

Feeding the Guerillas

Combating Iraq's militias means declaring war on the communities they govern.

By Martin Sieff

THINK 20,000 more American troops in Baghdad will make Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and the other Iraqi militias roll over and say uncle? Think again.

The Bush administration's policymaking in Iraq remains where it has always been—at least three years behind what is actually happening on the ground. Gen. Dave Petraeus is being sent out as the new U.S. ground forces commander. Middle and junior level U.S. Army and Marine officers are eagerly snapping up copies of the just republished paperback version of Sir Alistair Horne's *A Savage War of Peace*, his classic account of the Algerian War of Independence against France. (Let us here pause to note that Paul Wolfowitz, in testimony before a congressional committee, referred to it as a war against Spanish colonial occupation. He couldn't even get that right.) None of this will make the slightest bit of difference.

U.S. policymakers are finally paying lip service to the idea that the Sunni insurgents in Iraq are indeed waging a full-scale guerrilla war against American forces. The trouble is that this conception of the Iraq conflict has been obsolete ever since Sunni insurgents bombed the al-Askariya Mosque in Samara on Feb. 22, 2006. Shi'ite militias across Iraq, and especially in Baghdad, responded with a savage wave of random killings in reprisal. That was the key moment when the Iraq conflict metastasized into a sectarian civil war between the entire Sunni and Shi'ite communities.

It is not even a "clean" or simple civil war, for it involves conflicts between rival warring militias within each com-

munity. Yet none of the 1,500 overpaid civilian analysts in the U.S. Department of Defense have yet awakened to this truth: paramilitary militias in both communities provide the only effective government in Iraq. The Rube Goldberg constitutional machinery that the Bush administration so lovingly labored over to produce free and fair elections, an independent parliament, and then a Shi'ite-dominated government, has failed to provide reliable basic services or security. The new Iraqi army and police are thoroughly penetrated by the Shi'ite militias, and every Iraqi knows it. The more U.S. forces come into conflict with the Shi'ite militias in Baghdad, the more they run the risk that the guns they provide to the new Iraqi army and police will be turned on them, at first in increasingly common "random incidents" and eventually in a general uprising.

The British had to deal with three general and very popular uprisings of the Iraqi army—in 1936, 1941, and 1958. And they had spent decades ensuring its loyalty and dependability. This is what makes the "three-to-one" formula—putting three Iraqi army battalions into Baghdad for every single American battalion backstopping them—that Rep. Duncan Hunter, the former Republican chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, continues to push on the Bush administration so unconnected to reality. The Iraqi army is fated to eventually turn its guns on the troops that empowered it.

But suppose this grim scenario does not come to pass. Surely the overwhelming firepower of the five existing American combat brigades in Baghdad and the

"surge" so touted by President Bush, combined with an avid reading by U.S. combat officers of Horne's classic text on Algeria will bring Baghdad to heel?

Alas no. First, champions of the Algiers-Baghdad analogy neglect to note that the entire population of Algiers in 1956 was only half a million. It doubled to a million by 1960. The Casbah that was the heart of the FLN guerrilla forces before they were tactically smashed in the 1958 Battle of Algiers was less than 100,000. But the total population of Baghdad today is 7 million with 2 million of those living in the Shi'ite-dominated working-class district of Sadr City alone. And the U.S. Armed Forces, thanks to the political pusillanimity of President Bush and the romantic fantasies of former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his neocon "experts" that they could wage sci-fi super-war on the manpower cheap does not have the half million conscript soldiers that the French Fourth Republic, determined to hold on to Algeria, flooded into that unhappy country. Adding an extra 20,000 troops to make the difference in pacifying a city of 7 million is a drop in the ocean—or, perhaps more aptly, a spoonful of sand in the Arabian Desert.

