

The War to Continue War

By

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From childhood, we Americans are deluged with slogans. We often select our breakfast food, our soap and our toothpaste not by jingles and catchphrases rather than by reading the labels. So we fall easily into accepting evocative expressions in place of analysis even when it comes to national security. Our parents were sold on the slogan that First World War was the “war to end war,” although the Twentieth century had more of them than any other in history. We went into Vietnam fearing the “domino effect” although the struggle there had little relationship to events in any other Asian country. We were rushed into the war in Iraq by the assertion that little, poor, remote Iraq was on the point of attacking mighty America, and now we are bogged down there allegedly by just a tag-tag faction of Baathist die-hards.

Seldom do we hear hard-headed analysis of what is happening, what is possible, what are the alternatives, how much each will cost in lives, treasure, prestige and security. When I was the member of the U.S. State Department’s Policy Planning Council responsible for the Middle East, I had the duty to try to understand the reality in the problems we then faced, to comprehend the forces at work and to identify what could be done. Now as a private citizen, I ask what is the reality of Iraq, what we face there, and what we can do? I begin with the reality of Iraq.

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Leaving aside Kurdistan, where roughly a quarter of all Iraqis live, Iraq is a shattered country. Its infrastructure has been pulverized by the “shock and awe” of the American invasion. Few Iraqis today even have clean drinking water or can dispose of their waste. About seven in each ten adult Iraqis are without employment. Factories are idle and small shopkeepers have been squeezed out of business. Movement even within cities is difficult and dangerous. And the trend in each of these categories is downward. Iraq’s society has been torn apart, and perhaps as many as 100,000 Iraqis have died.¹ Virtually every Iraqi has a parent, child, spouse, cousin, friend, colleague or neighbor – or perhaps all of these -- among the dead. More than half of the dead were women and children. Putting Iraq’s casualties in comparative American terms to get at the impact on its much smaller society would equate to about 1 million American deaths. Dreadful hatreds have been generated.

Not all hatreds are on the Iraqi side. American soldiers, often not knowing why they are in Iraq but only that they are getting shot at in fifty to a hundred attacks each day, are fearful. Against an indistinguishable enemy, who fades into the general population, their fear turns into

¹ As reported by Dr. Les Roberts and a research team from Johns Hopkins University’s Center for International Emergency, Disaster, and Refugee Studies, published in English medical journal, *The Lancet*, in November 2004 and summarized by *The New York Times* on October 29, 2004.

general hatred. To GIs, the natives are the “rag heads,” just as in Vietnam, they were “gooks.” And they may be suicide bombers. As the commander of the 1st Marine Division, Major General Richard Natonski put it just before the attack on Falluja, “No soldier can fight unless he hates the enemy.” That hatred appeared in a film made by NBC news inside a mosque in Falluja showing a marine shooting a wounded Iraqi who was apparently pleading for help. It also appeared in the photographs of the obscene torture of prisoners at the Abu Ghuraib prison last month. Those scenes, in turn, helped to cement the image of the uniformed, indistinguishable, un-understandable foreign troops as the common enemy, whom the Iraqis are beginning to call the “crusaders.”

Such graphic demonstrations of hatred and contempt also, of course, echo far beyond Iraq among the more than one billion Muslims throughout the world. They have tended to corrupt the greatest of America’s national treasures, the nearly universal respect of mankind. As one senior former Army officer said,² “My sense is that such an impression has already taken hold in the Arab world.” He is certainly right.

Thus, even when, as in the Falluja battle, the insurgents were outnumbered at least 20:1, and it was obvious that they could not win against a phalanx of helicopters, gunships, fighter-bombers, tanks and artillery, they fought to become martyrs for their cause and thus to inspire others to take up their mission. They lost the battle of Falluja as they will lose every battle. But they have not lost the war. This is the reality with which American must deal.

