



WAITING FOR GODOT IN IRAQ

F. J. Bing West

IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S PLAY *Waiting for Godot*, the two protagonists passively await Godot, a tramp who will give direction to their lives. Godot, of course, never shows up. Similarly, the leaders of the Army and Marine Corps cannot wait for policy direction or a strategic clarity about Iraq that is not going to show up.

Supposedly, the current mission is to establish a stable and democratic Iraq. But Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno, about to assume command of Multi-National Corps–Iraq, has said he did not know whether insuring a Western-style democracy will remain the mission, telling a *New York Times* reporter, “Notice I left out a few things, such as a democracy in the sense that we see a democracy in the United States.”¹

The immense challenges facing our ground forces demand leadership with clear focus. For the next several years, our forces will remain engaged in combat in Iraq, with the ambiguous mission not enjoying the support of the majority of the American body politic. This tension between the military mission and political goals will affect battlefield performance, strategic credibility, the social contract between the people and our Army, and budgets. Let us look at each of the four challenges.

Battlefield Performance and Risk

There is no historical precedent for the current situation. President George W. Bush has said we will not leave until victorious, but the Iraq Study Group—ten distinguished Americans—has concluded that Iraq is “deteriorating,” while General Peter Pace, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said, “We’re not winning, but we’re not losing.”² No one knows when this war is going to end—or how—whether satisfactorily or badly.

As we enter the fifth year of the war, a majority in Congress and in the opinion polls want our forces substantially withdrawn, while acknowledging that the mission—leaving a stable, orderly, and democratic Iraq protected by its own forces—has not been achieved. At the same time, the president, with two years remaining as commander-in-chief, has not altered the mission, despite a widespread belief that his own political party will successfully force a mission change before the next presidential election.

This is quite different from the Vietnam case, when President Richard M. Nixon took office in 1969 promising a strategy of American withdrawal. He easily won reelection four years later, in large part because American ground

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Note: The views expressed in this article are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Army or the Department of Defense.

forces were no longer fighting in Vietnam. In Iraq, the other shoe of American politics—the public announcement of the withdrawal of most of our 140,000 American troops—has not yet dropped.

General Pace has also said the war cannot be won militarily, let alone won by Americans. To judge by our military performance, Pace's words are accurate. "Clear, hold and build" has given way to "Control Baghdad, withdraw from the front lines, increase the advisors, and turn operational control over to the Iraqis." The plan seems to be for U.S. forces to keep a lid on the sectarian violence, especially in Baghdad; train Iraqi security forces; and shift control of the Iraqi Army to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Major General William Caldwell, the military spokesman in Iraq, said, "We should see the complete transfer of command and control of all Iraqi Army divisions by late spring, early summer."³

Mr. Maliki, however, has not behaved like a strong leader. Giving him more control over the armed forces in order to bolster his confidence runs the risk of putting all eggs into a fragile basket. Because this has been front-page news for months, including the deliberate leaks of explicit memos from the White House, everyone understands that American units and advisors are conducting a holding action. Winning is not an option, while the risk of a tragic end to the American involvement in Iraq is there for all to see.

Indeed, the level of pessimism among the American policy-making elites, the Congress, and the press is astonishing. Having visited with 15 U.S. and Iraqi units in September and October, I am a solid five on a scale of one (disaster) to ten (success). In other words, the anecdotal evidence is confounding, and there are no objective, countrywide measures for determining whether stability or civil war is more probable.

The challenge is to inspire professional behavior in the face of strategic uncertainty and public pessimism. In both Korea and Vietnam, the expectancies about combat performance changed as the wars drew to a close. In 1953 in Korea, patrols were carefully plotted to minimize the chances of anyone being snatched, and in 1970 in Vietnam, aggressive patrolling was frowned upon as the units pulled out. We have not yet reached that demarcation point in Iraq, but it's coming fast. In this climate, are Soldiers expected to behave with

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the same aggressiveness and risk-taking that they did when attacking Baghdad in 2003?

