



Swift Invasion, Slow Victory

By Thomas Donnelly

Although U.S. forces removed Saddam Hussein's regime in record time, completing regime change in Baghdad and spreading democracy and stability in the greater Middle East will require an open-ended commitment and more political resolve than currently demonstrated within many circles in Washington.

In the crush of Iraq events—abuse at Abu Ghraib prison, tough fighting in Fallujah and Najaf, calls for Donald Rumsfeld's head on a pike—it is getting harder to see the forest for the trees.

Luckily, there is always Clausewitz to help us focus on the critical issues in war. And war, the Prussian sage reminds us, “does not consist of a single short blow.” That pretty much sums up what's going wrong and what's going right in Iraq.

The Bush administration's failure to heed these words is what got us in trouble in the first place. Fascination with the “shock and awe” of modern battle, the wizardry of stealth, precision, global strike, information networks, sensors, technology ad infinitum, blurred the true meaning of “regime change.” The three-week march to Baghdad, magnificent as it was, achieved regime removal but not regime change. The deeper purpose of the war—changing the nature of Iraqi politics—cannot be won by any blitzkrieg. This is even more true of the larger struggle to transform the greater Middle East.

Bipartisan Defeatism

We are beginning to grasp that true victory is going to take some time. But we should not forget that we are in the process of winning and can complete the win if, at last, we begin to do the

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things a long war demands. Political fashion in Washington holds that the war is unwinnable. It is still taboo to talk about cutting and running, but the phrase “cut and shuffle”—whatever that may mean—is gaining currency.

This is bipartisan conventional wisdom. Despair so grips the Democratic Party that even Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), a former Marine and long the voice of toughness among House Democrats, uses the term unwinnable when talking about the present course. Realist Republicans are grumbling about the president's hopeless, Wilsonian ideals. “In light of recent events,” *National Review* has concluded, “we should downplay expectations. If we leave Iraq in some sort of orderly condition, with some sort of legitimate non-dictatorial government and a roughly working economy, we will be doing very well.”

Vietnam analogies remain the opiate of the chattering classes. They put Senator Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) in full Marc Antony, Caesar's-wounds mode. “Forty years ago, the United States inundated the Vietnam jungles with American soldiers. What we received in turn was 58,000 caskets,” Byrd wrote in the *Washington Post*. “Iraq isn't Vietnam,” admits *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman. Except, he continues: “Gulf of Tonkin attack, meet nonexistent WMD and links to al Qaeda. ‘Hearts and minds,’ meet ‘welcome us as liberators.’ ‘Light at the end of the tunnel,’ meet ‘turned the corner.’ Vietnamization, meet the new Iraqi army.”

Long, Hard Slog to Stability

In sum, a year after declaring “mission accomplished” in major combat and after waging a fairly successful counterinsurgency campaign, we still do not understand the war—in Iraq, or Afghanistan, or on terror across the greater Middle East—as well as we should. Perhaps President Bush does, but he has been far too tolerant of his lieutenants, not just in the Pentagon but across the government, who do not share his goals. Both in terms of strategy and structures—especially military strategy and structure—we have yet to solve the puzzle.

To go forward, we must look back. Back to 1979, when the political order in the Middle East began to crumble. The fall of the shah and the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, and, most significantly, the seizure of power in Iraq by Saddam Hussein began the slow but inexorable collapse of traditional American policy. In the old way of doing business, the aim was to balance local powers to keep the oil flowing and, during the Cold War, to keep the Soviets out. Since the late 1970s, the search for stability has proved elusive and, as the legitimacy of regional regimes has weakened in the eyes of their own people, the balancing act has become more precarious. Since then, the presence of U.S. troops in the region has been steadily on the rise.

The policy of stability was dealt another great blow by the attacks of September 11, 2001, after which Americans began to comprehend the scope of the war on terrorism. A president other than George W. Bush might have been content to invade only Afghanistan, but it is not clear that a more limited campaign would have saved us from our present troubles. There is no guarantee that our enemies in the region would have been content had our presence been limited to Kabul. Indeed, given the centrality of Afghanistan to the jihadist wing of Islam, it is almost certain that we would be facing tougher resistance there had we not gone on to Iraq. To have focused on Afghanistan and/or the ever-more-intricate global manhunt for Osama bin Laden would have been to relinquish the strategic initiative. Again, given that our purpose is

to revolutionize the political status quo in the region, the price of “stability” is a longer, harder slog.

This is a truth that the U.S. policy and strategy-making community has been slow to grasp. The scandal is not, as Bob Woodward and others have “revealed,” that

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the administration immediately began planning for the invasion of Iraq after the war in Afghanistan. The Pentagon has been planning for a march to Baghdad since 1991. The real scandal was that the war plan was so at odds with the president’s goals. To be fair, no government bureaucracy has really embraced the idea of remaking the Middle East into an oasis of democracy. Rumsfeld’s Pentagon has served the president better than Colin Powell’s State Department or George Tenet’s CIA. But the mistakes of diplomacy and the mistakes of the intelligence community in estimating Saddam’s weapons programs pale in significance to the failure to understand the nature of the war. Moreover, these were mistakes that no military staff college student would make; they violated not only received American doctrine but also the most essential tenets of campaign planning.

