

Descending into the Quagmire

Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) | June 2003

Between May 1, when President Bush declared that major combat in Iraq was over, and June 26, 57 U.S. and eight UK military personnel have died in Iraq. That is more than one death every day. To the U.S. and UK toll must be added the sometimes tens or scores of Iraqis, both Saddamists—military, intelligence, fedayeen, non-Iraqi volunteers—and innocent civilians.

Having splashed the President's declaration over their electronic and newspaper front pages and magazine covers, the media are edging ever so gingerly toward serious questioning of what kind of "war" U.S. and UK troops (the "Authority") are fighting in Iraq. "Counterinsurgency," a 1960s buzzword, has already re-appeared in some reports. The dreaded "quagmire" has also been voiced. The Pentagon denies it is doing "body counts"—although the media always seems to know the number of guerrilla dead. Can "free fire zones," "five o'clock follies" (the daily official U.S. military briefings in Saigon), and "light at the end of the tunnel" be far off?

These phrases bring to mind Bernard Fall, author, chronicler, and journalist in the Vietnam War. Very early in that war—December 10, 1964—Fall delivered a lecture at the Naval War College on "The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency." Parts of his presentation seem as current today in the context of Iraq as they were in 1964 for Vietnam.

For example, Fall believed that the real objective of guerrilla (or small) war methods is to advance "an ideology or a political system." The U.S. government saw fighting as the primary challenge and responded by seeking a military solution. In so doing, it misjudged the depth and extent of political action by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong—the primacy of "political, ideological, and administrative" control—and thus the true nature of their "revolutionary warfare." Moreover, in failing to properly assess the political and ideological (nationalistic) forces at work in Vietnam, the Johnson and Nixon administrations

tended to mischaracterize (or ignore) the multitudinous economic and social cross-currents that were represented by those committed to the cause of Vietnam unification under Vietnamese leaders.

The result was a steady build-up of U.S. personnel and equipment and the expenditures of billions of dollars, none of which brought the U.S. any nearer to the tunnel's end—but all of which added to the casualties on both sides and exponentially increased the alienation of the civilian population. Even Buddhist monks protested, with some expressing their opposition to the repressive Saigon government and the actions of its U.S. ally through self-immolation. As Fall noted, "One can do almost anything with brute force except salvage an unpopular government."

History Repeating Itself

The Bush administration seems headed toward committing the same mistakes of its Vietnam-era predecessors—plus a number of its own. Washington expected that the dominate Shi'ite (62%) population, long subservient to the minority Sunnis (35%), would at least welcome its "liberation" by the Western coalition forces if not assist them in ousting Saddam and his cronies. Instead, the dominant reaction has been a growing disillusionment with and sustained protests about the continuing absence of basic services—water, electricity, telephone, garbage and sewage removal, basic policing, and physical security—for all classes of Shi'ites and Sunnis under the coalition occupation.

Prior to the U.S. attack in March, 2003 the Iraqi people were promised participation in a post-war



effort to build a functioning interim democratic governance structure. In April, two meetings of 43 and 250 Iraqi “leaders” selected by retired General Jay Garner, the Pentagon’s man-on-the-scene, were held “to advance the national dialogue among Iraqis regarding composition of an Iraqi interim authority.” No decisions were made, in part because of unhappiness with the selection process and dissension about the tribal and geographical representation (there are 2,500 tribes and sub-tribes in Iraq). One prominent returned exile, Ahmad Chalabi, said: “The composition at this time looks like Noah’s Ark, but that is fine at this stage.” (*Reuters*)

Within two weeks, the idea of an “interim Iraqi authority” was dead. The new top man-on-the-scene, L. Paul Bremer III, said that the security situation remained too unsettled and that additional “purging” of Saddam loyalists from the police, civil service, and political parties was needed. Bremer plans to appoint a council of 25-30 “advisers,” which he will control. This reversal almost immediately sparked calls for the U.S. to leave Iraq from the more militant, competing, fundamentalist Shi’ite factions—Ayatollah Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim’s Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, Moqtada al-Sadr’s adherents, and Abdul Karim al-Enzi’s Dawa sect. (Al-Enzi caught the mood exactly: “Democracy means choosing what people want, not what the West wants.”)