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Now I turn to the nature of guerrilla war and the tactic it sometimes uses, terrorism. Guerrilla warfare is not new. In fact it is probably the oldest form of warfare. But in recent centuries, so much attention was given to “formal” warfare that most soldiers forgot about “informal” war. Although few guerrilla leaders have given us accounts of how they organized, got their supplies, fought, retreated, regrouped and fought again, history provides a rich lode of information. We can study experiences dating from the earliest recorded times, through the Indian wars in North America to a series of Twentieth century conflicts in Europe, Asia and Africa including the Irish struggle against the British, Tito’s and the Greek ELAS’s struggles against the Germans in the Balkans, Mao Zedong’s war against the Japanese and then against the forces of Chang Kai-shek in China, the Viet Minh’s defeat of the French in Indo-China, the Algerian war of national liberation against the French, the Chechen’s centuries-long war against the Russians and, of course, our Vietnam and Russia’s Afghanistan.

The story they tell was well summarized by Mao Zedong when he described the guerrilla as a “fish” that must “swim” in the “sea” of the people. Absent popular support, Mao’s “sea,” the guerrilla is at best an outlaw and, more likely and sooner, a corpse. But, with the support of the people, he is elusive, nourished and, ultimately, replaceable. Consequently, almost no matter what forces are brought against him, he – or at least his cause – has proven indefatigable. If we are ignorant of this history, we are doomed to repeat it.

² Colonel Andrew Bacevich (who now teaches international relations at Boston University) quoted by Thomas E. Ricks in *The Washington Post* of November 16, 2004.

Generation after generation of soldiers and strategists have done just that, repeated it. Often ignorant of history and of the reflections of their predecessors, they attempted to find techniques to defeat the guerrillas. The ultimate way was by killing them. Caesar's conquest of Gaul was essentially a war of extermination as was the British war against the Irish and the Tsarist and Communist Russians' war on the Chechens. Even genocide rarely succeeded³ because new generations arose to replace the dead.

If not all could be killed, at least their lands and other resources could be taken away from them and given to alien settlers. This was the gist of colonialism as practiced by the French in Algeria and the Russians in Central Asia.⁴ Since we regard neither genocide nor colonialism as "politically correct" today, experiments have been made with various other tactics. In Vietnam, America tried a variety of them⁵ as did the Soviet Union in Afghanistan without ultimate success. Today, in Iraq and in occupied Palestine, Americans and Israelis are repeating these campaigns, focusing primarily on the application of overwhelming military power designed to dishearten the insurgents. In forty years, the Israelis have not achieved security; the chances that the Americans will in five years appears unlikely.

Why is this so? I believe that the answer is essentially simple: people of all religions and races share a common desire to control their own lives. Our Declaration of Independence puts it eloquently for us and President Woodrow Wilson summed it up neatly for others when he spoke of the quest for "the self determination of peoples." Thwarted in this quest, some people – whom, if we approve of them, we call "freedom fighters" or, if not, "fanatics" or "terrorists" -- take up arms, as Americans did in our Revolution. They are usually few in number, perhaps 15,000 or so in Iraq today and roughly the same in Algeria in the 1950s, but many more people who do not themselves actually fight support them.

Knowing that they cannot defeat the foreign enemy, they seek not so much to win battles but to wear him down, to inflict upon him what he will regard as unacceptable casualties and other costs, and to erode his political support. Thus, almost inevitably, the techniques of guerrilla warfare fade into terrorism.

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We have mistakenly acted as though terrorism was a "thing" or a group against which one can fight. But terrorism is merely a tactic that can be used by anyone. Ancient Britons used it against the Romans, the Zionists against the British, the Algerians against the French, the French

³ A partial exception is the replacement of the American Indians. That occurred, however, less through "war" than from the effects of disease, liquor and seizure of land. I deal with this in my forthcoming book, *The Birth of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

⁴ As the principal French strategist, General Duchemin, put it, "To pluck wild plants (the guerrillas) is not sufficient: one must plough the conquered soil, enclose it [with a military belt, markets and roads], and then sow it with good grain [settlers]." Russian policy in Central Asia was essentially similar.

