

When U.S. Occupation in Iraq Ends the Violence is More Likely to Subside

Written by Kevin Zeese
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Half Measures Seem Less Dangerous, But Are Often Moreso An Interview with William Polk, Author of *Out of Iraq*

William Polk is co-author with George McGovern of *Out of Iraq* and can be purchased on Amazon and at many other outlets. He taught at Harvard University from 1955 to 1961 when President Kennedy appointed him a Member of the Policy Planning Council of the United States Department of State. In 1965, Dr. Polk became Professor of History at the University of Chicago. There he also established the Center for Middle Eastern Studies and was a founding director of the Middle Eastern Studies Association. He was called back to the White House briefly during the 1967 Middle Eastern War to write a draft peace treaty and to act as an advisor to McGeorge Bundy, the former head of the National Security Council, who was the president's personal representative during that crisis. Dr. Polk is also the author of a treatise on *The United States and the Arab World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963, 1969, 1975, 1980 and 1991), *Understanding Iraq*, (HarperCollins Publishers, 2005) and numerous *other books*. More information on Dr. Polk can be found at: <http://www.williampolk.com/> and in the article below.

Kevin Zeese: Describe the relevant parts of your background, e.g. connection to Iraq, experience with insurgencies and your study of insurgencies.

William Polk: I visited the Middle East first in 1946 because my older brother George Polk was then the chief CBS correspondent there. On my way back to America, I stopped for some weeks in Baghdad. I was to return there many times over the years. In 1951, as a Fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation, I lived in and began a serious study of Iraq. That resulted in a short book for the American Foreign Policy Association called "What the Arabs Think." I then went on to Oxford where I studied Arabic and Turkish. After Oxford, I taught and did my doctorate at Harvard where I was assistant to the director of the Middle East Studies Center, Sir Hamilton Gibb. From there, President Kennedy appointed me to the Policy Planning Council where I was responsible for most of the Islamic world and took part in a wide range of studies and actions. I was head of the interdepartmental task that helped to end the Algerian war and was a member of the crisis management subcommittee that dealt with the Cuban Missile Crisis. Through my work on Egypt, President Nasser gave me an opportunity to visit, travel extensively in and meet the senior officials in Yemen and then Crown Prince Faisal of Saudi Arabia afforded the same opportunity for me to meet with the Yemeni Royalist guerrillas. During that period, I also visited Viet Nam where former Vice President Henry Cabot Lodge allowed me free rein to talk with all the American and Vietnamese officials. Drawing these first-hand experiences together and reading widely on others, I made an extensive study of guerrilla warfare on which I lectured at the National War College. After four exciting and informative years in government, I resigned, partly because of the

Viet Nam war which I opposed and (unpopularly) predicted we would lose, and became professor of history and founder-director of the Middle East Studies Center at the University of Chicago.

While at Chicago, I co-chaired (with Evgeni Primakov who later became Russian prime minister) a Pugwash committee on peace in the Middle East, twice lectured at the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Moscow and participated in various study groups at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. In 1967, I also became president of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs where I participated in a number of studies of guerrilla warfare including those of David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan who both began their books on Viet Nam there.

Over the next few years, I often visited Iraq and wrote several books (The United States and the Arab World, The Elusive Peace: The Middle East in the Twentieth Century, etc.). I visited Iraq a few days before the invasion and discussed with Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz how it might have been avoided. I then reported at the School of Advanced International Affairs in Washington what I thought could have accomplished the purposes of the American government while preventing the tragic events that followed the invasion. Obviously, I failed.

But as I read and heard what was being reported, I was appalled by the lack of understanding of Iraq by almost all journalists and most officials. With one outstanding exception, a former student of mine, Ambassador Hume Horan, no one even in Paul Bremer's administration knew Arabic and had a sophisticated understanding of Iraq. So I wrote a primer on the subject entitled Understanding Iraq. After reading that, Senator George McGovern, whom I have long admired as a man of rare integrity, suggested that we write together the book that laid out clearly and succinctly how we got into Iraq, what happened to us, the Iraqis and our position in the world when we did, how we could extricate ourselves with the least possible damage to ourselves, Iraq, and our reputation, and what will happen if we do not. That project became Out of Iraq: A Practical Plan for Withdrawal Now (Simon & Schuster, October 2006).

KZ: Of the insurgencies you have studied, which ones provide the most relevant experience for the situation in Iraq? What do we learn from them?