In November, *The New York Times* ran a front-page Sunday story about a captain, frustrated by the feckless Iraqi police, who said in essence that the job was to get the Soldiers home without losing anyone else.⁴ That created a stir across the military Internet, with one Marine general famous for his combat ferocity and blunt words writing: "Suck it up."

Determining the balance between tactical aggressiveness and care for one's Soldiers is tough at any time. It becomes particularly challenging when every Soldier understands that Iraqi political leaders are irresolute in confronting the Sunni insurgents and Shi'ite murderers, and that the American congressional election has produced a landslide vote against the president's insistence on staying the course.

There have been quiet changes of command in Iraq when patrolling has not been aggressive. Yet to avoid casualties and kidnappings, our generals have issued blanket tactical restraints, such as always wearing thirty pounds of armor and never leaving the wire with fewer than eight Americans or four HMMWVs. In Iraq, our counterinsurgency doctrine—an exhortative taxonomy—emphasizes "non-kinetics," and our rules of engagement are as strict as those governing the police in the States. In theory, higher commanders communicate their intent, leaving initiative and details of execution to their subordinates. In reality, the higher command dictates force protection measures and investigates continuously. Decentralized decision making is limited in order to reduce the chances of friendly casualties.

In 2007, we're about to bulk up our advisors to provide more combat experience on the streets, at the point of battle. In terms of the disparity in self-protection equipment and firepower, there is, and will remain, a huge difference between the advisors and the Iraqi forces. This leads to a question about the advisors' mission: Are the Iraqis expected to do as the advisors do, or as they say?

In December I received an e-mail from an advisor in a remote outpost, sent shortly after a suicide bomber killed one of his men. The advisor wrote, “We don’t want to stay in this town forever, but while we’re here we sure as hell believe we’re going to fix the problem. There are too many irritants floating around the terms ‘winning or losing’ and ‘belief in the cause.’ The job is hard and serious enough that without total commitment to your unit, a belief in something larger than yourself, it would be easy to cut corners, to take an extra hour or two of sleep, to slough the time inside the wire...and your peers would recognize it immediately and cast you out. Keegan said that infantrymen work for recognition only by their peers. I agree with that.”

A few days after I received that e-mail, the Associated Press ran a story about a unit that was 10 miles and a thousand attitudes away: “We’ve been here for 12 months now and there’s been no progress,” an American Soldier said. “It’s like holding a child’s hand, how long can you hold onto his hand before he does something on his own. How much longer do we have to get shot at or blown up? I don’t want to live my life like this.”⁵

We shouldn’t drift into divergent interpretations of the mission and of aggressive versus force protec-

tion tactics, as we did in Vietnam as the war ground down. How aggressive we expect our battalions and advisory teams to be over the next two years requires explicit address. General George W. Casey Jr., commander of the Multi-National Force-Iraq, meets with every American combat battalion commander and staff. Undoubtedly Lieutenant General Odierno will do likewise. Across the board, there should be one set of standards and expectations about aggressiveness for our battalions and advisory teams. At Camp Fallujah, a sign reads, “Welcome to the fight!” Good on that command. That has to be the spirit. Aggressiveness saves lives.

Strategic Credibility

However the war in Iraq ends, the American press, policymaking elite, and a majority of the public have already concluded it was a failure. Facts don’t change attitudes, and the judgment against Iraq has been rendered. Whether U.S. generals acted wisely in Iraq, or were as culpable as the civilian policymakers, will be debated over the course of the next decade. Retired Army General Jack Keane, a former vice chief of staff of the Army, told *The New York Times*, “There’s shared responsibility here. I don’t think you can blame the civilian leadership alone.”⁶

The subject of who erred in Iraq will be more divisive than Vietnam in one key respect: the military is divided internally. After Vietnam, the military and those who served closed ranks, with 95 percent proud of their service and an overwhelming majority believing the cause was noble.

Unlike the South Vietnamese, the Iraqis have not fought doughtily, and many have expressed bitterness against the United States. In areas where there is scant violence—most of the provinces—there is little willingness to sacrifice for the country and no gratitude to America for bringing freedom. The religious leader of the Shi’ites in Iraq, Ayatollah Sistani, is hugely influential in political matters and has met with UN representatives, but he refuses to meet with an American official.

