

Securing Iraq

By Bing West

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Summary:

To the Editor:

In "COIN of the Realm" (November/December 2007), Colin Kahl divided counterinsurgency (COIN) theory into two opposing schools of thought: "hearts and minds" and "coercion." Kahl cited me as an advocate of "coercion," quoting my observation about "a radical religion whose adherents are not susceptible to having their hearts and minds won over."

Kahl is right; al Qaeda must be destroyed, not converted. But having spent years on battlefields as a marine in Vietnam and now as a correspondent for *The Atlantic Monthly*, I am leery of academic categories. In the actual fight, it is hard to distinguish "hearts and minds" from unreconstructed "coercion." Counterinsurgency is not an either-or proposition. Kahl rightly praised the U.S. Army and Marine Corps' COIN manual for emphasizing moral behavior. But COIN is still war. It is a bromide to assert that an insurgency is 80 percent political. American soldiers do not win the hearts and minds of members of al Qaeda in Iraq; they kill them. Killing members of al Qaeda is the essential 20 percent.

In Anbar Province, the heart of the insurgency, the tribes have now rebelled against the al Qaeda extremists they welcomed a few years ago. The United States did not win those Sunni hearts; al Qaeda lost them. The tribes chose to align with our soldiers because, as one sheik told me, "Marines are the strongest tribe." The tribes could not destroy al Qaeda; our military could. To cement the gains, the U.S. military is also acting as an ombudsman for the Sunnis (the "hearts" part) and pressuring the Shiite government we created to provide the Sunnis with resources and assurances. The 80 percent political solution has followed -- and depended on -- the 20 percent battlefield success that was due to the daily grind and grit of our soldiers.

The COIN manual has set the proper strategic tone in Iraq. It has also provided foreign policy elites with an intellectual rationale for grudging acceptance of the fact that the U.S. military is prevailing in Iraq. Nonetheless, Kahl concludes that Iraq remains "a recipe for likely failure" and thus illustrates that even the best COIN theories cannot change some hearts and minds.

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