

When “Scores” Count

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) | October 6, 2004

For tens of thousands of fans, it was a happy September—the pro-football season resumed, diverting attention from the political campaign and natural disasters.

For thousands of others, however, September turned out to be a tragic escalation over preceding months in the multinational reach and catastrophic scale of exclusively human violence.

With 50,000 dead and 1.4 million displaced—many slowly dying—by the rampages of government-backed militias, refugees from the Darfur region of Sudan continue to flood humanitarian relief camps. One camp was overwhelmed by more than 30,000 new refugees in the first few days of September.

In Beslan, a town in Russia’s North Ossetia area, at least 339 out of more than 1,000 individuals held hostage in a school by Chechen rebels (“terrorists” in Russian-speak) died in a hail of bullets and explosive devices on September 3. Over half were school children.

On September 7, the toll of U.S. dead in Iraq passed 1,000, reaching 1,060 in early October. In Sadr City, Fallujah, and near Mosul, the media reported that at a minimum 150 Iraqis—“enemy fighters” according to the U.S. command but a mix of insurgents and “scores of civilians” according to Iraqi hospital workers—died in street fighting or during bomb runs by U.S. aircraft between September 11-14. Television cameras recorded additional Iraqi civilian deaths, including children, as daily U.S. air strikes against Fallujah continued into October.

U.S. ground commanders say they are committed to retaking all “no-go” areas (where U.S. and Iraqi security forces don’t presently enter) before the January 2005 elections. In early October, U.S. and Iraqi security forces spent fourteen hours battling their way into Samarra, the first of 16 towns Iraqi interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi classified as no-go areas. The U.S. commander claimed 127 insurgents were killed and another 128 captured in the operation; the administrator of Samarra General

Hospital said 70 bodies had arrived at his facility—including 23 children and 18 women.

During a press conference September 7, Pentagon civilian and uniformed chiefs attributed the noticeable increase in the number of hostile attacks (on average 87 per day in August and more than 75 in September) and U.S. fatalities to a desperate insurgent “backlash” against “progress” toward Iraqi democracy. Just as predictably, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s prescription for defeating extremists, wherever they are, required “the civilized world...stay on the offensive” whatever the “pain and the cost.”

What he didn’t address—and what Russia’s Vladimir Putin and his Chief of the General Staff also skipped over in their public statements on the Beslan debacle—was the simple question: whose pain and whose cost.

Iraq

Estimates of Iraqi dead—military, insurgent, noncombatant—since March 19, 2003, run from 11,000 to as high as 37,000. Accurate figures don’t exist; in December 2003 the Iraqi Health Ministry was told to cease efforts to compile death statistics. In April 2004 it resumed this effort. Incomplete as it was, the count showed 1,100 Iraqi dead for that one month and 2,956 between April and the end of August 2004. During the September 7 press event, Rumsfeld estimated that U.S. troops in August had killed as many as 2,500 Iraqi “former regime elements, criminals, terrorists.”

There are other costs—especially in trust, integrity, and lost opportunities to win at least tolerance for foreign forces. Spending on reconstruction has been meager, meaning that the jobs and steady income promised by the Coalition Provisional Authority never materialized. Of the \$18.4 billion Congress

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appropriated last year for reconstruction, less than one billion has been spent. On September 14, the administration informed Congress that it wanted to redirect \$1.8 billion from reconstruction to security—specifically to train an additional 45,000 police and 16,000 border control officers and 20 National Guard brigades (about 14,000 soldiers). In turn, the lack of basic health, education, electricity, and other services, which has continued under the interim Iraqi administration—will be exacerbated and will continue to fuel dissatisfaction and insurgent recruitment. Iraqi tolerance of foreign troops—especially U.S. forces—has never been high. Should Iraqi casualties remain high (per month at 10 or more times U.S. fatalities), there is a real possibility that after the January 2005 elections, Washington could find itself disinclined.

Acknowledging that a “tough, tough road” lies ahead, Rumsfeld says he cannot “imagine failing.” To do so would mean “turning over the world to the people who want to chop off people’s heads. And so we have no choice.”

