

Into the Valley

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) | August 17, 2004

It is called the Valley of Peace, that vast cemetery adjacent to the Imam Ali Mosque in the Shi'ite holy city of Najaf. For more than a thousand years, the faithful have been buried here to be close to the Imam. This August, it is a Valley of Death for hundreds of innocent Iraqis as well as Iraqis fighting U.S. Marines, Army, Special Forces, and Iraqi National Guard and police units.

The most recent carnage was foreshadowed by events last April, when the U.S.-dominated Coalition Provisional Authority was formally in charge but “consulting” with the U.S.-appointed Iraqi governing council. Members of the Madhi army, a militia loyal to the popular anti-U.S. Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, turned the cemetery into a weapons “warehouse” and firebase for attacks against foreign military forces. Wary of inciting a major uprising should the mosque suffer war damage, U.S. forces agreed to pull back and let the Iraqi governing council and moderate Shi'ite leaders negotiate a ceasefire and subsequent withdrawal and demobilization of Madhi army members, leaving control of the city to reconstituted Iraqi security personnel.

As August began and the outside temperature flared, so too did tempers and, eventually, combat. U.S. military commanders and spokespersons for the new Iraqi interim government accused al-Sadr's militia of violating the April agreement by rearming instead of disbanding and attacking police personnel and installations. Reporters accompanying U.S. troops described close-quarter combat in the Valley of Peace, with al-Sadr's militia displaying improved discipline and small-unit tactics. Heavy armor in the form of Abram tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles seized the center of the old town and threw a cordon around the mosque area as thousands of residents fled.

Once more, however, the decisive tactical battle has not taken place. And in this instance, it is not going too far to assert this battle can never take place if Washington and the rest of the West have any pretensions of long-term peaceful relations with Baghdad and the Islamic world. In effect, when the CPA and the occupying armies failed to deliver both basic services and real democracy after Saddam fell, the foreigners relinquished the initiative to al-Sadr—and did so to an extent far surpassing conditions affecting the major towns in the “Sunni triangle.” In turn, the CPA handed the Iraqi interim government the same inferior hand.

The View from the Arab “Street”

Some outsiders have suggested using Iraqi commandoes to go into the mosque and clear the premises of weapons, ammunition, and fighters. Iraq's Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, for all his early tough talk, seems to recognize this would be disastrous. No matter what the U.S., UN, or Iraqi government officials say, the Arab “street” believes that the current Baghdad regime possesses only nominal sovereignty as it is a creation of and is maintained by infidel countries. Thus the blame for any attack on or any damage to the Imam Ali Mosque, regardless of which side or which nationality is responsible, will automatically fall on the U.S. The fact that some in the new Baghdad government and a significant bloc in the 1,100-member national conference convened in the capital have joined moderate Shi'ite clerics—including Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani from his London hospital—in calling for negotiations with al-Sadr, simply reinforces the constraints on military activity in Najaf.

U.S. standing in Iraq and the Islamic world is hostage to another reality over which Washington has even less control: the health and well-being of Muqtada al-Sadr himself.

Last April, the CPA was intent on arresting or killing al-Sadr. Defiantly, the cleric dressed in Islamic funeral white and spoke forcefully about his impending martyrdom. As the August uprising gathered momentum, al-Sadr again reverted to the language of and welcomed his prospective martyrdom in *jihad* even though U.S. commanders had completely dropped their April rhetoric and Prime Minister Allawi had tried to entice al-Sadr into the political process. As it is, al-Sadr was said to have sustained minor wounds while visiting militia strongpoints in Najaf.

A Failure of Reconstruction

It is facile to say that al-Sadr is an Iraqi problem. His current appeal and resulting power rests on his opposition to the general presence of foreign troops in Iraq and their particular presence in Iraq's Shi'ite holy cities. This popularity among the now well-armed, unemployed, poverty-stricken population in Baghdad's Sadr city poses the classic challenge to the

Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)



stability of any government susceptible to someone willing and able to manipulate the masses for his own ends. The dilemma is harder to resolve when the “legitimate” government cannot provide services, cannot provide security, and is considered to be a pawn of or otherwise is identified with an alien authority and culture.

In August 2004, Iraq remains, and is largely perceived to be an artificial creation of the Bush administration and the U.S. Congress and heavily reliant on 160,000 foreign troops. But like so many creations, its development and eventual maturation cannot be predicted, let alone controlled. The meeting of the national conference, postponed for two weeks and enlarged because of under-representation of ethnic and religious groups, has been roiled by events in Najaf and may have to be extended to get through its main task of choosing the 100 individuals for the advisory and constitutional drafting assembly that will oversee the interim government.

Among Washington’s justifications for the continued presence of foreign military forces is the need to stabilize Iraq. Yet the presence of foreign military forces is a major cause of the instability. The resolution lies not in Najaf but in Baghdad, in simultaneously disarming the militia elements and significantly improving basic economic, health, and educational levels (not just “opportunities”) among the inhabitants of Sadr city.

Only then will Najaf’s cemetery again become the Valley of Peace.

(Dan Smith is a military affairs analyst for Foreign Policy In Focus, online at www.fpif.org, a retired U.S. Army colonel and a senior fellow on Military Affairs at the Friends Committee on National Legislation.)

FOR MORE ANALYSIS FROM FOREIGN POLICY IN FOCUS:

Posing the Right Question

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) (July 30, 2004)
<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0407question.html>

From Iraq to Asia—the Butterfly Effect

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) (July 8, 2004)
<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0407butterfly.html>

Charging on in Iraq—But Which Way?

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) (June 7, 2004)
<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0406charging.html>

The Defense of “Command Influence”

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) (May 18, 2004)
<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0405comminf.html>

How Long a War?

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) (May 13, 2004)
<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0405byrdwar.html>

Of Rumor and Reality

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) (May 13, 2004)
<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0404rumorreality.html>

The Psychology of War: Iraq and Vietnam

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) (April 7, 2004)
<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0404iraq-vietnam.html>

Rendering an Account on Iraq

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) (March 18, 2004)
<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0403iraq-ann.html>

Why So Many Were So Wrong for So Long

By Col. Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) (February 5, 2004)
<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0402wrong.html>

Fighting By the Rules, Not Against Them

By Col. Dan Smith, (Ret.) (December 18, 2003)
<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2003/0312rules.html>

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2004. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

“A Think Tank Without Walls”

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to “making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner.” For more information, visit www.fpif.org.

Recommended citation:

Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.), “Into the Valley,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, August 18, 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0408valley.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.)

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

p. 2

www.fpif.org

A Think Tank Without Walls