Then, in late June, a clear signal came that the U.S. was getting closer to falling into a Vietnam-like quagmire. Iraq’s Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who was at first quite tolerant and even supportive of the invading troops, wrote of “great unease” concerning the length of the U.S. occupation, the failure of the U.S. to grant Iraqis self-rule, and what he saw as the biggest threat to Iraq: “the obliteration of its cultural identity.” (*Washington Post*, June 23) As if to accentuate the Ayatollah’s remarks, within 48 hours six UK military police were dead and another eight UK troops were wounded in two attacks deep in Shi’ite dominated southern Iraq.

Distant Rhetoric

The rhetoric from Washington seems as distant from what is happening on the ground in Iraq today as it was during the Vietnam War. The President and his representatives point to the \$2.5 billion for Iraq’s reconstruction in the March supplemental, of which \$700 million has been committed. They trumpet the vaccination programs for Iraqi children and the expected troop augmentations of 20,000-30,000 from as many as 41 other countries to assist with security in Iraq—troops for whom, in many cases, the U.S. is footing the bill.

Even with this force augmentation, the U.S. military will continue to carry the load. There are still 146,000 U.S. military personnel in Iraq (plus 16,000 UK troops) and another 45,000 providing support from Kuwait. More than 210,000 National Guard and Reserves have been called up for either homeland defense, duty in the Balkans and the Sinai Desert, or the Iraq war itself, with many into their second year of continuous active duty. U.S. planners say a new Iraqi army of 40,000 will be ready in three years, a clear signal that administration assurances of being out of Iraq in two years simply will not happen. Some in Congress predict a 5- to 10-year presence.

U.S. forces will also continue to bear the brunt of the casualties. In the fighting up to and including Baghdad’s capture, 138 U.S. forces were killed; of the 57 who have died since May 1, 20 were killed by hostile fire (plus the UK dead noted above). Washington says the casualties are “militarily insignificant,” while field commanders note a seemingly steady stream of outsiders entering Iraq for the immediate purpose of killing U.S. soldiers and a longer-range goal of building pressure in the United States for the withdrawal of U.S. troops.

The demonstrations by disgruntled Iraqi civilians, civil servants, and cashiered military officers seeking back pay or pensions, combined with the plethora of firearms in Iraq, have contributed to Iraqi civilian casualties as U.S. troops react to the taunts (“America is the enemy of Allah”), gunfire, and general chaos in Iraq. In Baghdad’s first post-war public opinion poll, 73% said the U.S. had failed to provide adequate security in the city. (*London Times*, June 20) But even

as they deride the lack of results, Iraqis sense that, for now, they have no option; in the same poll, only 17% want the Western troops out immediately. That figure may start to increase if U.S. troops continue to engage in “security practices” that Iraqis deem inappropriate—e.g., male soldiers “patting down” Iraqi women while looking for weapons or arresting minor children. And a surge in “Yankee go home” sentiment could be expressed in increased attacks on U.S. forces by new groups in new, often Shi’ite areas.

Such opposition, armed only with AK-47 rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and light mortars may seem puny against tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and modern aircraft with precision-guided munitions, but that is what Vietnam-era administrations thought in the 1960s and early 1970s. Between June 9 and June 22, the Pentagon logged 131 “incidents” involving U.S. troops in Iraq, including 41 attacks on U.S. compounds, 26 attacks on sentry or observation posts, and 26 on convoys. (*New York Times*, June 22) The next 24-hour period saw an additional 25 incidents. Moreover, not all heavy weapons in Iraq are being collected by “the Authority.” The 70,000 Kurdish *pesh merga* will retain their tanks and artillery until their expected integration into the new Iraqi army. (Obviously, not all 70,000 can be amalgamated; those excluded could cause problems later.)

A question the Bush White House and the Pentagon still have to answer is just how many U.S. military men and women will be needed to pacify and provide security in Iraq. Before the war, on February 25, 2003, then-Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki told Congress that “several hundred thousand” troops would be needed in post-war Iraq. Both Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, sharply disagreed, with the latter stating that Shinseki’s estimate was “wildly off the mark.” But the question lingers for many in Congress, the U.S. public, and the armed forces.