Neither the U.S. Armed Forces nor the ramshackle Iraqi parliamentary-democratic system that American authorities have imposed on Iraq have brought peace, prosperity, security, or basic daily services to the Iraqi capital. For these, the people of Baghdad, especially the ever-growing Shi'ite majority, have come to rely on their neighborhood militias, which have become the

real government of the Iraqi capital. “Beirut Rules” or “Belfast Rules” now operate in the city of Baghdad.

In Belfast from 1969 through 1994 and in Beirut from 1975 through 1991, the professional armies of major states never made the mistake of thinking they could totally annihilate the guerrilla/paramilitary forces operating in the country.

Belfast had always been a British city, so the British army was never an army of military occupation. The guerrilla insurgency of the Irish Republican Army came only from a small minority of the Catholic community of Northern Ireland, which itself was only one-third of the total population. The British army managed to tame the IRA only by waging relatively limited military operations against it and putting its main emphasis on intelligence and diplomatic/political dialogue with the political wing of Sinn Féin.

The Syrian Army in Beirut was far more of an outside, foreign presence than the British army in Northern Ireland ever was. Yet for all their famed ruthlessness, after their initial entry into Lebanon in the mid-1970s, the Syrians never made the mistake of trying to wage a direct war of annihilation against any of the most powerful sectarian militias.

The reason for this was that in both cases the militia forces were deeply rooted in their own local community strongholds and were seen by a significant plurality—and often a majority—of their inhabitants as the community’s defenders. War against them was therefore seen as war against the entire community. The more force that was used by outsiders against militia forces and the more civilian casualties incurred, the more the remaining civilians, especially the families and friends of the dead and injured, would be motivated to rally to the militias’ cause.

That is the nightmare scenario that the U.S. Armed Forces could face if they

are forced to fight a campaign of annihilation or repression against the dominant Shi’ite militias that increasingly control the city of Baghdad.

The idea is for the American military to act in a supportive role in partnership with the Iraqi police and army, which would be operating on behalf of the democratically elected Iraqi government. But the reality would be far different. The Iraqi armed forces and police remain highly unreliable. Lt. Gen. Martin Dempsey, the commander of the U.S. military’s effort to train Iraqi forces, publicly admitted on Dec. 18 that as many as 25 percent of the senior commanders of the Iraqi police had significant ties to the Shi’ite militias.

The more U.S. firepower and military force used against the militias, and the more civilian casualties inflicted as a by-product of military operations, the more the Shi’ite population of Baghdad would become bitterly opposed to America’s presence. As the conflict escalated, U.S. forces would become embattled and besieged. The Iraqi government—a government in little more than name—at best would try to help ineffectually and at worst could easily become a conduit for intelligence and sabotage on behalf of the Shi’ite militias.

The U.S. Army historically has had little experience with the complexities, viciousness, and enormous casualties of full-scale street-fighting in urban environments. Horne’s great book is no guide to that kind of experience nor does it pretend to be. Horrific as the Algerian War of Independence and its Battle for Algiers were, they were not remotely on that scale.

That is because the tactical doctrine of street fighting in cities is one of the most difficult to master in modern war, and it requires far more expertise than the overwhelming firepower that the U.S. Marines and other combat forces poured into Fallujah and other Iraqi

towns and Baghdadi districts whenever they felt they had to take them. The German Sixth Army and Fourth Panzer Army at Stalingrad were 300,000 strong, more than double the current total U.S. troop strength for the whole of Iraq. They outnumbered the combat troops of Red Army Gen. Vassili Chuikov’s 62nd Army by factors of four or five to one. And their use of firepower was unrestrained, to put it mildly: an estimated half a million Russian civilians died in the great siege. Yet it was the Wehrmacht forces that were outfought, decimated, and eventually annihilated. For the previously invincible Wehrmacht had no operational doctrine for street fighting in large cities, and Chuikov was the world’s leading expert on the subject. He had played a major role in successfully defending Madrid for the forces of the Spanish Republic in 1936.

