

# Strategic Errors of Monumental Proportions: Lessons for Iraq from Vietnam, El Salvador and the Middle East

William E. Odom

**Strategic Errors of Monumental Proportions: Lessons for Iraq from Vietnam, El Salvador and the Middle East**

By Lt. Gen. William E. Odom (Ret.)

Text of testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 18 January 2007.

Good afternoon, Senator Biden, and members of the committee. It is a grave responsibility to testify before you today because the issue, the war in Iraq, is of such monumental importance.

You have asked me to address primarily the military aspects of the war. Although I shall comply, I must emphasize that it makes no sense to separate them from the political aspects. Military actions are merely the most extreme form of politics. If politics is the business of deciding "who gets what, when, how," as Boss Tweed of Tammany Hall in New York City once said, then the military aspects of war are the most extreme form of politics. The war in Iraq will answer that question there.

## Strategic Overview

The role that US military forces can play in that conflict is seriously limited by all the political decisions the US government has already taken. The most fundamental decision was setting as its larger strategic purpose the stabilization of the region by building a democracy in Iraq and encouraging its spread. This, of course, was to risk destabilizing the region by starting a war.

Military operations must be judged by whether and how they contribute to accomplishing war aims. No clear view is possible of where we are today and where we are headed without constant focus on war aims and how they affect US interests. The interaction of interests, war aims, and military operations defines the strategic context in which we find ourselves. We cannot have the slightest understanding of the likely consequences of proposed changes in our war policy without relating them to the strategic context. Here are the four major realities that define that context:

1. Confusion about war aims and US interests. The president stated three war aims clearly and repeatedly:

- \* the destruction of Iraqi WMD;
- \* the overthrow of Saddam Hussein; and
- \* the creation of a liberal democratic Iraq.

The first war aim is moot because Iraq had no WMD. The second was achieved by late Spring 2003. Today, people are waking up to what was obvious before the war -- the third aim has no real prospects of being achieved even in ten or twenty years, much less in the short time anticipated by the war planners. Implicit in that aim was the belief that a pro-American, post-Saddam regime could be established. This too, it should now be clear, is most unlikely. Finally, is it in the US interest to have launched a war in pursuit of any of these aims? And is it in the US interest to continue pursuing the third? Or is it time to redefine our aims? And, concomitantly, to redefine what constitutes victory?

2. The war has served primarily the interests of Iran and al-Qaeda, not American interests.

We cannot reverse this outcome by more use of military force in Iraq. To try to do so would require siding with Sunni leaders and the Ba'athist insurgents against pro-Iranian Shi'ite groups. The Ba'athist insurgents constitute the forces most strongly opposed to Iraqi

cooperation with Iran. At the same time, our democratization policy has installed Shi'ite majorities and pro-Iranian groups in power in Baghdad, especially in the ministries of interior and defense. Moreover, our counterinsurgency operations are, as unintended (but easily foreseeable) consequences, first, greater Shi'ite openness to Iranian influence and second, al-Qaeda's entry into Iraq and rooting itself in some elements of Iraqi society.

3. On the international level, the war has effectively paralyzed the United States militarily and strategically, denying it any prospect of revising its strategy toward an attainable goal.

As long as US forces remained engaged in Iraq, not only will the military costs go up, but also the incentives will decline for other states to cooperate with Washington to find a constructive outcome. This includes not only countries contiguous to Iraq but also Russia and key American allies in Europe. In their view, we deserve the pain we are suffering for our arrogance and unilateralism.

4. Overthrowing the Iraqi regime in 2003 insured that the country would fragment into at least three groups; Sunnis, Shi'ites, and Kurds. In other words, the invasion made it inevitable that a civil war would be required to create a new central government able to control all of Iraq. Yet a civil war does not insure it. No faction may win the