Russia

After Beslan, which followed the downing of two commercial airliners and the suicide bombing of a Moscow subway stop—all of which Moscow blames on Chechen Islamic “terrorists”—the Russians asserted their own global pre-emption doctrine. During a marathon post-Beslan encounter with visiting western academicians, Putin rejected the West’s “double standard” in which Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida are regarded as international terrorists while Chechens and their allies are “separatists” who want nothing more than independence. The Kremlin sees no difference, citing the more than 1,000 dead in the last 22 months from attacks carried out by Chechens and their sympathizers.

For a leader who staked his political future on defeating Chechen “terrorists,” Putin’s complaint may mask a worrisome (for him) trend among ordinary Russians: more and more see the fight as too costly in lives and other resources. Such disaffection among voters may, in fact, have prompted the sweeping

changes in the electoral law proposed by Putin in mid-September, changes that would concentrate more power in the Russian president’s hands.

The Chechens, on the other hand, have very few material goods to lose as their homes and livelihoods have been flattened again by the two post-Soviet era wars—especially the second that started in 1996. (In 1944 Stalin forcibly removed the entire 1.2 million Chechens to Siberia and Kazakhstan; they returned to the Caucasus in 1965.) The continued violent resistance to Russian control by a determined segment of Chechens suggests they hold life without independence as a form of death—and the latter a fate from which they do not shrink. This is nationalism taken to a predictable extreme—what the U.S. found in Vietnam and is encountering in Iraq today.

The Domino Fear Theory

The extent of Putin’s dilemma is tellingly revealed in another comment made to the western academicians. In an almost Rumsfeldian syntax, Putin warned: “If these people come to power in Chechnya, they’ll come to power in your country.” The clear message is that only the total extermination of “these people” will remove the threat.

History, on the other hand, provides examples of exactly the transformation Putin decries. Most notable is the experience of Russia itself in 1917-18 when the post-czarist Kerensky regime was overthrown by the Bolsheviks under Vladimir Lenin. Civil war, the Red Terror, War Communism, and peasant revolts followed, as did the loss of national self-determination initially promised the 65 million non-Russians.

The British Palestine Mandate area is another prominent 20th century example of a violent nationalist movement whose leaders eventually became rulers. Haganah and Irgun may be less recognizable than the “Stern Gang,” but Yitzhak Rabin, Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir are familiar names. All participated in the anti-British insurgency and all eventually became Israeli prime minister.

Now Iraq looms as a possible 21st century site where—after the U.S. and coalition forces leave—those who participated in the insurgency may well emerge as leaders. What U.S. civilian and military leaders seem unable to fathom, despite the gross mismatch in the firepower the two sides can muster, is the force of the “-oligies” motivating the insurgents. Among the uniformed military, both in Washington and Moscow, this may result from a dearth of experience in the competitive setting of practical political democracy. (Such experience fosters sensitivity to ideas, interests, bargaining, and other nuances that foster collective decisions making, something hierarchical systems do not do well.)

More difficult to fathom is the failure of U.S. and Russian civilian leaders who have this competitive experience to grasp the underlying motivational strength of the insurgents. One is forced to fall back on the image of a mental cage that traps imagination whenever the term “terrorist” surfaces. The single-function, machine-like resort to the use of military force seems to drain blood from the brain; stifling investigative, creative, and remedial thinking that might—just might—discover less costly, less violent paths to resolving differences, disagreements, even hatreds.

There is a difference between staying the course when progress is possible and what Ralph Waldo Emerson called “a foolish consistency [that] is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.” The challenge before Russian and U.S. politicians (Emerson’s little statesmen) is to discern the distinction, just as a football coach discerns in the first few series of plays how his game plan is working and adjusts accordingly. In both Chechnya and Iraq, however, when it became obvious that the “quick strike” strategy (equivalent to football’s forward pass) had failed to connect with the people, there was no alternative strategy ready—and no half-time in which to pull back and survey all the players and all the perspectives. Until Moscow and Washington develop such an encompassing perspective, without which they cannot address the motivations underlying the two insurgencies, they will be condemned to an

exhausting, yard-by-yard, costly, painful, ultimately losing effort.

And that’s the tragedy. For unlike football, as the count of dead and wounded mount by the scores, everyone loses. Russia, Chechnya, the U.S., Iraq—the world—desperately need a new strategy so that these fruitless contests can end without more carnage.

The ball is in the air heading our way.

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