How Many Troops and for How Long?

Traditional military doctrine estimates that a conventional army requires roughly a 10-to-1 size advantage if it is to defeat a well-equipped, well-executed, persistent insurgency. But where insurgents, while less

centrally organized, are still too powerful for standard police (or where standard police do not exist), responding to and measuring against armed insurgent strength may not be the best gauge. In 1995, James Quinlivan, writing in the Army War College’s quarterly, *Parameters*, suggested that force requirements should be based on the need for population control (to cut off support to the insurgents) and local security—that is, the need to “win hearts and minds” and therefore requires a force proportional to the population.

Quinlivan describes three historical force ratio levels. The first, one to four security personnel per 1,000 population, is essentially the ratio for ordinary policing. In a military setting, the U.S. Constabulary force in post-World War II Germany was staffed at 2.2 per thousand for “enforcing public order, controlling black market transactions, and related police functions.” The same ratio existed in the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (1992-1993), whose duties included “supervision of the cease-fire and voluntary disarmament of combatants, supervision of about 60,000 indigenous police to provide law and order, and administration of a free and fair election.” But the UN had little real presence outside the main urban areas.

The second force ratio is from four to ten security personnel per 1,000 population. India’s campaign against militants in Punjab, viewed as quite punitive by many, was implemented at a ratio of almost 6 per 1,000 population. At the high point of the 1965 U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic, whose purpose was preventing civil war and restoring “stability,” Army and Marine personnel operated at a ratio of 6.6 per 1,000 population.

Quinlivan’s third ratio level is above ten per 1,000 population. Military examples of this level are the Malayan Emergency of the 1950s when foreign and full-time indigenous security forces operated at a ratio of 20 per 1,000 population. The same ratio pertained to the combination of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and British troops in Northern Ireland for much of the period 1969-1994. Here, multiple small groups advocating separation from or continued union with Great Britain waged war on each other, and one side fought “occupying” security

forces with a goal of forcing them out—conditions that are unfolding in Iraq today.

Applying the average of 2.2 per 1,000 of level one to Iraq would require 52,800 individuals. But Iraq is not a defeated, broken, devastated country like Germany. Nor is it at peace or semi-peace, where the main task is maintaining public order. It is still a country at war, a country saturated with weapons, a country that is becoming more and more restless under its “liberator.”

Level two ratios of 6 and 6.6 yield 144,000 and 158,400, respectively. These are comparable strength totals to what the U.S. and its allies have in Iraq today. Yet these forces seem unable to isolate Iraqi and foreign militants who have come into Iraq to fight “the Authority” and to provide both the perception and reality of public safety. Perhaps even more important is the need to avoid any hint of punitive measures that inevitably would lead to a precipitous decline in general Iraqi tolerance of foreign forces.

At 10 per 1,000 population, the point of intersection between levels two and three, Quinlivan’s numbers skyrocket to 240,000. (Interestingly, just in Baghdad, where the population is roughly five million, there are 55,000 troops, producing a ratio of 11 per 1,000.) Matching the British experience in Malaysia and Northern Ireland at 20 per 1,000 dou-

bles this total to 480,000, which is the total authorized strength of the active U.S. Army. Clearly, any of these levels are impossible to sustain given the demands for and on people. Even level two ratios may be impossible, given that 5 of the Army’s 10 active divisions currently are engaged in Iraq.

In Iraq, as one phase of the “global war on terror,” the Bush administration chose war and occupation, and must now face the consequences of its choices. Having dislodged the previous regime by force, the U.S. increasingly is caught in the quagmire of depending on force to control the Iraqi people in the name of national and regional “peace.” But “peace through war” or the threat of war is a costly chimera, both for the “victor” and the loser. This truth was well understood by the 19th Century British statesman Edmund Burke, who noted that “War never leaves where it found a nation.”

What remains to be seen is what price will be exacted from the U.S. public—and in what condition Iraq will be in two, five, or 10 years.

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