In Iraq, the ministries do not provide for their own troops. The feckless Iraqi politicians, divided by sectarian loyalties and a society traumatized by decades of murderous tyranny, have been unable to generate sustained competence and cadres of leaders. The consequence is that too many Iraqis look first to taking care of family, then tribe, and



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LTG Ray Odierno, incoming commander, III Corps, Camp Victory, Iraq, 14 December 2006.

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then religious sect, with national loyalty a distant fourth in priorities.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq, however, is real, evil, implacable, and dedicated to killing. A collapsed Iraq would result in a wider, messier regional war. A defeat for the United States would be more than a national humiliation; it would adversely affect trade, our economy, our domestic comity, and the willingness of other nations to ally with us. Losing is not an option.

So what is the mission today? To train Iraqi security forces capable of restoring a modicum of enduring stability. Whether this will be accompanied by a Western-style democracy or by a military controlling things behind the scenes, as was the case in Turkey and South Korea a few decades ago, remains to be seen.

Highly respected generals like retired Marine Tony Zinni have criticized the policy that led to the war, with the press providing a multiplex megaphone, while remaining silent about the military strategy for fighting the war. Unfortunately, U.S. generals have not distinguished themselves in the four years that have led to the current, minimalist mission of training indigenous soldiers to take over a job we defined poorly and could not complete. In Desert Storm in 1991, our generals basked in public adulation and accepted it as their due. Modesty was not a trait to be found in the books, reviews, and ticker-tape parades that followed the swift eviction of Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

After 9/11, U.S. Central Command seemed set on a second path of glory. Together with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, General Tommy Franks was lauded for routing the Taliban. This was followed by the impressive march to Baghdad in April 2003. Franks retired and, like his predecessors, Generals

Norman Schwarzkopf and Zinni, wrote a best-selling memoir that distilled his military wisdom.

That was the high-water mark for public adulation of generals. The iron rule of politics—and all generals, like all senior executives, have polished political skills—is that courtiers boost winners and eschew losers. As Iraq disintegrated in late 2003, the press began to distance itself from the generals it had feted.

The press has begun to question the role of the generals in key decisions. General Franks concurred in the White House decision to violate the principle of unity of command, agreeing it was proper to relieve his deputy, Army retired Lieutenant General Jay Garner, as the director of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance in Iraq, and install Ambassador Paul Bremer. This shift established a separate chain of command to the president, and gave Bremer authority to determine the mission and budget of both the new Iraqi Army and the police. That was a terrible decision. Franks preached unity of command, and concurred in its abolition.

In July 2003, General John Abizaid, who followed General Franks as the CENTCOM commander, declared an insurgency had emerged in Iraq, yet permitted Combined Joint Task Force-7 (CJTF-7), the coalition military command in Iraq at that time, to flail around with unilateral offensive operations for another year and a half. This ignored basic counterinsurgency doctrine. CJTF-7 and CENTCOM ordered a Marine expeditionary force (MEF) to assault Fallujah in April 2004, overruling the subordinate command's protests. Then CENTCOM ordered the MEF to halt the attack when it was two days from finishing the mission. The MEF then handed the city over to former Iraqi generals, who lost control to Musab al-Zarqawi. In deciding to hand over power to the Iraqi generals, the MEF consulted with CENTCOM, but did not coordinate with Ambassador Bremer and the State Department, who vociferously objected when they belatedly learned about the transfer of power inside Fallujah. There was no glory in those military decisions.

The next year, 2005, saw repeated offensive sweeps driving the insurgents from one city to another. In Anbar Province, there were never enough troops for the mission. Senator Joe Biden (D-DE) announced on TV that a senior general in Anbar told him he needed more U.S. forces. Yet

CENTCOM, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the command in Iraq all claimed they needed no more American troops. Hmm. This is not a reflection of character; everyone makes mistakes. Senior officers adhere to a code of leadership and honor that should be emulated by those senior corporate executives who have made a virtue of greed.