The U.S. Army today has no effective systematic doctrine for the capture, pacification, and holding of entire cities either. Rumsfeld, his Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz and their Undersecretary for Policy Douglas Feith did not think the subject was important enough to warrant their attention during their fateful stewardship of the Armed Forces of the United States.

As the Battle of Baghdad escalates in the coming months, the book *American combat officers will find most timely to read for useful and accurate historical analogies will no longer be *Savage War of Peace* but another recent classic of military history by another British historian of renown: *Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege: 1942-43* by Anthony Beevor.* ■

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Iraq and a Hard Place

Congressional Democrats have the power to defund the war, but they don't want to risk ending it before 2008.

By W. James Antle III

WHEN THE CLINTONS first came to Washington, the Democratic Party's unofficial theme song was Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop (Thinking About Tomorrow)." Today the Rolling Stones' "You Can't Always Get What You Want" might be a better choice. That's the message coming through loud and clear to millions of voters who cast Democratic ballots last November with hopes of ending the Iraq War.

Democrats now control both houses of Congress, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's "100 hours" legislative marathon has come to a close. President Bush is nevertheless sending an additional 21,500 troops to Iraq, and talk is turning to Tehran, almost as if the new majority did not exist. Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid promptly sent Bush a letter announcing their opposition to the surge and calling instead for redeployment. A non-binding resolution opposing the troop increase is wending its way through the Senate as we go to press.

Can't the Democrats do more than send the president a message? As it happens, the Constitution not only gives Congress the authority to declare war but also the "power of the purse"—the ability to raise or deny funds for any military operation. Congressman Dennis Kucinich, an Ohio Democrat and long-shot presidential candidate, has been challenging his colleagues to use this power. "It is simply not credible to maintain that one opposes the war, yet continues to fund it," he said recently. "If

you oppose the war, then don't vote to fund it."

But virtually nobody expects that the Democrats will actually defund the war, which is precisely why many hawks are challenging them to do so. *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol described Kucinich's statement as "logical," listing him as an "honorable exception" to the "boneless wonders" who dominate Congress. The House Republican leadership is backing a resolution that would force Democrats to take a stand on funding for both Afghanistan and Iraq. Sen. John Cornyn, a Texas Republican who backs the surge argued, "If my Democrat colleagues are truly opposed to the mission in Iraq, then as the new majority they should schedule a serious debate and a vote on cutting off funding for our troops."

The last three words of Cornyn's volley—"for our troops"—are exactly what gives some Democrats pause. Both Reid and Pelosi have been careful to emphasize that they won't curtail funding to troops in the field. The more forces the Pentagon has in place, the more reluctant Congress will be to do anything that can be seen as detracting from their mission. Lawrence Korb of the Center for American Progress warned the liberal *New Standard*, "By the time you vote on the money bill, a lot of the troops will already be there."

Korb's prediction may already be coming to pass. National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley told ABC's

"This Week" that the administration believes it already had enough money for extra troops in the fiscal year 2007 budget. "I fully understand [Congress] could try to stop me from doing it," Bush told CBS's "60 Minutes," "But I made my decision, and we're going forward."

Such bluster hasn't kept a few powerful Democrats from introducing bills aimed at curbing the troop escalation. Sen. Ted Kennedy filed legislation prohibiting Bush from spending money for additional troops "unless and until Congress approves the president's plan," an approach similar to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1974, which essentially ended American involvement in Vietnam, and the Boland Amendment, which barred President Reagan from continuing aid to the Contras. But the Kennedy bill leaves intact funding for troops that have already been sent to Iraq.

Congressman John Murtha, chairman of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, has proposed another approach. He wants to try imposing strict military readiness standards on emergency appropriations. This is intended to have the effect of making the escalation more difficult for the Bush administration while putting the Democrats on record in support of a stronger military in general. Yet this would not necessarily pull the plug on the president's plan.

Senate Democrats entertaining presidential ambitions have been playing a transparent game of Iraq one-upman-