WP: Obviously, all insurgencies are somewhat different because they arise in countries with different cultures and experiences. However, there are persistent themes. Let me tick off a few:

The first is that most are directed toward getting foreigners to leave. That was true of our own insurgency, The American Revolution; it was the main theme in the Spanish guerrilla against Napoleon, the Philippine Insurrection against us, the Irish struggle against the British, Tito's war against the German occupiers of Yugoslavia, the Vietnamese war against the French colonialists and subsequently against us, the Algerian war of national independence against the French, the Afghan and Chechen wars against

the Russians and a number of others - the twentieth century produced a remarkable array of guerrilla wars!

A second theme is that insurgencies seem to follow a more or less set pattern. They usually start very small, often with only a dozen or so determined men and women. Such groups are too small to conduct guerrilla warfare so they usually begin with terrorism. Then, if they are successful enough to gather more followers, arms, and money, they gradually move toward larger forms of combat, eventually acquiring the wherewithal to conduct guerrilla warfare.

That form of combat is usually very difficult to counter because the guerrillas are elusive. Napoleon, fighting the Spanish guerrillas lost almost as many men (about 300,000) as in his much better known invasion of Russia (400,000). This stage of insurgency is a bit like ju-jitsu: it uses the numbers and power of the occupying power against itself. But it is usually not satisfactory to the insurgent leaders: they want to move toward parity with the armed forces of their enemies so they put aside as fast as they can guerrilla tactics and structure and organize themselves into formal armies. That was what George Washington did in our Revolution and what Tito did in his.

At that point, the leaders often turn on the guerrillas and suppress them. That is what Eamon De Valera did in Ireland and Ben Bella did in Algeria. They can do this because they or their movements have accomplished the fundamental aim of the insurgency, getting rid of the foreigners, so that many of their supporters are satisfied and want to return to normal life. That, I believe, could be critical in Iraq once the Americans leave.

A third theme arises from this. It is that without popular support, insurgents are powerless. Mao Tse-tung reflected this in his famous analogy of the fish and the sea. The actual combatants are the fish; they must be supported by the people, the sea, or they die. Viet Nam is a powerful example of the failure of "counterinsurgency." There (and in Iraq today) America is attacking the "fish." We have about 16,000 of them in prisons today and have killed an unknown number of thousands. These figures multiplied describe what we did in Viet Nam. But, the "sea" keeps on producing more "fish." We were so frustrated there that we tried (as did the Russians in Afghanistan) to destroy the country. Neither the Russians nor we could do it. What Viet Nam should have taught us is that the only way to end the war is to get out.

The fourth theme is one that is most often either overlooked or downplayed. It is that insurgency is not about military combat so much as about politics. I have a shelf full of books that dwell on weapons, tactics, even uniforms of combatants, but very few observers have grasped the central point that all successful guerrilla leaders have known: either the people are brought aboard politically or the movement fails.

The last theme I will mention here directly pertains to Iraq but is also demonstrated in Algeria: when the insurgency and the counterinsurgency last a long time, both the natives and the foreigners become brutalized. Pushed further, societies implode. Algeria, nearly half a century after achieving independence still has not recovered its civic "balance."

That process is now at work in Iraq. It is a wounded society and will take a generation or so to return to "normality." The longer we stay, the harder it will be. And, let us not forget, the costs to us will also rise as we have discussed in Out of Iraq.

KZ: When I wrote about "Out of Iraq," the book you wrote with Senator McGovern and mention your view on violence subsiding after the occupation ends, perhaps with a brief spike in violence, the common critical reaction I get is -- "yes, but this is no longer an insurgency. It is a civil war and when we leave it will escalate. The Shia's majority will punish the Sunni minority; they will be supported by Iran and the Sunni by Saudi Arabia. Thus, this civil war will escalate into a regional war." I expect that civil wars are not an uncommon bi-product of occupation because very often the occupying power uses people from the occupied country to help control the population, i.e. divide and rule. This can easily develop into a civil war. Do any of the insurgencies you study provide lessons for the type of sectarian war we are seeing in Iraq? How do you think the end of the occupation will impact this internecine warfare?

WP: Of course no one knows exactly what will happen when we leave. It would be as naïve to suggest that the next day all would be sweetness and light as it was when the Neoconservatives told us the Iraqis would greet us with flowers in their hands. There will be a difficult and bloody period. We have not been able to stop it with about 150,000 troops in the country.