But there has been a systemic flaw that persists through today. In conventional war, the objective is to defeat the enemy force. This lays the civilian population open to occupation, as in World War II, or forces the enemy government to accept terms, as in World War I. Progress can be measured by terrain taken or armies shattered. In an insurgency, those measures are misleading, and others must take their place.

In Iraq, our military offered no set of measures to the public. So the press came up with its own: the degree of daily violence, especially civilian deaths. In response, the military pointed to an ever-increasing number of “trained” Iraqi forces, as the violence escalated. The result was that a large portion of the press, the Congress, and the foreign policy community grew to doubt the wisdom and the candor of the generals.

In 2003, maneuver warfare was brilliantly applied in the swift march to Baghdad. When the war shifted to an insurgency, though, we persisted for 18 months with inappropriate maneuver warfare tactics. This was Phase I: maneuver warfare inappropriately applied against insurgents.

Saddamists directed the Sunni insurgency in late 2003 and 2004. Former army officers had the skills and drew on a legion of disaffected youths galvanized by the seditious preachments of Sunni clerics who gained power in the absence of local government. The American invaders were the target. Simultaneously, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was targeting Shi’ite symbols and leadership.

By 2005, AQI was pushing aside the Saddamists and emerging as the bellwether among the diverse insurgent cells. Under General Casey, the American combat battalions shifted to counterinsurgency, aiming to win over and protect the Sunni population. Practically, this meant fewer heavy-handed searches and raids and more attention to dialogue and civic works. The counterinsurgency FM issued in December of 2006 codified the changes that had evolved since early 2005. Every American battalion in Iraq was practicing counterinsurgency. This was Phase II: counterinsurgency versus insurgents.

Underlying contradictions, though, were never resolved. A large majority of Sunnis wanted the Americans to leave. They didn’t want AQI taking over and imposing Taliban rule, yet they considered it legitimate for the insurgents to kill Americans. The Americans were infidel invaders that had stripped the Sunnis of power and handed it to the Shi’ites who had been oppressed for centuries. AQI and the “moderate” cells that called themselves “the honorable resistance” agreed that the Americans

had to be thrown out. The Sunnis had not accepted that they deserved to lose their power dominance, or that the loss was permanent. For over 18 months, American officials have been meeting in Jordan with at least seven insurgent groups that claimed to want reasonable terms, but rejected every offer. Obdurate irrationality prolonged anti-American violence.

The U.S. did not succeed in Phase II. As of November 2006, General Abizaid said that Anbar Province, the stronghold of the insurgency, was “not under control.”⁷ By then, the American counterinsurgency dictum of “clear, hold and build” had been overtaken by events. Beginning with the destruction of the Samarra mosque in February 2006, the war had shifted into Phase III—sectarian violence that



AFP

GEN George W. Casey Jr., second from left, commander of Multi-National Force-Iraq, with soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 24th Infantry Regiment, in Mosul, 27 January 2005.

demands the police techniques of identify, arrest, and imprison.

The Shi'ite death squads were retaliating with increasing ferocity in response to the merciless Sunni suicide bombings. Faced with ethnic cleansing, mass murder, and chaos in Baghdad, U.S. troops were rushed into the capital. But Prime Minister Maliki responded by declaring that Sadr City, the lair of the death squads, was off-limits to U.S. units. This placed the American forces on the tactical defensive, limited to patrolling and pinprick raids insufficient to quell the violence. Every day, the American press corps in Baghdad reported scores of bodies found bound, tortured, and executed. The frustration of the American public resulted in severe Republican losses in the midterm elections, followed by the dismissal of the Secretary of Defense and publication of the Iraq Study Group report. The Group recommended a huge increase in advisors, withdrawal in 2007 of U.S. combat units as conditions permitted, and aid to the Iraqi Government dependent upon its meeting benchmarks of performance. President Bush then declared he would adopt a new strategy. "The American people expect us to come up with a new strategy to achieve the objective which I've been talking about," Bush said.⁸ Any comprehensive strategy has political as well as military components. But the press and the White House—strange bedfellows—have given the rest of the U.S. Government a free pass in the war. Iraq's judicial system is broken, unemployment is enormous, and Maliki and the Shi'ites have to reconcile with the Sunnis to substantially decrease the violence. These are political and economic missions. Yet the State Department, AID, Department of Justice, and the rest of the U.S. Government never showed up with an adequate, professional work force. In 2007, it is incumbent on the White House to change that.