⁵ The fortified village/"strategic hamlet;" civic action; economic subsidies of various sorts and provision of food to villagers; military assistance, training and provision of arms to a local army; recruitment of ethnic minorities as soldiers; search and destroy missions, free fire zones and massive bombing campaigns; etc.

against the Nazis, Chechens against the Russians, the Basques against the Spaniards, and so on. It is the traditional “weapon of the weak” who resort to it when all else fails.

At the beginning of the struggle against Saddam Husain, the Bush administration charged that Iraq was a terrorist state acting in close collaboration with Usama bin Ladin’s *al-Qaida*. In the emotional reaction to the attacks in New York and Washington, sloganeering drowned out intelligence. Saddam Husain’s regime was certainly evil, but Iraq was not a terrorist state. It had no significant relationship with any terrorist organization as the American, British and Israeli intelligence agencies knew. In fact, Usama bin Ladin, a religious fundamentalist, had offered to raise a military force to fight Saddam’s secular government and denounced Saddam with the strongest condemnation a Muslim can utter, that he was a *kafir* (a Godless person). Despite the findings of official American investigations, however, the rallying-cries stick in our minds. The latest public opinion poll shows that about seven in ten Americans still believe Saddam Husain was working with Usama bin Ladin in the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center.

While that is wrong, Iraq has changed under American blows so that it is now a prime recruiting ground and justification for terrorism. General Natonski again: “After we take Falluja, the terrorists will have no sanctuary, nowhere to hide.” I remember similar words about the Vietcong. And within a day after the general said this, fighting broke out in a dozen Iraqi cities. The Russians could have told General Natonski that a decade after they did to the Chechen city of Grozny what his troops did to Falluja, fighting continued. That is what we are now seeing in Iraq. This is the reality with which we must begin. So what can America do?

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Today, there are no good options -- only better or worse -- alternatives. Three appear possible:

The first option has been called "staying the course." In practice that means continued fighting. France “stayed the course” in Algeria in the 1950s as America did in Vietnam in the 1960s and as the Israelis are now doing in occupied Palestine. It has never worked anywhere. In Algeria, the French employed over three times as many troops, nearly half a million, to fight roughly the same number of insurgents as America is now fighting in Iraq. They lost. America had half a million soldiers in Vietnam and gave up. After forty years of warfare against the Palestinians, the Israelis have achieved neither peace nor security.

Wars of national “self-determination” can last for generations or even centuries. Britain tried to beat down (or even exterminate) the Irish for nearly 900 years, from shortly after the Eleventh century Norman invasion until 1921; the French fought the Algerians from 1831 until 1962; both Imperial and Communist Russia have been fighting the Chechens since about 1731. Putin’s Russia is still at it. There was no light at the end of those “tunnels.”

At best, “staying the course” in Iraq can be only a temporary measure as eventually America will have to leave. But during the period it stays, say the next five years, my guess is that another 30 or 40 thousand Iraqis will die or be killed while the U.S. armed forces will lose at

least another thousand dead and 20,000 seriously wounded. The monetary cost will be hundreds of billions of dollars.

It is not only the casualties or treasure that count. What wars of “national liberation” demonstrate is that they also brutalize the participants who survive. Inevitably such wars are vicious. Both sides commit atrocities. In their campaigns to drive away those they regard as their oppressors, terrorists/freedom fighters seek to make their opponents conclude that staying is unacceptably expensive and, since they do not have the means to fight conventional wars, they often pick targets that will produce dramatic and painful results. Irish, Jews, Vietnamese, Tamils, Chechens, Basques and others blew up hotels, cinemas, bus stations and/or apartment houses killing many innocent bystanders. The more spectacular, the bloodier, the better for their campaigns. So, the Irgun blew up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946; the IRA a Brighton (England) hotel in 1984; an Iraqi group the UN headquarters in Baghdad in 2003. Chechens blew up an apartment house in Moscow in 2003 while a Palestinian group blew up an Israeli-frequented hotel in Taba (in Egypt) in 2004.

