

What is to be done in Iraq?

By William R. Polk

While C.I.A. director George J. Tenet struggles in Washington to prove that his agency did not exaggerate the danger Iraq posed to the United States, American forces continue to come under attack on the ground throughout Iraq. Misunderstanding is evident in both situations. Not comprehending similar courses of events in Vietnam cost Americans thousands of lives and billions of dollars. So it is worth attempting to get as precise an interpretation of the issues as is now possible.

Take intelligence first: In his speech at Georgetown University on February 5, Mr. Tenet was candid on what he thought of as the central issue: that the analysis offered by his agency was "generally on target" and its advice to the President was hedged with warnings that all intelligence can be only an "estimate." He also covered over Vice President Dick Cheney's widely reported and unprecedented visits to "discuss" their appreciation with C.I.A. analysts. C.I.A. officers regarded these visits as attempts to get them to say what the administration wanted to hear rather than what their analysis supported. This must have been personally embarrassing as well as professionally disturbing for Mr. Tenet, but in his talk, he more or less denied it.

In that talk, Mr. Tenet carefully avoided the central problem. The problem is not that the CIA was wrong but that it was replaced.

What replaced the CIA was a new office created in the Pentagon to provide a more "supportive" underpinning for the already agreed direction of policy. This "Office of Special Plans" was created under the aegis of Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Under Secretary Douglas Feith. Reporting to Stephen Cambone, as under-secretary of defense for intelligence and the man who took the lead in the campaign to justify the attack on Iraq, was one of the most important but least known of the small band of "Neoconservatives," Abram Shulsky.

Mr. Shulsky's organization aimed essentially to supplant the entire American intelligence system. Although never admitted, its task, effectively, was to prove the charge, aggressively pushed by Vice President Cheney, that Saddam Hussein, in conjunction with his ally Usama bin Ladin, was poised to attack the United States with an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. It is that alternative intelligence analysis to which those who made the decisions listened. And it was that alternative which Tenet carefully avoided discussing.

Meanwhile, on the ground in Iraq, there is a more pervasive failure of intelligence analysis which may, in the long run, prove even more costly to Americans. Put simply, it is what is actually happening there. The assumption has been that only a small group of "die-hard Baathists" oppose the Americans and that once they are eliminated by "hunter-killer" squads "security" will be established.

Looking back at America's most grievous intelligence failure, Vietnam, we can see an analogy. Bluntly put, we thought we could shoot or bomb them into doing what we wanted. We saw what we wanted to see and never managed to ask the fundamental questions about what the people on the other side wanted, how they functioned and how we fit into their world.

During that period, I was a member of the Policy Planning Council. To my dismay, I found that while we had gathered more information on that little country than any government had ever gathered on any nation, we lacked any criteria for separating the merely interesting from the significant. So, being challenged to address the graduating class of the National War College, I read everything I could find on guerrilla warfare as it has occurred all over the world and constructed from those experiences an analytical "model."

In essence, what I found was that guerrilla warfare is composed of three elements. First, the guerrillas have to establish their credentials, to win legitimacy, because they must demand sacrifices from those they would lead. They usually accomplish this by casting themselves as nationalists who oppose foreign imperialists -- Yugoslavs against the Germans, Greeks against the Germans and Italians, Irish against the British, Algerians against the French, Zionists against the British, Chinese against the Japanese, Vietnamese first against the French and then against the Americans and so on.

Only after they have established their legitimacy can guerrilla movements make the second step, to supplant the administration of those they would overthrow. In Vietnam, during the 1950s, as police reports I dug up showed, the Vietminh eliminated the French-installed administration everywhere outside the main cities and replaced it with their own. In Greece, Yugoslavia and elsewhere guerrillas did the same. Even when guerrillas are too weak to supply services, as they were in Northern Ireland, they assert their right to demand contributions ("taxes") and protection (police power and justice) so they establish a claim on administration.

By the time they have established their nationalist credentials and assumed at least some attributes of government, the guerrillas have won, by my estimate, about 95% of the campaign. As the American statesman John Adams wrote to Thomas

Jefferson about the American revolution, our guerrilla war against the British, the *real* revolution occurred long before the actual fighting which "was no part of the revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it." Military force is the short end of the stick.

Force is important, admittedly, but usually not in the way those who oppose the guerrillas believe. Foreigners regard the use of force as the means to create "security." But those guerrillas who have won their wars are the ones who have learned how to use the power of their enemies like jujitsu against them. They goad the foreigners into actions that are painful or frightening to the natives and so further undermine the foreigners' claim to legitimacy. In Vietnam, for example, Vietminh cadres would fire at American aircraft to provoke them into bombing villages. Then they would return to ask the frightened or wounded villagers rhetorically, "are those your friends who destroyed your houses and killed your relatives?"

Models are never exact; there are always exceptions. So the model I constructed for Vietnam cannot pretend to be more than suggestive. But both the similarities and the differences are instructive.

Take first the issue of legitimacy. So far, at least, Iraqis appear deeply divided so there is nothing quite like the single nationalism exhibited in many guerrilla wars. But we would find in most of them, in their early stages, nationalism was divided and weak. Nor is there such a unified leadership as in Vietnam; but in Yugoslavia, Greece and Algeria unified leadership came only at the end of the struggle. All had a major objective - to get the foreigners out. And despite nuances, this is clearly the objective of at least the Sunni Arabs and Shi'a Arabs - who make up about 75% of the population. The Kurds are inhibited by their fear of a likely Turkish invasion if America leaves suddenly, but their fear does not equate to pro-American sentiment. We cannot even dream of acquiring legitimacy for ourselves. Getting the foreigner out is the bottom line of nationalism.

