

IRAQ

What if we win?

Thanks to a fragile but real improvement in the security situation in Iraq, it has become possible to imagine the United States and its allies achieving what could plausibly be described as a win. But a win how defined, and with what implications? We asked a diverse group of observers to ponder these questions.



Stay to Win

Josef Joffe

In the fifth year of America's war in Iraq, some astounding numbers have come to suggest that the tide just might be turning. A change for the better was not supposed to happen. Though the United States had scored a spectacular victory against Saddam Hussein's armies in March-April 2003 in phases I, II and III of the war, "Phase IV" seemed destined to go the way of almost all such entanglements since 1945—from bad to worse to withdrawal.

The pattern looked awfully familiar. In Kenya in the 1950s, in Algeria in the 1960s, in Vietnam in the 1970s, the superior armies of the West were bested by Third World forces fighting on their own turf and animated by an unbending will to win. Add to these major engagements such ill-fated U.S. interventions as in Beirut in the 1980s and Mogadishu in the 1990s, or Israel's drawn-out attempt to impose control beyond its borders. Though Israel hung on to Southern Lebanon for 18 years and Gaza for almost forty, it abandoned both places in the end, leaving them to Hizballah and Hamas, deadly enemies both.

All these instances obeyed a single common denominator. "Asymmetric warfare", a classic advantage of the West in army-versus-army encounters, would lead into a trap (as it also did for the Soviets in Afghanistan) that left only one way out: retreat and disgrace. And thus in Iraq, which seemed to drive home the same lesson once the insurgency began in earnest about half a year after President Bush's famous "mission accomplished" speech on May 1, 2003:

- One year later, U.S. monthly casualties had almost doubled—from 82 to 137.
- By the end of 2006, *daily* attacks by insurgents and militias had quintupled: from 35 to 180.
- Monthly multiple-fatality bombings had leapt tenfold from the end of 2003 to the end of 2006 (from 6 to 65).
- The displacement of Iraqi civilians ("ethnic cleansing") had quadrupled: from 25,000 in 2003 to 100,000 in 2006.¹

It did not matter that American fatalities were modest by the standards of the Vietnam War. In Vietnam, the United States lost 58,000 men between 1964 and 1973. At "halftime" in Iraq—five years into the insurgency—the United States had lost fewer than 4,000. But these deaths were enough to confirm an iron law of wars of choice fought at great distances for less-than-vital national purposes: Democracies don't like engagements that are costly, long and inconclusive. As Iraq shows, the price the American democracy is willing to pay has come down to a fraction of the Southeast Asian toll. As early as the 2004 presidential contest, "withdrawal" had become a Democratic Party buzzword. Four years later, *all* Democratic presidential candidates preached a latter-day version of George McGovern's "Come home, America"—draw down, get out.

As in Vietnam, the premise of the war's

¹Jason Campbell, Michael O'Hanlon and Amy Unikewicz, "The State of Iraq: An Update", *New York Times*, December 22, 2007.



Staff Sgt. Mike Pryor

U.S. soldiers patrol a new market in Baghdad's Sha'ab neighborhood, January 15, 2008.

critics was twofold. The game is not worth the candle, and we can't win anyway. Yet the Vietnam analogy is wrong in many ways, as are all such analogies. Above all, the regional dimensions are beyond comparison. Vietnam was not just an insurgency; it was three wars in one. At first, Vietnam looked like a straightforward rebellion—the Vietcong vs. the Diem/Thieu regime. Then it became an open interstate war—North Vietnam vs. South Vietnam. Both of these conflicts were wrapped in a great-power test of wills, with Soviet Russia and China arrayed against the United States. With the help of Beijing and Moscow, Hanoi would have fought to the last Vietnamese soldier, North and South, to expel the United States. If the Americans “want to make war for twenty years”, Ho Chi Minh pledged, “then we shall make war for twenty years.”² Hanoi's message to Washington was: We can fight forever, and since we are sheltered by two great powers, your best weapons are blunted. You dare not destroy us for fear of unleashing Armageddon.

The Iraqi insurgency has lacked two of these critical dimensions, and that makes all the difference. It is at its core an internal war. Jihadists and Ba'athists cannot count on

powerful states next door; Iran will meddle, but it will not commit hundreds of thousands of men to the battle as did North Vietnam. Even less so will Syria, and neither will Turkey, which has only smaller fish to fry—those PKK extremists using the Kurdish north as a staging area. Nor can the insurgency rely on even one great power, let alone the two that supported Hanoi, to supply an endless stream of equipment and ordnance and to deter an all-out attack.

These critical systemic differences might offer one part of the explanation why the numbers have been changing in 2007 (the following are figures compiled for November of each year):

- In 2006, Iraqi civilian casualties were 3,450; in 2007, they had dropped to 650, less than one-fifth.
- In 2004, U.S. troop deaths stood at 137; in 2007, they had fallen to forty.
- In 2006, daily attacks by insurgents and militias numbered 180; in 2007, they dropped

²December 1966 letter to Martin Niemoeller, quoted in Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945–1990* (HarperCollins, 1991).

by more than half (to eighty).³

- In 2006, multiple-fatality bombings amounted to 65; in 2007, they had been reduced by two-thirds (to 22).

