

General Abizaid, I'm Glad You Asked

By Col. Daniel Smith, U.S. Army (Ret.) | July 14, 2005

In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on June 23, General John Abizaid, head of Central Command, told the committee: "Maybe it's something we're not doing right in the field. But I can tell you that when my soldiers ... ask me the question whether or not they've got support from the American people or not, that worries me. And they're starting to do that. So I would say we better have a frank discussion with ourselves. I am not against the debate."

Combined with Abizaid's acknowledgement that the insurgent and resistance fighters in Iraq are as strong as they were six months ago, this statement is a remarkably candid warning to U.S. politicians that the present course of U.S. policy in Iraq is in trouble.

I would expect nothing less than absolute candor from Abizaid – and the public should accept nothing less from everyone in the Bush administration. Unfortunately, Abizaid and the public received no real discussion, no direction other than "stay the course" from the president on June 28. Thus – being equally candid – if there is to be meaningful dialogue, it will have to be with the public and in public. Such would be a rare but most apropos development. After all, the people are the ultimate authority and hold ultimate power in a democracy. And while I do not claim to represent the U.S. body politic, someone has to be willing to start the conversation with Abizaid.

So....

Battlefield Performance

Perhaps the first point is to reassure soldiers that overall, their battlefield performance reflects well their technical training and their adaptability to changes in the tactics of their opponents.

But while U.S. firepower can always carry the day, it is not carrying the Iraqi population or, increasingly, the U.S. population. What is painfully clear, more than 27 months after the U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq, is that there are not enough security forces to

hold Iraqi towns and villages and even some sections of Baghdad once an operation ends. This flies in the face of every modern counterinsurgency experience; it is documented in official reports and accounts of *sotto voce* comments by villagers talking to reporters. The people know from experience that without a steady presence of coalition or trained and equipped government security units, once an operation ends, it will not be long before insurgents resurface.

Moreover, the lack of sufficient numbers of security forces leads to heavy reliance on "search and destroy" operations which, in addition to the physical havoc caused, are hardly conducive to winning the hearts and minds of ordinary Iraqis. If it is true that the Iraqi population does not support the terror, then coalition forces and political leaders are not focused on the decisive "center of gravity" of their armed opposition when conducting these punitive sweeps. For the locals, the extent of cooperation with either side becomes a life and death decision – especially if government forces are seen to be as ruthless as the resistance.

When a population is beset by armed groups trying to intimidate and turn the people against their government, the government must ensure that any military response it undertakes scrupulously observes human rights and international agreements protecting noncombatants and combatants alike.

The next two points are related to the first.



More Troops?

In response to calls to send more U.S. troops to Iraq, the Pentagon and the White House fall back on the excuse that the field generals – you and General Casey – have not called for more troops. But what never is spelled out convincingly is the reason(s) for not asking for more when the intuitive reaction would be an increase in troop strength on the ground. You can say that the Iraqis are the ones who need to respond and field a larger security force – a process underway. You can say that more U.S. troops would simply provide more targets for the resistance. As valid as these points may be, and as real as are those Iraqis who do stand against the terror strikes, all of this is discounted when the U.S. public reads that Iraqi police, ill-equipped and outgunned by insurgents, leave their posts (or never get there) at the first indication of an attack.

What response is there to those who ask: “If Iraqis will not stay and fight for their country’s future, why should foreign forces fight and die?”

Then there is the suspicion that CENTCOM has been told that the personnel well is dry. That is to say, there are no more active, reserve, and National Guard units of the type needed (e.g., infantry, transportation, military police, civil affairs, aviation) that can be rotated into Iraq without subverting policies on intervals between combat tours. And while surges in troop strength will happen in anticipation of milestones (e.g., elections) or in reaction to events, changing the policy is not an option because, among other considerations, it would depress further the steep decline in new enlistments for the Army. (June’s achievement, after falling short four months in a row, may be an anomaly.) In this context, the active duty Army’s reorganization from 33 to 43 brigades appears more like simply rearranging the pawns on the chessboard than a real change.

The recruiting shortfalls have led to speculation about and calls for resuming the draft, either on its own or as part of a larger mandatory national service program. In this regard, the illegal activities of a few recruiters, the pressures on them, the large monetary bonuses – as much as \$70,000 – for joining the military, and the imposition of “stop-loss,” extended tours, and mobilization of thousands of soldiers in

the Individual Ready Reserve suggest that in Iraq, as in Vietnam, something important is being concealed from the public. Add in administration actions that amount to data-mining on the 16-25 year-old population for the purpose of increased targeted recruiting, and the public has more reason to suspect that the truth is being concealed – just as the very existence of the data-mining operation was not reported, as required by law, for more than three years.

Assaults on the Truth

In a phrase, truth once again has become a casualty in this war. Whether it is a fatality or “only” wounded depends, unfortunately for the military, on how candid the administration will be over the next half year.

You will recall that at the end of the Paris talks about U.S. disengagement from Vietnam, a U.S. colonel observed that the North Vietnamese had never won on the battlefield – to which a North Vietnamese officer replied that this was immaterial in that the U.S. was leaving, not the North Vietnamese. In Vietnam neither the various Saigon regimes nor U.S. troops ever won the psychological war. This failure set the stage for the collapse of the entire effort as the public rebelled against the whole enterprise.