Faced with such challenges, the occupying power often reacts with massive attacks aimed at terrorists but inevitably also killing many civilians. To get information from those it manages to capture, it also frequently engages in torture. Torture did not begin at the Abu Ghuraib prison; it is endemic in guerrilla warfare. Two phrases from the Franco-Algerian war of the 1950s-1960s tell it all and ring true today: “torture is to guerrilla war what the machine gun was to trench warfare in the First World War” and “torture is the cancer of democracy.” Guerrilla warfare and counter insurgency inexorably corrupt the very causes for which soldiers and insurgents fight. Almost worse, even in exhausted “defeat” for the one and heady “victory” for the other, they leave behind a chaos that spawns warlords, gangsters and thugs as is today so evident in Chechnya and Afghanistan.

The longer the fighting goes on, the worse the chaos. Viewing the devastation of Falluja, one correspondent wrote, “Even the dogs have started to die, their corpses strewn among twisted metal and shattered concrete in a city that looks like it forgot to breathe...The city smell like dust, ash – and death.” Viewing the same scene, the deputy commander of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force said, “This is what we do...This is what we do well.”⁶ This is not new or unique; it is classic. Recall the statement the Roman historian Tacitus attributed to the contemporary guerrilla leader of the Britons. The Romans, he said, “create a desolation and call it peace.”

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The second option is "Vietnamization." In Vietnam, America inherited from the French both a government and a large army. What was needed, the Nixon administration proclaimed, was to train the army, equip it and then turn the war over to it. True, the army did not fight well nor did the government rule well, but they existed. In Iraq, America inherited neither a government nor an army. It is trying to create both. Not surprisingly, the results are

⁶ Brigadier General Dennis J. Hejlik, quoted by Jackie Spinner, *The Washington Post*, November 16, 2004.

disappointing. Most Iraqis regard the American-selected and American-created government as merely an American puppet. And the idea that America can fashion a local militia to accomplish what its powerful army cannot do is not policy but fantasy. An Iraqi army is unlikely to fight insurgents with whom soldiers sympathize and among whom they have relatives. Reportedly, already, many have thrown off their new uniforms and joined the insurgents.

Much has been made also of the constitution we wrote for the Iraqis. It reads well, as did the one the British wrote for the Iraqis eighty years ago in 1924, but it is not anchored in the realities of Iraqi society. Absent the institutions that give life to a constitution, it will be simply a piece of paper as was the one the British provided eighty years ago. When it was needed, it was simply brushed aside. Representative government grows in the soil of the people or it does not grow at all. It cannot be mandated by foreign rulers.

Thus, the best America might gain from this option is a fig leaf to hide defeat; the worst, in a rapid collapse, would be humiliating evacuation, as in Vietnam.

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The third option is to choose to get out rather than being forced. Time is a wasting asset; the longer the choice is put off, the harder it will be to make. The steps required to implement this policy need not be dramatic, but the process needs to be unambiguous. The initial steps could be merely verbal: America would have to declare unequivocally that it will give up its lock on the Iraqi economy, will cease to spend Iraqi revenues as it chooses and will allow Iraqi oil production to be governed by market forces rather than by an American monopoly.

The second step, more difficult, is to make a truce and pull back its forces. If President Bush could be as courageous as General Charles de Gaulle was in Algeria when he called for a “peace of the braves,” fighting would quickly die down. This is not wishful thinking; it is what happened time after time in guerrilla wars.

Then, and only then, could Iraqis themselves set about creating a national consensus. It would probably not come through elections although they might legitimize the process. We would probably not like the government that emerged, but we are already beyond being able to control that choice. What we should help and encourage is the essentially indigenous process of building civil institutions. Only as they emerge will some form of reasonably peaceful, reasonably free, reasonably decent government have a chance. This is the most sensitive and difficult part of the whole affair. It cannot be rushed and we cannot do it for the Iraqis.