This list would not be complete without two other surprising twists. For four years, Sunni volunteers either could not or would not work with U.S. and Iraqi forces; by the end of 2007, 50,000 of them had joined up. Similarly, no money from the central government went to the provinces in 2003 and 2004; in 2005, it was \$25 million, in 2006, \$50 million, and in 2007, \$100 million (each figure for November).⁴

Was it the “surge?” Was it General David Petraeus? If “all’s well that ends well”, dissertations galore will be written about the first truly successful counterinsurgency since the British defeated a 12-year rebellion in their Malay possessions (now known as Malaysia) beginning in 1948. Suffice it to say that, as in Malaya, the new strategy launched in the summer of 2007 combined sound military tactics with intelligent politics.

The tactics changed from hunkering down plus intermittent sallies to determined offensive operations (“clear and hold”) variously known as “Phantom Thunder”, “Law and Order”, “Marne Torch”, “Arrowhead Ripper” or “Commando Eagle.” By the end of the summer of 2007, Coalition and Iraqi forces had pushed into areas previously denied to them, expelling insurgent groups from the Diyala province, the north of Babil and the east of Anbar, as well as from the southern approaches of Baghdad. Al-Qaeda units were hit throughout the country. Still, had not the United States scored such victories in Vietnam and proven unable to sustain them? In the Iraqi case, the “clearing” seems to be accompanied by “holding.” But these military exploits are just one part of the story. The other part has to do with the changing political tectonics of the war.

Let’s begin with the Sunnis. Basically, as Bartle Bull, the only Western journalist who was “embedded” in Moqtada Sadr’s Mahdi Army, put it: “The Sunnis [had] rolled the dice, launched the battle of Baghdad and lost. Now they are begging for an accommodation with Shi’a Iraq.”⁵ Between 2004 and 2006,

the Sunnis, Ba’athists and jihadists had put all their money on a single bet: Terrorize the Shi’a majority and demoralize the Americans to the point that they would quit. It was a battle for Washington—Congress, media and all—as much as for Baghdad. The gamble was as desperate as it was understandable. After all, the 15-percent Sunni minority had lorded it over Iraq for much of the 20th century, even under British rule. Ruthless “de-Ba’athification” under the American viceroy L. Paul Bremer III had robbed them of their status and power. Their livelihood was being destroyed, and their very lives were on the line. But recall that a critical strategic asset was lacking. There was no equivalent of North Vietnam, Soviet Russia and China to magnify and sustain the might of the insurgents. So they fought, and it looks like they have lost (at least the first round).

At the same time, just as the British had extended a hand to the rebels in Malaya, the United States and Iraq’s Shi’a government reached out to the Sunnis, offering them a place and a role in a new federal Iraq. Civil-service jobs and pensions were handed out to former Ba’athi officials. Money began to flow to the provinces. Brutal de-Ba’athification yielded to slow re-integration, spelling out the kind of reassurance the early occupation had rudely denied to the Sunnis. As the surge decimated the rebellion’s strength, it signaled to the local players that the United States was not about to tuck tail and run. All told, these changes have had a salutary effect on the calculus of both the Sunni minority and the Shi’a majority.

With the United States acting as tacit protector of the Sunnis (for instance, by taking on Sadr’s Mahdi Army in Baghdad), two messages were dispatched. To the Sunnis: “You are not alone.” To the Shi’a: “Do not use your numerical superiority for wholesale slaughter.” Together, these tacit communications might explain what could hardly be expected: the miraculous restraint of the majority whom the United States had delivered from decades of Sunni oppression. Future historians might well point to this

³Campbell, O’Hanlon and Unikewicz.

⁴Campbell, O’Hanlon and Unikewicz.

⁵Bull, “Mission accomplished”, *Prospect* (October 2007).

political shift as the decisive one. As the Shi'a were deterred, the Sunnis were reassured. The bloodbath that did not happen—even in the face of murderous provocation by the insurgency's suicide bombers and death squads—made co-existence at least possible.

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda *et al.* had imposed a reign of sheer terror wherever they could, with murder and mutilation, rape and extortion. That did not endear them to the Iraqis. So American and Iraqi battlefield (and intelligence) victories came with a smell of permanence. Hence the astounding figure of 50,000 Sunni volunteers who flocked to Coalition and Iraqi forces by the end of 2007. Will the miracle of re-integration endure?