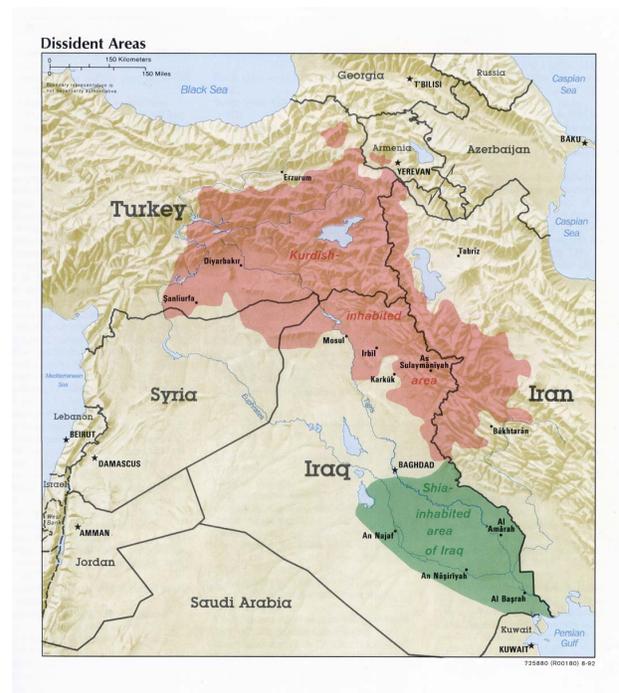
struggle. A lengthy stalemate, or a permanent breakup of the country is possible. The invasion also insured that outside countries and groups would become involved. Al-Qaeda and Iran are the most conspicuous participants so far, Turkey and Syria less so. If some of the wealthy oil-producing countries on the Arabian Peninsula are not already involved, they are most likely to support with resources any force in Iraq that opposes Iranian influence.

operations having the aim of trying to reverse this reality, insisting that we can now "do it right," need to be treated with the deepest of suspicion. That includes the proposal to sponsor the breakup by creating three successor states. To do so would be to preside over the massive ethnic cleansing operations required for the successor states to be reasonably stable. Ethnic cleansing is happening in spite of the US military in Iraq, but I see no political or moral advantage for the United States to become its advocate. We are already being blamed as its facilitator.



Middle East and Central Asia

Many critics argue that, had the invasion been done "right," such as sending in much larger forces for reestablishing security and government services, the war would have been a success. This argument is not convincing. Such actions might have delayed a civil war but could not have prevented it. Therefore, any military programs or



Let me now turn to key aspects of the president's revised approach to the war, as well as several other proposals.

In addition to the president, a number of people and groups have supported increased US force levels. As General Colin Powell has said, before

we consider sending additional US troops, we must examine what missions they will have. I would add that we ask precisely what those troops must do to reverse any of these four present realities created by the invasion. I cannot conceive of any achievable missions they could be given to cause a reversal.

Just for purposes of analysis, let us suppose we had unlimited numbers of US troops to deploy in Iraq. Would that change my assessment? In principle, if two or three million troops were deployed there with the latitude to annihilate all resistance without much attention to collateral civilian casualties and human rights, order might well be temporarily reestablished under a reign of US terror. The problem we would then face is that we would be opposed not only by 26 million Iraqis but also by millions of Arabs and Iranians surrounding Iraq, peoples angered by our treatment of Muslims and Arabs. These outsiders are already involved to some degree in the internal war in Iraq, and any increase of US forces is likely to be exceeded by additional outside support for insurgents.

I never cease to be amazed at our military commanders' apparent belief that the "order of battle" of the opposition forces they face are limited to Iraq. I say "apparent" because those commanders may be constrained by the administration's policies from correcting this mistaken view. Once the invasion began,

Muslims in general and Arabs in particular could be expected to take sides against the United States. In other words, we went to war not just against the Iraqi forces and insurgent groups but also against a large part of the Arab world, scores and scores of millions. Most Arab governments, of course, are neutral or somewhat supportive, but their publics in growing numbers are against us.

It is a strategic error of monumental proportions to view the war as confined to Iraq. Yet this is the implicit assumption on which the president's new strategy is based. We have turned it into two wars that vastly exceed the borders of Iraq. First, there is the war against the US occupation that draws both sympathy and material support from other Arab countries. Second, there is the Shi'ite-Sunni war, a sectarian conflict heretofore sublimated within the Arab world but that now has opened the door to Iranian influence in Iraq. In turn, it foreordains an expanding Iranian-Arab regional conflict.

Any military proposals today that do not account for both larger wars, as well as the Iranian threat to the Arab states on the Persian Gulf, must be judged wholly inadequate if not counterproductive. Let me now turn to some specific proposals, those advocated by independent voices and the Iraq Study Group as well as the administration.

## Specific Proposals

Standing up Iraqi security forces to replace US forces. Training the Iraqi military and police force has been proposed repeatedly as a way to bring stability to Iraq and allow US forces to withdraw. Recently, new variants, such as embedding US troops within Iraqi units, have been offered. The Iraq Study Group made much of this technique.

I know of no historical precedent to suggest that any of them will succeed. The problem is not the competency of Iraqi forces. It is political consolidation and gaining the troops' loyalties to the government and their commanders as opposed to their loyalties to sectarian leaders, clans, families, and relatives. For what political authority are Iraqi soldiers and police willing to risk their lives? To the American command? What if American forces depart? Won't they be called traitors for supporting the invaders and occupiers? Will they trust in a Shi'ite-dominated government and ministry of interior, which is engaged in assassinations of Sunnis? Sunni Arabs and Kurds would be foolish to do so, although financial desperation has driven many to risk it. What about to the leaders of independent militias? Here soldiers can find strong reasons for loyal service: to defend their fellow sectarians, families, and relatives. And that is why the government cannot disband them. It has insufficient loyal troops to do so.