The U.S. military strategy must also change. Over the next year, most of the battle space will be handed over to the Iraqi Army,

with U.S. combat units pulling back to be used more as quick reaction and raiding forces against al-Qaeda in Iraq and death squads. American units are not going to continue to occupy Sunni cities and try to win the support of the Sunni population or protect them from the insurgents that were hiding in plain sight among them. Counterinsurgency is no longer central. The primary task has shifted to training Iraqi security forces.

American forces face three tasks: 1) reduce the violence in Baghdad while getting control over the police; 2) partner with the Iraqi Army in the Sunni Triangle, cut local deals with the tribes and stand up the police; and 3) bring the advisory effort to the fore, increasing the numbers from 3,500 to 15,000. The advisors must have a joint U.S.-Iraqi board to appoint the key Iraqi commanders and to relieve for malfeasance. Lacking this leverage, our advisors risk their lives, but cannot affect the critical input: Iraqi leadership. We must adapt our tactics to the new tasks. Our forces are not attriting the enemy in firefights. The enemy has learned not to engage Americans. I recently met with several squads of grunts who were completing their second tours. Of 40 riflemen, about six or seven were fairly positive they had shot an insurgent. The common



A U.S. Marine Corps M1A1 Abrams fires its main gun into a building to provide suppressive counterfire against insurgents who fired on other Marines during a firefight in Fallujah, Al Anbar Province, Iraq, 10 December 2004.

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reference for battling insurgents was “it’s like fighting ghosts.” Firepower isn’t the answer because it cannot be applied.

About 20 percent of the effort of a combat brigade goes into raids, mostly at night. These yield most of the results in terms of detainees. Eighty percent of the effort is devoted to self-protection and patrols, patrols, patrols—most in partnership with Iraqi units. The initiative to engage, though, lies with the enemy. We drive or walk by, and he chooses when and how to attack. Patrols keep a lid on the violence, but do not change attitudes or the balance of the war. Patrols buy time. This is not a strategy; it is a holding action.

Holding for what action, and by whom? The enemy has used the same tactics of mass sectarian murder-by-suicide and intimidation-by-assassination for four years. The hard-core killers must be identified, arrested, and put away for life. The war has passed through the counterinsurgent phase and into the police phase.

The first tactical imperative is to identify the insurgent who hides in plain sight among the civilians. Four years after the war began, we have no reliable means to identify insurgents in Baghdad or the Sunni triangle. Our U.S. Border Patrol carries handheld PDAs that take a thumbprint of a pedestrian or driver, send it over the radio, and inside two minutes have the individual’s history on the screen. If there is no prior data, the print is entered into the database. The procedure is simple, fast, and has an acceptable success rate. We and the Iraqis conduct thousands of patrols and stop tens of thousands of cars each day. If our forces were equipped with these PDA devices, all military-aged males in Baghdad and the Sunni Triangle would be registered inside six months.

But in Iraq, our military-industrial complex has successfully fought every effort to introduce any such simple fingerprinting system. The intelligence community, not known for conducting patrols, insists on an elaborate, convoluted system called BATS—the Biometric Automated Toolset System. Every time BATS falters, more money is heaved at it. Improvements have been slowly made, but the system is reserved for Americans only, and run on computers cleared for sensitive data. So at the battalion level, to include all Iraqi battalions and police stations, we go without the most basic tool of population control: identification.

The Iraqi police arrest practically no one. One in every 318 Americans is in jail for violent crimes; one in 869 Iraqis is in an Iraqi jail for committing a crime or for insurgency. The United States holds another 14,000 in Iraq. Added together, one in 719 Iraqis is in jail—two to three times less than in the United States. Yet the chances of a civilian being killed in Iraq are 21 times greater than in the United States, and 43 times greater if you are in the security forces in Iraq.