From the start, the decision to limit the size and capabilities of the invasion force had unintended but predictable consequences. Almost from the start, the attempt to fight a “just in time” war meant that even small surprises—the resistance of the Saddam *fedayeen* and other irregulars, the terrible sandstorm of the last week in March—sapped the strength of a too-small force. In particular, stripping force units of their usual complements deprived the force of the logistical wherewithal to continue operations past Baghdad. To use a military term of art, the invasion force “culminated” shortly after the statues in Firdos Square came down. That means they weren’t ready to go on to other tasks.

To be sure, simply ridding the world of Saddam, Uday, Qusay, and the rest has been no small blessing. Mass murder directed from Baghdad is a thing of the past. Iraq’s neighbors no longer fear Saddam’s tank armies. And Americans are no longer risking their lives simply to contain the hegemonic ambitions of one of the region’s fascists.

It is easy to undervalue the invasion because it was so successful, so swift, and thus so humanely fought. There

were many good reasons to fight the war as rapidly as possible. So much of the story of Operation Iraqi Freedom is the story of dogs that did not bark: no wider war, no attacks on Israel, no environmental catastrophe, no humanitarian crisis, no siege of Baghdad. And—saints be praised—no weapons of mass destruction. That Saddam had, for whatever reason, decided to purge his stocks of chemical and nerve agents and put his nuclear program on hold is an unmitigated blessing. We feared these weapons for the best of reasons. He had them in the past. He used them in the past. He still wanted them and had the means to acquire them. It is good to be lucky, but it is no basis for strategy.

Peace through Broader Engagement

The need for speed, however, took precedence over the need for a combat campaign that would set the right conditions for reconstruction. Saddam's power—which he maintained for nearly thirty years, hardly a measure of fragility—drew not only on his own ruthlessness and the perversity of the Baath Party, but also on the traditional ties of tribe and clan, as well as the deepest fears of the Iraqi-Sunni community. We have yet to cure Iraqi society of its well-learned viciousness, let alone replace the ruthlessness and paranoia with anything better.

To make progress on this front, we need to have really conquered the so-called Sunni Triangle. But this goal was beyond the imagination of the war plan and beyond the abilities of the invasion force. We can only speculate what effect the fourth Infantry Division might have had if the Turks had permitted an attack through northern Iraq. There is no guarantee that there would not have been an insurgency of some sort. Muqtada al-Sadr and his Iranian sponsors would still be a problem, jihadists everywhere would still be outraged. But the Sunni heartland certainly did not feel the shock and awe of the invasion, and the problem persists.

For those disappointed that the invasion itself did not produce the anticipated quagmire, the sporadic but constant violence of the past year—especially in Fallujah—has offered significant consolation. But by any historical standard, the counterinsurgency campaign has been remarkably successful.

First of all, the rejectionists in Iraq have thus far had little luck in shaking American political resolve (beyond the nervous politicos inside the Beltway) to stay the course. It is not that we all share President Bush's clarity

on this issue, or that polls do not capture our uncertainty about what to do next. But the Democrats are showing themselves more anti-Bush than anti-war, which is perhaps a better measure of public opinion. John Kerry disagrees with Bush about many aspect of the war, and his plan of "internationalizing" the Iraq mission is pure fantasy, but his argument so far is merely that he knows better than Bush how to win. The Howard Dean moment, and the belief that a world without Saddam is no safer, seems to have passed.

Second, the insurgents have also failed to spark a civil war in Iraq—which, to remember prewar predictions, ought to have been easy to do. The fact remains that, for all our blunders, Iraqis have proved patient enough. Indeed, this has been the real story of the past several weeks, particularly of Najaf and Abu Ghraib. The day after the prison pictures were published, Grand Ayatollah Sistani and his fellow mainstream Shia clerics gave the U.S. military a green light to go after Muqtada al-Sadr. And Kurdish and Shia leaders in Iraq—in contrast to the Sunni regimes of the region—have had little to say about Abu Ghraib. They understand, however grimly, that we are their only hope. As long as our will holds, theirs will, too.

Against these two strategically vital successes, the insurgency can only claim to have driven the Spanish, the Hondurans, and perhaps the Thais out of Iraq. Even the United Nations has returned, if only as interlocutor in the form of Lakhdar Brahimi. Certainly Kofi Annan is anxious to change his institution to be relevant in post-9/11 politics.

President Bush has, ironically, been reluctant to seek that same sort of change. The U.S. military—its forces, its plans, its budgets, its weapons programs—remains essentially unchanged from the world of September 10. Nor has there been any fundamental change during the past year, as it has become clear to all that our commitment in Iraq must be open-ended.

Even though there is a pressing need for some more troops in Iraq, there is an even more urgent need to prepare the American people, their government, and their military for longer and larger missions. President Bush's basic strategic insight—that peace and stability in the Middle East depend on political reform and the spread of liberty—is profound. But victory in the so-called war on terrorism will be measured less by how rapidly we deploy or how swiftly we fight than how long and how broadly we remain engaged. Clever tactics are no substitute for resolute will.