U.S. officer hands flag to Iraqi commander during a 2006 handover ceremony in Mosul

As a military planner working on the pacification programs in 1970-71 in Vietnam, I had the chance to judge the results of training both regular South Vietnamese forces and so-called "regional" and "popular" forces. Some were technically proficient, but that did not ensure that they would always fight for the government in Saigon. Nor were they always loyal to their commanders. And they occasionally fought each other when bribed by Viet Cong agents to do so. The "popular forces" at the village level often failed to protect their villages. The reasons varied, but in several cases it was the result of how their salaries were funded. Local tax money was not the source of their pay; rather it was US-supplied funds. Thus these troops, as well as "regional forces," had little sense of obligation to protect villagers in their areas of responsibility. For anyone who doubts that the Vietnam case is instructive for understanding the Iraqi case, I recommend Ahmed S. Hashim's recent book, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq*. A fluent Arab linguist and a reserve US Army

colonel, who has served a year in Iraq and visited it several other times, Hashim offers a textured study that struck me again and again as a rerun of an old movie, especially where it concerned US training of Iraqi forces.



Supplying NLF forces in South Vietnam

US military assistance training in El Salvador is often cited as a successful case. In fact, this effort amounted to letting the old elites, who used death squads to impose order, come back to power in different guises. And death squads are again active there. The real cause of the defeat of the Salvadoran insurgency was Gorbachev's decision to cut off supplies to it, as he promised President George H. Bush at the Malta summit meeting. Thus denied their resource base, and having failed to create a self-supporting tax regime in the countryside as the Viet Cong did in Vietnam, they could not survive for long. Does the administration's new plan for Iraq promise to eliminate all outside support to the warring factions? Is it even remotely possible? Hardly.

The oft-cited British success in Malaysia is only superficially relevant to the Iraq case. British officials actually ruled the country. Thus they had decades of firsthand knowledge of the local politics. They made such a mess of it, however, that an insurgency emerged in opposition. A new military commander and a cleanup of the colonial administration provided political consolidation and the isolation of the communist insurgents, mostly members of an ethnic minority group. This pattern would be impossible to duplicate in Iraq.

An infusion of new funds for reconstruction. A shortage of funds has not been the cause of failed reconstruction efforts in Iraq. Administrative capacity to use funds effectively was and remains the primary obstacle. Even support programs carried out by American contractors for US forces have yielded mixed results. Insurgent attacks on the projects have provoked transfers of construction funds to security measures, which have also failed.

A weak or nonexistent government administrative capacity allows most of the money to be squandered. Putting another billion or so dollars into public works in Iraq today – before a government is in place with an effective administrative capacity to penetrate to the neighborhood and village level – is like trying to build a roof on a house before its walls have been erected. Moreover, a large part of that money will

find its way into the hands of insurgents and sectarian militias. That is exactly what happened in Vietnam, and it has been happening in Iraq.

New and innovative counterinsurgency tactics. The cottage industry of counterinsurgency tactics is old and deceptive. When the US military has been periodically tasked to reinvent them – the last great surge in that industry was at the JFK School in Fort Bragg in the 1960's – it has no choice but to pretend that counterinsurgency tactics can succeed where no political consolidation in the government has yet been achieved. New counterinsurgency tactics cannot save Iraq today because they are designed without account for the essence of any "internal war," whether an insurgency or a civil war.



US counterinsurgency operation in South Vietnam

Such wars are about "who will rule," and who will rule depends on "who can tax" and build an effective state apparatus down to the village

level.

The taxation issue is not even on the agenda of US programs for Iraq. Nor was it a central focus in Vietnam, El Salvador, the Philippines, and most other cases of US-backed governments embroiled in internal wars. Where US funding has been amply provided to those governments, the recipient regime has treated those monies as its tax base while failing to create an indigenous tax base. In my own study of three counterinsurgency cases, and from my experience in Vietnam, I discovered that the regimes that received the least US direct fiscal support had the most success against the insurgents. Providing funding and forces to give an embattled regime more "time" to gain adequate strength is like asking a drunk to drink more whiskey in order to sober up.

Saddam's regime lived mostly on revenues from oil exports. Thus it never had to create an effective apparatus to collect direct taxes. Were US forces and counterinsurgency efforts to succeed in imposing order for a time, the issue of who will control the oil in Iraq would become the focus of conflict for competing factions. The time would not be spent creating the administrative capacity to keep order and to collect sufficient taxes to administer the country. At best, the war over who will eventually rule country would only be postponed.