The Arab Middle East, perhaps the most poisonous political culture in the world, is not famous for such marvels. But assume the transformation initiated in 2007 sinks roots. If it does, then, *horribile dictu*, George W. Bush and his minions, who have excelled as the most incompetent regime transformers in American history, might be vindicated despite themselves. Assume that an effective U.S. presence stays and provides basic security (it took a Biblical forty years to turn Germany and Japan into exemplars of liberal democracy). Assume, as a result, that the Sunnis will keep moving from war-war to jaw-jaw, to recall Churchill's fabled phrase. Assume further that, under the American gun, the Shi'a majority continues to practice wisdom and restraint. Assume that oil revenues will be more or less equitably shared—look how the surge in oil prices has moved Russia from chaotic decline to neo-czarist stability, if hardly to democracy. Assume finally that Syria, Turkey and Iran would rather have order on their borders than an irresistible magnet of intervention.

Then it will be *mirabile dictu*. No, Iraq will not turn into a 21st-century democracy as Germany or Japan did in the late 20th century. But it won't be yet another Arab *mukhabarat* state, either—a secret-police system that props up despotic regimes through intimidation and repression. To begin with, federalization is setting up competing power centers that do not exist elsewhere in Araby. Such diffusion of author-

ity (together with a weak central government) is hardly an ideal constitution; indeed, it may well foreshadow *de facto* partition, hence the end of a unitary Iraq. But the upside should not be blithely dismissed in a country under the shadow of civil war, especially in the Arab world, where only one state, Egypt, really qualifies as a *nation-state*. The rest, like Iraq, are postcolonial concoctions rent by tribal, ethnic and denominational strife and held together by authoritarian control along a scale of nastiness, from the forward-looking Kingdom of Jordan to the hell hole that is Sudan.

Federalization, then, may be the antidote to the Saddams and Asads. It holds out the promise of autonomy and security to the various constituent parts. If the promise were achieved, the weak would be less fearful of the tyranny of the

George W. Bush and his minions might be vindicated despite themselves.

strong, while the majority would be less tempted, and find it harder, to impose its rule on the rest.⁶ Add to this a benign element of Iraqi "exceptionalism": Post-2003 Iraq is the only Arab country (except Lebanon, haphazardly) that has experienced reasonably free and fair votes—for the constitution in 2004 and the parliament in 2005. So it has been one man, one vote, but already more than one time—and that under murderous terrorist fire. Though marred the first time out by Sunni abstention, the balloting has left powerful memories about how politics *could* be—again without precedent in the Arab world. For all its shortcomings, Maliki's is the only Arab government that was brought to power by popular choice. Better even, as long as the Americans stay, Maliki or his successors will have to pass the test of elections again. This hurdle may also stand in the way of would-be putschists in the vein of Abdul Karim Qassim and Abdul

⁶This argument should not be overdone, as America's 19th-century history suggests. As decentralized as the United States was at the time, it could not protect the South against violent "majorization" by the stronger North.

Salam Arif, who brought down the monarchy and paved the way for Saddam Hussein.

Imagine then that “Bushism”—meaning here the strategy of regime transformation—succeeds in spite of itself. Will Iraq be the *avant garde* that brings democratic reform to the rest of the Arab world by irresistible example, a domino in reverse? Don’t hold your breath. Despots do not quake and slink away because their colleagues next door have stumbled. They are more likely to redouble their efforts to extirpate the bacillus of democracy. They might even go on the offensive, by subversion or war, to squelch the epidemic *ante portas*.

The Bush Administration will come to an end in January 2009, but the Iraqi experiment will not—not for a long time. And neither should the American intrusion. Iraq, indeed, the entire Arab-Islamic Middle East from Beirut to Islamabad, is Hobbes’ country, where the war of all against all lurks right beyond the next bend in the unhappy road to modernity. In such settings, security is the existential precondition for everything else—freedom and participation, development and democracy. Hence, American power must stay as a pillar of assurance within and deterrence to those without. The strength

and location of U.S. troops are not cast in concrete, but their presence as an effective fighting force must not be in doubt. Unless there is one player in this game who is stronger than each and all, order, let alone freedom, will not prevail. And if post-1945 Germany and Japan have anything to teach, it is that security, both internal and external, must come first if democracy is to come later.

America brought war to Iraq. America should now bring peace to that tortured country. Fortunately, the moral obligation comes with an enticing political prize: order married to benign change in a pivotal country of the Middle East. By living up to its responsibility, the United States will serve its own, and the West’s, interests in the world’s most dangerous arena. The prize is surely worth the price. For if left untreated, the Middle East’s pathologies will poison this planet’s fate in the 21st century as much as Europe’s did in the 20th. 🌐

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Leave or Lose

Paul Schroeder

The question “What if we win?” seems to involve three core assumptions. The first is that America is currently winning in Iraq by making significant progress in defeating the insurgency, and that the present strategy and tactics, resolutely pursued, could lead to actual victory in the sense of restoring reasonable security and effecting economic recovery and political stability there. The second assumption is that Iraq would then be capable of governing and defending itself, cooperating

in the general struggle against terrorism, and affording the United States and others access to its oil, freeing America to turn its main attention and resources elsewhere. The third assumption is that now is the time for Americans to begin thinking about how to exploit this opportunity.

The Bush Administration, along with the Republican Party and virtually all its presidential candidates, support the first two assumptions; most Democrats and other critics reject