However, we argue that, based on what is known of other insurgencies, once the major irritant - us -- is removed, conditions can be created for a healing of the wounds. To encourage and promote that process, we advocate a careful program including a "stabilization force" under the UN working for the Iraq government to police the major facilities (roads, hospitals, schools, banks, factories, etc.). This force would not engage in counterinsurgency and would have a limited mandate so the things that have made an American presence unacceptable will be lessened.

The civil war, which of course, is already going on cannot be immediately stopped. We recognize that. If we look back at Viet Nam, we see that it was extremely bitter during the American period. As Neil Sheehan pointed out in his excellent *A Bright and Shining Lie*, during the Tet Offensive it involved in just a few days the death of about 3,000 people of whom some were shot, others beheaded and still others buried alive. In short, it was as bad as the worst of Iraq today. In Algeria, during the last week of the war, when I was in Algiers city, some 16,000 people were summarily executed. Then, when the French got out of Algeria, the terror abated and then stopped. The consensus on Viet Nam was that there would be a national bloodbath when we pulled out. There was a painful period. Many people were killed and more were imprisoned or otherwise harmed but there was nothing like the bloodbath that had been predicted.

It is unrealistic to think that the Iraqis will be gentler than the Algerians or the Vietnamese. But, equally, there is no reason to think that they will necessarily be more bloodthirsty. Much will depend on when and how we get out.

We stress in our book that much will depend on the Iraqi government. The present government is certainly regarded as an American creation and will have trouble containing the violence. We believe that there will be an interval between an American withdrawal and the emergence of some sort of consensus. That is the dangerous period. My hunch, based on other insurgencies, is that the current government will lose control and be replaced over a year or so but that during this period there will be stages during which the UN-sponsored stabilization force can ameliorate the worst and gradually, as a new, more broadly supported government begins to take over, restore an acceptable degree of order. Local militias, to the degree that they can be encouraged to work within their own neighborhoods, will be beneficial. Perhaps most important, as the public works projects we call for take hold, the socially destructive high rate of unemployment (as much as 50% in much of Iraq) will decline, and as exiles begin to trickle back to rebuild public health, etc. -- the various parts of the program we have outlined - piece by piece, people will demand that the gunmen stop shooting. Without public support, they will become vulnerable.

We are realists and know how hard it will be to coax the genie back into the bottle, but there is no other way. The longer we stay, the harder will be the process. So we have laid out what we believe is the best possible means, given the very difficult situation the American invasion and occupation has created. It will certainly not be perfect, but we have sought to mobilize every possible means to ameliorate the current tragedy and work toward a better future. As I have said, other insurgencies suggest that once the central aim, getting rid of the invader, is achieved, enough people want a return to normal life that there is something with which to work. Today, and as long as we stay, there is not.

The idea that when we leave, Iraq will be invaded by Iran, Syria, Kuwait or Saudi Arabia is a red herring. None of those countries would have anything close to the capacity we have. And none of them would be any more successful. There is every sign that their leaders realize this. Moreover, their history and recent policies suggest that they have no such idea in mind.

KZ: Your exit proposal contains many parts. If various parts are not met is exit conditional or will exit proceed no matter what happens regarding reconstruction funds, a stabilization force or other aspects of your proposal?

WP: If our exit is conditional on the Iraqis doing what we want them to do, they will keep on fighting. Our intention must be clear and definite if we want the war to wind down. The best we can do is to make possible (by helping to finance) what we think are intelligent moves (e.g. hiring a stabilization force while building a national police force) and by not helping to finance those that are counter-productive (e.g. reconstituting a national army which so often in the past has suppressed moves toward peaceful and representative government and empowered dictators). Most of the proposals we make will serve the healing process. We would hope that whatever Iraqi government emerges will see merit in them, but we Americans must give up the idea that we can tell them what to do. We cannot if we want the war to stop.

KZ: It seems that the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Working Group is going to advocate that a bit less than half the troops leave in a short amount of time (with the timing currently unspecified). This also seems to be the position of many leading Democrats -- start a withdrawal process this year, but without any discussion of actually completing the withdrawal. What does your experience show you about these types of middle ground approaches when the occupying country is not ready to face the reality of defeat, but at the same time are not ready to increase their involvement in the occupation? Any lessons? What do you think of this halfway approach?