The danger during this period is two-fold: on the one hand, Iraq, like Afghanistan, could shatter with local warlords seizing the pieces or Iraq could split into a sort of eastern Balkans with Kurdish, Sunni Arab and Shia Arab successor states. The one would certainly create mafia style terrorism while the other would promote mayhem as thousands of suddenly created refugees flee from now alien states. Further area instability would be created and possibly either or both Turkey or Iran would intervene, Turkey to suppress the Kurds and Iran to protect the Shiis. The results are unforeseeable but certainly ruinous.

On the other hand, in an attempt to avoid this disaster, we and our Iraqi protégés could, as we are now attempting, create a new Iraqi army. We should heed the lesson of Iraqi history. In the past, the British-created army destroyed moves toward civil society and probably would do so again, probably indeed paving the way for the “ghost” of Saddam Husain. During the period during and following American evacuation, Iraq would need a police force but not an army. A UN multinational peacekeeping force would be easier, cheaper and safer. The balance between “security” and cohesion would be difficult to achieve and maintain, and we could be of only minimal help, but either extreme would be worse.

Meanwhile, a variety of "service" functions would have to be organized. Given a chance, Iraq could do them mostly by itself. With its vast potential in oil production, probably the greatest in the world, it would soon again become a rich country and has a talented, well-educated population. Step by step, health care, clean water, sewage, roads, bridges, pipelines, electric grids, housing, etc. could be provided by the Iraqis themselves, as they were in the past. When I visited Baghdad in February 2003 on the eve of the invasion, the Iraqis with whom I talked were proud that they had rebuilt what had been destroyed in the 1991 war. They can surely do so again. More important, in carrying out the rebuilding and reordering process, particularly at the “grass roots” level, Iraqis would begin to take control of their lives and begin to build the neighborhood institutions and consensus on which, if it is to grow at all, representative government will depend.

Economically, Iraq will also have to mend itself. Here the American role is primarily negative. We have imposed policies during our occupation that worked against the recovery of Iraqi industry and commerce. Abrogating these would spur development since any reasonably intelligent and self-interested government would emphasize getting Iraqi enterprises back into operation and employing Iraqi workers. That process could be speeded up through international loans, commercial agreements and protective measures so that unemployment, now at socially catastrophic levels, would be diminished. Neighborhood participation in running social affairs and providing security are old traditions in Iraqi society and allowing or favoring their reinvigoration would promote the excellent side effect of grass roots political representation.

As fighting dies down, reasonable security is achieved and popular institutions revive, the one million Iraqis now living abroad will be encouraged to return home. In the aggregate they are intelligent, highly trained, and well motivated and can make major contributions in all phases of Iraqi life. Oil production will play a key role. The income it generates can make possible great public works projects which will help to lure back Iraqi émigrés, employ Iraqi workers, encourage local entrepreneurs and salvage the class of merchants and shopkeepers who traditionally provided security in Oriental cities. In its own best interest, the Iraq government would empower the Iraq National Oil Company (NIOC) to award concessions by bid to a variety of international companies, each of which and NIOC would sell oil on the world market. This is obviously to the best interests not only of Iraq but also of the Western world.

Contracts for reconstruction paid for by Iraqi money would be awarded under bidding, as they traditionally were, but to prevent excessive corruption perhaps initially supervised by the World Bank. The World Bank would, of course, follow its regular procedures on its loans.

Where other countries supplied aid, they would probably insist on (and could be given) preferential treatment in the award of contracts as is common practice everywhere.

In such a program, inevitably, there will be set-backs and shortfalls, but they can be partly filled by international organizations. The steps will not be easy; Iraqis will disagree over timing, personnel and rewards while giving the process a chance will require a rare degree of American political courage. But, and this is the crucial matter, any other course of action would be far worse for both America and Iraq. The safety and health of American society as well as Iraqi society requires that this policy be implemented intelligently, determinedly and soon.

© William R. Polk, November 18, 2004.

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