is the wasting of a treasure Americans have inherited that is far more valuable than money.

If these costs are realistic, what is to be gained by the "oil spot" policy had better be significant. And creating and sustaining, much less spreading, the spots had better be feasible. So what does Mr. Krepinevich think actually happens in them ?

The idea is conceptually simple. We expand the "Green Zone" population from just Americans and a few approved Iraqis first to neighborhoods, next to towns, then to provinces and finally to the whole country.

The difficulty is implementing it.

In Vietnam we implemented it rather crudely, moving whole populations into "secure" areas, destroying their former homes and torching or poisoning their fields and killing their animals to prevent the Vietcong from benefiting from them. Most important was to be the breaking off of contact between the evacuees and the insurgents. It was a massive, brutal and expensive program. Unfortunately, it did not work. As I pointed out in my last essay, the Vietcong not only moved relatively easily into the "secure" areas -- the current saying was "the night belonged to them" as I witnessed even in downtown Saigon -- but even into the presidential palace and into the councils of the South Vietnamese general staff. Presumably, as I believe everyone now admits, such movement could not have happened without at least the acquiescence of a significant portion of the people in the secure areas.

So how could this fatal weakness be rectified in Iraq?

Consider a hypothetical case: we decide to make a suburb of Baghdad an “oil spot.” It has, say, a hundred thousand people living in it. How do we keep it “pure?” To weed out the active insurgents has everywhere proven impossible for us. Never mind the native insurgents, of whom there are believed to be less than 20,000, we have not even managed to catch more than a few of the several hundred foreign insurgents purported to be in Iraq. The reason is clear: these people are given food, a place to hide, cover, money and perhaps even arms and explosives by large numbers of Iraqis. My guess is that the large number adds up to several hundred thousand. So let us assume that in our model suburb, there are a few score combatants and a few thousand supporters. They, in turn, rely on the complicity of relatives, friends and neighbors. How can such people be identified, “turned,” arrested or killed? To do so would require a secret police organization like the ones that functioned in Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia and Mao’s China. Even Saddam’s police force, brutal as it was, was not capable of this task. It is difficult to see how Americans, who are woefully ignorant of the country, the culture, the language and are themselves objects of suspicion or even hatred could improve upon what Saddam was able to do. But, in attempting it, imagine the effect on the inhabitants: at best, as they were turned against one another, they would be rendered less capable to undertake the immense task of rebuilding Iraqi society. More likely, in the process of identifying security risks, the inquisitors will engender further hatred of America and so indirectly help to recruit new insurgents. But, even if the American administration succeeds, what could it do with the arrested security risks? We have somewhat more than 12,000 Iraqis now in prison. The prisons are already bursting, but each “oil spot” would surely add substantially more.

And, unless each neighborhood was walled or fenced off, as we tried but failed to do in Vietnam, people would move in and out so that agitators would “contaminate” even the already cleared “oil spots.” To prevent them would be further to cripple the economy. With an unemployment rate already perhaps as high as 65%, the whole country would become destitute. Then it would be hard to find *any* Iraqis who would cooperate with the Americans.

Even worse, I have to say, selfishly as an American, would be the degrading of the American character that involvement in such a program would necessarily cause.

Not to belabor the point further, the “oil spot” policy makes no sense at all.

Why, I ask in frustration, are such apparently intelligent people as Mr. Krepinevich, who is described as “Distinguished Visiting Professor of Public Policy” at George Mason University, driven to such fantasy? I think the answer is that they simply cannot deal with the central fact of the Iraqi insurgency: nationalism. The Iraqi people, as I have pointed out in *Understanding Iraq* and elsewhere are like us in at least one respect. They do not want to be ruled by foreigners. The more of us there are and the longer we stay, the greater will be the opposition to us. Those “experts” who do not wish to see this, or at least to be guided by what is realistic, bring forward the argument, as does Mr. Krepinevich, that “Radical Islamists would see the U.S. departure as a victory” and that our departure would *cause* chaos.

So we search for gimmicks, as did Scott Gerwehr and Nina Hachigian or a new strategy (or at least a new name for an old strategy) as does Mr. Krepinevich.

Is there another possibility? Yes, there is, however desperately we seek to avoid seeing it. It is in the *context* not in the gimmicks or in the strategy. In the context of an American occupation, any Iraqi government is bound to be seen as a puppet or even as a Quisling. Consequently, *enough of* the population will support the opponents of the foreigners that the government will be crippled. And, *enough of* the population will tolerate even horrible and apparently senseless attacks on fellow citizens, as it has been doing, that the combatants will be supported or at least not effectively opposed.

If the *context* were changed, the effects would become quite different. When the foreigners leave, the target is removed. Then terrorists either become government officials (as happened in Ireland, Israel, Kenya, Algeria, and in incipient United States after our own Revolution which was also mainly a guerrilla war against foreigners) or they become merely outlaws without popular support -- Mao's fish without their supporting sea -- and quickly are hunted down. History should teach us, if we were willing learn from it, that *changing the context* is the only feasible way out of the mess we got ourselves into in Iraq.

Of course, there will be a period of confusion, of fighting, of atrocities – as there are now, every day. That is the price that must be paid for our decision to go into Iraq in the first place. A similar time of chaos has followed evacuation in every insurgency. American revolutionaries hounded out of the country, brutally assaulted or even hanged large numbers of the Loyalists who had supported the British. Similar ugly events will happen in Iraq. We might be able to mitigate the worst with a transitional UN peacekeeping force provided its tenure was clearly limited and we were not part of it. In my study of a number of comparable insurgencies, I found that this period of chaos was usually short; roughly, it was in proportion to the degree of brutality of the war and its duration. How long it will take Iraq is anyone's guess, but the longer we stay there and try to "win," the longer and more costly the recovery process will take.

Rather than chasing mirages while we waste the lives of more thousands of young Americans, tens of more thousands of Iraqis, more hundreds billions of dollars and the rapidly draining reservoir of goodwill of the rest of the world, would it not be intelligent to try *really* to understand the war and evolve a sensible way to end it?

William R. Polk
September 7, 2005

William R. Polk was a member of the Policy Planning Council of the U.S. Department of State from 1961 to 1965. Subsequently, he was Professor of History at the University of Chicago, the founding director of its Center for Middle Eastern Studies and President of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. His latest book is *Understanding Iraq* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005). More of his essays can be accessed at his website, www.williampolk.com.