On administration, we have proven unable to recreate the one we destroyed; and so have failed to provide minimal services to the bulk of the Iraqi people.

Finally, we are now disputing, as we did in the Vietnam war, the least significant of the three, military force. And not very successfully: we have suffered more American casualties in the months since the invasion than in the first three years of our involvement in Vietnam. Can anyone really believe it will get better?

So what can we expect? The short answer is defeat.

That is a bitter pill, one no political leader willingly swallows, particularly in an election year. So what are the alternatives?

The first is simply to delay. The expression "not on my watch" comes from naval officers who tried to avoid catastrophe for which they could be personally blamed. There will be a strong and understandable tendency of the Bush administration to try to slow down the tide running against us in Iraq. Bargain, negotiate, equivocate, encourage differences. These may indeed buy time. But if the time is not used constructively, the result will be, as it was in Vietnam, the worse for coming later.

The second alternative is to prop up a hand-picked ruling council. The British did this with reasonable success from 1919 to 1932. But we should remember that during that decade, Iraq had practically no literate, politically active population. In 1920, less than one half of one percent of population was in school; in that year, the government opened two secondary schools. One had 7 and the other 27 pupils. The British were candid about their policy. In their 1923-1924 report to the League of Nations, they wrote that "in this country, it is neither desirable nor practicable to provide Secondary education except for the select few." Even at the end of the British mandate in 1932, the average pupil outside the main cities spent only 2 years in school and only 14 of the then existing 154 schools had as many as 6 grades. When I first lived in Baghdad in 1951, the whole country had only 5 mechanical engineers.

Today, the situation is entirely different. Iraq has one of the highest rates of literacy in the Middle East and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis are highly trained professionals. In my example, it now has thousands of mechanical engineers. In sum, the Iraqis are not an "underdeveloped" people. It should be evident that they cannot be fooled with a façade in place of a government.

The third alternative is not simple and will not be easy, but it is the only one that offers America a chance to get out of Iraq less ignominiously than we got out of Vietnam. This policy can be divided into *principles* and *processes*.

Among the principles we will have to make completely clear is that 1) we *will* get out; 2) we *will not* so build ourselves into the Iraqi economy that, like the British did from 1932 to 1958, we will run the country behind a native façade; 3) that we *will not* seize or denationalize Iraqi oil; and (4) that we *will*, in some transparent fashion, allow a high degree of self-determination.

Among the processes, 1) we *will* get out with all deliberate speed; 2) we *will* begin right away to devolve political power in meaningful ways; and (3) we *will* immediately move to dilute our unilateral role by allowing serious political and commercial activities by other powers and political and "security" activities under UN auspices.

I suggest that, despite pronouncements, a sober view of what is actually happening in Iraq will show that on most of these issues our actions now lead in the opposite direction.

Take one, critical, example: we have spoken with apparent pride of our creation of an interim governing council. But, since we selected all the members and the group has no power, Iraqis see it as an attempt to fool them while we continue to run the country. Some will argue that this is paranoia, but to one who has studied Iraqi politics and history, as I have for the last 50 years, it is understandable: that is precisely what the British did during their rule of the country.

What else might we have done or could we do now? I think the best approach would be to reverse our emphasis on a national council and provide money and other forms of recognition and support to neighborhood groups. They can be helped to provide clean water, dispose of waste, open clinics and schools, provide protection against robbers, etc. and represent their constituents to the higher authorities. If the current situation is to be more than a hiatus between dictators, self-determination must begin there, at the grass roots.

For this, there is an old Middle Eastern - Muslim, Christian and Jewish - tradition. Quarters of towns and cities were expected to be self-governing and to maintain such facilities as schools, markets, public baths, clinics and places of worship. They taxed themselves and paid a lump sum to the government; they had their own police forces; and their leaders represented them to the rulers. That system has been weakened and partly supplanted by modernization, but elements of it remain and could again become vigorous in proper circumstances.

To begin at the neighborhood level also avoids the danger of corrupting the very concept of democratic government as the British did and as we are now doing with the powerless, appointed and manipulated "governing council."

Wise observers like the late UN representative, Sergio Vieira de Mello, have understood that sovereignty not security is the key to Iraq. Only if we can win the "perception" challenge - the widely held belief in Iraq that we intend to stay, to control their economy, dominate their lives and exploit their oil - will enough Iraqis stop protecting the guerrillas that attacks will be

curtailed. Security can be achieved only thus; to try to win Iraq by military force will have the same result as in Vietnam.

Lastly, however we got to where we are in Iraq, by intent or by bad intelligence, we must deal with the likelihood that a precipitous withdrawal will result in chaos; local mafias (as in Afghanistan) will proliferate; intercommunal massacres may follow; and, either in greed or in fear, other Middle Eastern states will almost certainly intervene.

So, it is evident that we must begin implementing an orderly, intelligent and effective policy rather than just trying to beat down opposition, to bolster shams or merely to hang on until after the American election. Time is not on our side. So we had better begin.

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