WP: Compromise positions always appear attractive. They seem more sensible, more realistic, and less dangerous. They protect reputations. They proclaim progress. But consider one episode in our past when we opted for this "solution." We were in the quagmire of Vietnam in 1968 and things were bad. The Tet offensive had shown that we could not win the war. So what to do? The compromise first Johnson and then Nixon chose was gradually to cut back our troops as some now advocate for Iraq. But, the Viet Nam war kept going until our last people left from the roof of a Saigon building in helicopters four years later. During those years, almost 21,000 Americans were killed and over 50,000 seriously wounded.

Our plan would, among other things, halt the killing of Americans which surely will continue, and probably grow, if we just scale back. Is this a perfect solution? Obviously not. Is it better than any known alternatives? Yes, we think it is.

KZ: Before the recent mid-term election a Bush Administration official asked "How would [the Democrats] force the president to withdraw troops? Yell?" The Democrats can yell, i.e. hold hearings that show how bad Iraq is, how poorly managed an occupation it has been, all the mistakes that have been made or pass resolutions calling for withdrawal. But, all this will amount to nothing if the president decides the U.S. is staying. The only real power the Democratic Congress has to direct the withdrawal is the power of the purse. This power seems to be something the Speaker of the House and the Majority Leader has taken off the table. Should it be a power Congress uses? Is there any other way for Congress to really end this war?

WP: In the American system, the key role of the legislature, of course, is to fund or not fund what the executive wants to do. The power of the purse is its ultimate power. It is a crude power and few legislators will wish to use it except as a last resort.

The legislature, however, has a second, more subtle and ultimately more important role. It is to act as the school for the public. It has the authority to demand and make public information, the lack of which was extremely detrimental to America in recent years. Such information may be considered something like a text book for the public; the legislature can use it to conduct "school." This is what Senator William Fulbright did during the Viet Nam war. He educated the Congress and the American public. Something like what he did is needed now.

It is also enormously important that the press play a role in this educational process. It was a long time in doing so in Viet Nam and has been particularly inadequate on the Iraq.

But the buck stops with us, the citizens: no other agency, neither the Congress nor the press, is going to do our job for us. We have the obligation to inform ourselves. Sadly, we are more inclined to watch sports or soapbox opera than the (few) intelligent programs of thought and information available on radio or TV. Worse, our school system produces young people who do not even know where other countries are, much less anything about their politics, culture or aspirations. As the Roper pollsters found, after three years of the Iraq war, few young college students could even find it on a map.

A president can, at least for a time, obscure or deny objections to any policy, as Johnson did and as Bush is doing. But, let us be honest: we get the government we deserve.

KZ: What should the anti-war movement be doing to make sure this war ends as quickly as possible?

WP: The key factor in the protests against Viet Nam was the draft. By using only the "volunteer army," the Bush administration has avoided most protests. Few American families have to worry about having sons and daughters incapacitated or killed unless they choose to put themselves in harm's way. So new recruits are increasingly drawn from those who seek to escape from deprived backgrounds.

The Administration has also shrewdly lessened the pain of the war's cost by huge borrowings abroad which enabled it to cut taxes. The public so far does not seem to care that also cut were social services which had made our society more humane, more fulfilled and stronger.

Initially, it sought to shield us from disturbing sights like coffins containing our dead which were virtually sneaked into the country. The public also seemed willing to have the true horror of war masked or at least cleaned up for it. Television programs show combat just like we know it from the movies, not as it really happens in filth, blood and pain, because, as one TV executive put it, "Americans don't want their breakfasts spoiled with obscene pictures."

So what to do? There is no easy answer. But a first step is to face the realities: we have had over 2,800 young men and women killed. There would have been many more but for the superb medical technology we have. Well over 20,000 have been wounded of whom about half will never recover. And additional 40,000 or perhaps many more have suffered severe psychological damage and about an additional 50,000 have received severe or multiple concussions. Thousands more will develop cancer or have malformed children as a result of the explosion of depleted uranium shells (which as the noted biologist, Dr. Hans Noll has informed me), generate an extremely toxic form of uranium oxide in the form of U3O8. Dr. Noll says that "there is persuasive evidence that most of the Gulf War Syndrome is caused by the neurotoxicity of U3O8 and not by post-

traumatic stress disorder, as claimed by the Pentagon." The victims will pay for these effects for the rest of their lives - and so will tax payers. I find that Americans do feel the pain when hit in that most sensitive of organs, their pocket books. When I have mentioned to audiences around America the costs estimated by some of our very best economists, between \$1 and \$2 trillion, that got the attention of even the most bellicose.

We have a long way to go.