The same possibility exists in Iraq, as evidenced by the Iraqi who lamented: “We have transformed from a dictatorship into something far worse. We have lost our country.” (Los Angeles Times, June 24, 2005) Living conditions are far worse today than before the invasion; billions of dollars have disappeared, regime-induced violence, targeted against regime opponents, has given way to massive, unpredictable violence which is much more stressful and is compounded by sometimes heavy-handed reaction by Iraqi authorities or coalition forces.

If Vietnam was a quagmire, Iraq is a black hole that is sucking lives and treasure and talent into its maw.

And as already noted, as in Vietnam, it is tearing at the public’s trust in the government and the veracity of administration officials. Richard Nixon had a secret plan to end the Vietnam War; many today believe George Bush has no plan other than to “stay the course” for as long as one terrorist remains alive and free. As far as the U.S. public ever knew, Nixon’s plan – if it existed at all – was to bomb North Vietnam back to the Stone Age (or some approxima-

tion thereof), if necessary, to force Hanoi to come to the negotiating table on U.S. terms. In Iraq, “staying the course” is nothing more than “Iraqization,” replacing coalition forces and coalition (especially U.S.) casualties with Iraqis.

Iraqis, having endured decades of oppression under Saddam Hussein’s military, now face a new fear: that the lessons being taught the new Iraqi army reflect not the psychology of defense of the state from external powers but the psychology of occupation. That is, the new army is absorbing the mindset of those doing its training – of an alien force in an alien land where the entire indigenous population is suspect and untrustworthy. The result is predictable: the “new” army is becoming alienated from the people it is supposed to protect, making it little better than Saddam’s elite units.

Another assault on truth is the “happy news” syndrome that manifests itself in congressional pronouncements and administration announcements. The daily press briefings in Saigon at 5:00 pm were so transparently a farce they were nicknamed the “five o’clock follies.” The nearest equivalents today are the Pentagon press briefings, but these are not held everyday. Nonetheless, Vietnam’s false assurance of a “light at the end of the tunnel” is matched by “we’ve turned the corner,” or “we’ve broken the back of the insurgency,” or the insurgents are “dead-enders about to reach the end of the line,” or the “insurgency is in its last throes.” All are serious misjudgments at best, intentional obfuscation at worst.

Yet, again, the worst case seems the operational one. Every reason propounded by those favoring the war has been confounded by careful investigation by the U.S.-led Iraq Survey Group, interrogations, or other means. Among the latter is a series of nine pre-March 19, 2003 British cabinet-level memos addressing London’s view of the Bush administration’s evolving policy to go to war with Saddam. By June 2002, the British were convinced that Bush would go to war. Significantly, they also noted that intelligence would be molded to fit policy.

Politically, it is true that the Iraqis have been in charge of running their country for a year (beginning January 28, 2004). But with foreign military forces still numbering 160,000, with the transitional government taking three months to organize itself and elect constitutional drafters, with the government and national assem-

bly having to work inside the highly defended “Green Zone” because physical security is so unpredictable, are the Iraqis really in charge of anything? Most observers would, I suspect, heavily qualify that assertion.

Given the above, General Abizaid’s response to the litany of concerns, misjudgments, missteps, misanalyses, exaggerations, and at least a few lies might well be similar to another part of his Senate testimony: “We that are fighting the war think it’s a war worth fighting ... but we can’t win the war ... without your support and without the support of our people.”

Undoubtedly, senior officers would agree, if for no other reason than to maintain troop morale. In principle, many others would agree; after all, who would oppose elections, freedom, liberty, and the other accoutrements of a market democracy?

Actually, there would be many, or many who would reject parts of this package or possibly wish to suspend certain features for a few years. For example, most Iraqis would reject attempts to separate Islam from the functioning of government. Islam is woven into the fabric of daily life in many countries, informing and directing the activities of believers. Without Islam, Arab culture atrophies – not news to Abizaid who is a scholar of all things Islamic and Arabian, but easily a revelation to key members in the U.S. political hierarchy.

In other words, other than to maintain unit spirit in a difficult situation, what is important is not what the U.S. commanders and soldiers on the ground think about the war. What the Iraqi people think, what they hold as “worth it,” ought to be the determining factor.

It is their country; the U.S. invaded and occupied it, has killed many thousands of Iraqis and injured many more thousands, all without showing any concrete intention of leaving (although showing quite a bit of concrete for permanent bases for U.S. forces).

Given sentiment in Iraq today, declaring a clear intention to withdraw all U.S. troops and bases from Iraq could well be the key to really ameliorating armed opposition and separating the nationalist-inspired Iraqi resistance from hard-core perpetrators of terror and in winning the support of Congress and the U.S. public for a policy under which foreign forces withdraw without foreign countries abandoning Iraq.

Iraq's Future

Iraq's ultimate future, like that of all nation-states, lies in the political realm, and insofar as its future poses political uncertainty, it must search for or devise a political path that can remove this uncertainty. But after nearly 25 years of continuous warfare, the Iraqi people expected to have seen much less war and more political progress as a result of regime change in Baghdad. This failure to meet a not unreasonable expectation may, in the end, be the catalyst that accelerates the departure of coalition forces, with the Iraqis finally resuming full sovereignty in their land.

Three months after Iraq's January 2005 parliamentary election, forbearance is thin. As one Iraqi observed: "We sacrificed our soul and went out to vote. What did we get? Simply nothing."

It's time to give them something.

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Recommended citation:

Col. Daniel Smith, U.S. Army (Ret.), "General Abizaid, I'm Glad You Asked," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, July 14, 2005).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/158>

Production Information:

Writer: Col. Dan Smith, U.S. Army (Ret)

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Rick Davis, IRC

p. 4

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