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OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

A Victory, But Little Is Gained

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Hanover, N.H. — The textbook urban assault on Falluja reflected well on the dedication, training and equipment of the American military. Unfortunately, it has not brought the United States appreciably closer to achieving its political objectives in Iraq. In fact, history suggests that America has slim hopes of defeating the insurgency, and that our best chance for "success" depends on redefining what we would consider a victory.

American troops killed as many as 1,000 insurgents in Falluja and seized stocks of weapons and ammunition. But neither guns nor dedicated fighters are scarce in Iraq. The Pentagon estimates the number of hard-core enemy fighters to be roughly 10,000 (20,000 if active sympathizers and covert accomplices are included). And Iraq is awash in assault rifles, ammunition, rocket-propelled grenades and explosives - the lifeblood of insurgency. Most troubling, the guerrillas enjoy support from a sizable fraction of the population in the Sunni heartland.

While major operations like the attack on Falluja create the appearance of progress, over the last 60 years major powers have learned repeatedly that there is virtually no connection between seizing territory and defeating an insurgency. Insurgents do not seek victory on the battlefield.

The first rule of insurgency is to avoid large-scale battles with the government; guerrillas attack on their own timetable against civilians and isolated military units. Shrewd insurgents concede territory, melt away when enemy units approach in force, and then snipe, kidnap and bomb from the shadows. It was no surprise that the insurgents started isolated actions in Mosul, Samarra and other cities as soon as the attack on Falluja began.

If seizing cities was the key to success in a counterinsurgency, one might have expected a French victory after the battle of Algiers in 1957, an American victory after the defeat of North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces in Hue in 1968, and a Russian victory over the Chechens after the retaking of Grozny in 1995. Instead, the French and Americans lost, and the war in Chechnya drags on.

As T. E. Lawrence famously described it, fighting rebels is "like eating soup with a knife." Guerrillas do not depend on vulnerable lines of supply and communication, so counterinsurgents must target them directly, and even a few thousand armed guerrillas can create chaos in a country of tens of millions. Guerrillas camouflage themselves among the population; frequently the only way to distinguish an insurgent from a civilian is when he (or she) opens fire.

This is why the history of counterinsurgency warfare is a tale of failure. Since World War II, powerful armies have fought seven major counterinsurgency wars: France in Indochina from 1945 to 1954, the British in Malaya from 1948 to 1960, the French in Algeria in the 1950's, the United States in Vietnam, the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, Israel in the occupied territories and Russia in Chechnya. Of these seven, four were

outright failures, two grind on with little hope of success, and only one - the British effort in Malaya - was a clear success.

Many counterinsurgency theorists have tried to model operations on the British effort in Malaya, particularly the emphasis on winning hearts and minds of the local population through public improvements. They have not succeeded. Victory in Malaysia, it appears in retrospect, had less to do with British tactical innovations than with the weaknesses and isolation of the insurgents. The guerrillas were not ethnic Malays; they were recruited almost exclusively from an isolated group of Chinese refugees. The guerrillas never gained the support of a sizable share of the Malaysians. Nevertheless, it took the British 12 years to defeat them, and London ended up granting independence to the colony in the midst of the rebellion.

Paradoxically, it is only some weaker countries that have succeeded in suppressing rebellions, albeit by unleashing tremendous brutality against the civilian population. This is the approach that Guatemala adopted in the late 1970's and early 1980's to crush a growing communist insurgency in the countryside. Villages were wiped out in a campaign that killed about 200,000 people and made an equal number refugees. Hafez al-Assad of Syria succeeded with a similarly murderous approach when he crushed the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion in 1982, as did Saddam Hussein when he defeated the Shiite uprising in southern Iraq after the Persian Gulf war in 1991.

America, of course, is not willing to contemplate this level of violence in Iraq. Furthermore, even unrestrained brutality does not guarantee success. The Soviet Union killed more than a million people in Afghanistan, but never broke the will of the insurgents.

Some will insist that the American commanders have a more refined strategy for defeating the insurgency in Iraq. They plan to rely increasingly on Iraqi forces, trained by our military, who will have greater legitimacy with the population and whose knowledge of the language, culture and terrain will allow them to do a better job policing the country.

There is logic to this approach, but it is not new. Hundreds of thousands of local troops fought alongside the French in Algeria and Indochina. The Soviets set up a puppet government in Afghanistan. And, of course, the American policy of "Vietnamization" did not prevent the collapse of the South Vietnamese government after United States forces withdrew from the country. In all of these cases, the local forces were corrupt and inefficient and had dubious loyalty to the occupier. Do we really expect more from the weak government in Baghdad?

As long as the insurgency rages, it is unlikely that America will achieve the political goals it set for itself - a unified, democratic Iraq as the first building block in the broader democratization of the Middle East. In fact, we must now worry about the emergence of an Iraqi government dominated by anti-Western jihadist groups, or a perpetual civil war among the Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish communities that will kill millions and create fertile ground for terrorist groups like Al Qaeda to recruit, train and plan.

Given these horrific possibilities, perhaps we should set our goals more realistically, and focus on the achievable. Some have suggested that we let Iraq divide itself into independent Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish countries. This might avert a prolonged, violent struggle for control of the central government after the United States withdraws. Still, history - most recently that of Yugoslavia - suggests that partition is a risky, bloody business. Millions of people would be forced from their homes, and many would not leave without a fight. Furthermore, the mini-countries carved out of Iraq may be swallowed by their larger neighbors; the Shiite area would be very attractive to Iran.

A second distasteful alternative is to support the consolidation of power in the hands of a new secular strongman. This may bring peace of a sort, but it would be a bitter result for the Iraqi people after their brief

taste of freedom. Saddam Hussein was able to keep his politically, ethnically and religiously divided state together only through nearly constant repression; it seems unlikely that any successor could rule with a velvet glove.

These are depressing prospects. The fact that we must consider them underscores the caution that should be employed before deciding to go to war. Still, given where we stand today, if the United States can find a way to withdraw most of its troops over the next several years and leave behind an Iraq that is not in a civil war, that is not a haven for Al Qaeda and is not an immediate threat to its neighbors, history may well record it as an odds-defying success.

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