This is the crux of the dilemma facing all such internal wars. I make this assertion not only based on my own study, but also in light of considerable literature that demonstrates that the single best index of the strength of any state is its ability to collect direct taxes, not export-import tax or indirect taxes. The latter two are relatively easy to collect by comparison, requiring much weaker state institutions.

The Iraq Study Group. The report of this group should not be taken as offering a new or promising strategy for dealing with Iraq. Its virtue lies in its candid assessment of the realities in Iraq. Its great service has been to undercut the misleading assessments, claims, and judgment by the administration. It allows the several skeptical Republican members of the Congress to speak out more candidly on the war, and it makes it less easy for those Democrats who were heretofore supporters of the administration's war to refuse to reconsider.

If one reads the ISG report in light of the four points in the strategic overview above, one sees the key weakness of its proposals. It does not concede that the war, as it was conceived and continues to be fought, is not "winnable." It rejects the rapid withdrawal of US forces as unacceptable. No doubt a withdrawal will leave a terrible aftermath in Iraq, but we cannot avoid that. We can only make it worse by waiting until we are forced to withdraw. In the meantime, we

prevent ourselves from escaping the paralysis imposed on us by the war, unable to redefine our war aims, which have served Iranian and al-Qaeda interests instead of our own.

I do not criticize the report for this failure. As constructed, the group could not advance a fundamental revision of our strategy. Its Republican and Democrat members could not be said to represent all members of their own parties. Thus the most it could do was to make it politically easier for the administration to begin a fundamental revision of its strategy instead of offering a list of tactical changes for the same old war aim of creating a liberal democracy with a pro-American orientation in Iraq.

### **What Would a Revised Strategy Look Like?**

How can the United States recover from this strategic blunder?

It cannot as long as fails to revise its war aims. Wise leaders in war have many times admitted that their war aims are misguided and then revised them to deal with realities beyond their control. Such leaders make tactical withdrawals, regroup, and revise their aims, and design new strategies to pursue them. Those who cannot make such adjustments eventually face defeat.

What war aim today is genuinely in the US interest and offers realistic prospects of success?

And not just in Iraq but in the larger region?

Since the 1950's, the US aim in this region has been "regional stability" above all others. The strategy for achieving this aim of every administration until the present one has been maintaining a regional balance of power among three regional forces – Arabs, Israelis, and Iranians. The Arab-Persian conflict is older than the Arab-Israeli conflict. The United States kept a diplomatic foothold in all three camps until the fall of the shah's regime in Iran. Losing its footing in Tehran, it began under President Carter's leadership to compensate by building what he called the Persian Gulf Security Framework. The US Central Command with enhanced military power was born as one of the main means for this purpose, but the long-term goal was a rapprochement. Until that time, the military costs for maintaining the regional power balance would be much higher.

The Reagan Administration, although it condemned Carter's Persian Gulf Security Framework, the so-called "Carter Doctrine," continued Carter's policies, even to the point of supporting Iraq when Iran was close to overrunning it. Some of its efforts to improve relations with Iran were feckless and counterproductive, but it maintained the proper strategic aim – regional stability.

The Bush Administration has broken with this

strategy by invading Iraq and also by threatening the existence of the regime in Iran. It presumed that establishing a liberal democracy in Iraq would lead to regional stability. In fact, the policy of spreading democracy by force of arms has become the main source of regional instability.

This not only postponed any near-term chance of better relations with Iran, but also has moved the United States closer to losing its footing in the Arab camp as well. That, of course, increases greatly the threats to Israel's security, the very thing it was supposed to improve, not to mention that it makes the military costs rise dramatically, exceeding what we can prudently bear, especially without the support of our European allies and others.

Several critics of the administration show an appreciation of the requirement to regain our allies and others' support, but they do not recognize that withdrawal of US forces from Iraq is the sine qua non for achieving their cooperation. It will be forthcoming once that withdrawal begins and looks irreversible. They will then realize that they can no longer sit on the sidelines. The aftermath will be worse for them than for the United States, and they know that without US participation and leadership, they alone cannot restore regional stability. Until we understand this critical point, we cannot design a strategy that can achieve what we can legitimately call a victory.

Any new strategy that does realistically promise to achieve regional stability at a cost we can prudently bear, and does not regain the confidence and support of our allies, is doomed to failure. To date, I have seen no awareness that any political leader in this country has gone beyond tactical proposals to offer a different strategic approach to limiting the damage in a war that is turning out to be the greatest strategic disaster in our history.

*Posted at Japan Focus on January 26, 2007.*