Iraq is holding fewer prisoners than Saddam released in late 2002, when he opened the jail gates and let loose tens of thousands of criminals that society had incarcerated over the decades. Today, eight out of ten detainees walk free—and they are paid \$6 a day for their inconvenience.

By 1969, South Vietnam had 40,000 guerrillas in Kho Tang Island and other prisons. Adjusting for differences in population, to match that Iraq should have in prison at least 60,000, rather than the 14,000 it does have. The reason we are not affecting the enemy is because we let him go. The “catch and release program” is frustrating to American and Iraqi Soldiers in Iraq; the farcical “rule of law” aids and abets the insurgents and death squads. This war is going to drag on unnecessarily because our senior commanders, military and civilian, do not understand that the war effort is being systematically undercut by not arresting and imprisoning insurgents and death squad members for the duration of the conflict. The greatest single defect—and it may be mortal—in the effort to restore stability is the refusal of the Iraqi and American systems to imprison the criminals, insurgents, and death squad members. Sending more U.S. troops into Baghdad and letting the death squads walk free makes no sense. If you cannot identify the insurgent, and you are on the tactical defensive waiting for him to shoot, and you cannot imprison him when you do arrest him, you are not going to prevail. And that’s a military reality, not an economic or political one.

So how do we prevail? We don’t. Our troops keep a lid on the violence until the Iraqi Shi’ite leadership reaches a political agreement with the Sunnis, who in turn essentially cease to support the insurgents or kill al-Qaeda in Iraq. In other words, our strategy is for someone else to implement a strategy.

The United States does not control the central actors in Iraq. We are like a powerful trader in a volatile market faced with alternative trading models. General

Abizaid and President Bush are doubling-down their bet on Maliki. He has been weak so far, and by putting in more U.S. troops and ceding him more control over Iraqi forces, they are betting he will improve.

The Iraq Study Group took the opposite tack. They recommended tying U.S. assets to the market performance. If the market met expected benchmarks, add assets. If it underperformed, reduce the assets.

So where are we headed? Down two tracks: the one is the development, under American advisors, of the Iraqi security forces; the other is the emergence of a responsible Iraqi Government. General Abizaid has assured the Congress that Maliki will move against the Shi'ite militias and emerge as a true leader by February, March, or April 2007. It may be that Maliki is on the verge of a character-altering epiphany. But if Maliki is incapable of moving against the militias or effecting reconciliation, Bush will face the choice of sticking with a failed democracy the United States created, or tolerating a behind-the-scenes power play by a fed-up Iraqi military.

Four years ago, al-Qaeda in Iraq did not exist. But it does now, and it's damn dangerous. Due to our own fecklessness, Zarqawi took over Fallujah in the summer of 2004, and it took a bloody battle to expel him. His successor cannot be allowed to set up a sanctuary in another city and impose Taliban-like rule. We must be prepared to let Maliki fail, and we must not fail with him. We are training Iraqi troops to be the cement holding Iraq together in place of Americans. We should hedge our bet and leave open a government model like South Korea or Turkey in the '60s and '70s—both emerging democracies with weak national assemblies and strong armies that insured order prevailed.

Beyond Iraq, one long-term result from this confusing war is clear: the combatant commanders have lost power. For over a decade after the Goldwater-Nichols Act, the theater commanders were called Commanders in Chief, or CINCs, and they had authority independent of the Joint Chiefs and Washington. General Franks, for instance, delighted in the story of calling the Joint Chiefs "Title X m-f's" and recounting how they responded after his seemingly victorious march to Baghdad in April 2003 by taking off their blouses to reveal purple T-shirts with the same words emblazoned.

This act of self-deprecation and homage marked the apex of the bureaucratic power of the theater commanders. In the next conflict, the Joint Chiefs

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will yield no such deference to the strategic decisions of any one commander. Neither will the press, the Congress, or the public.

The Social Contract

All is not healthy within the body politic. Given the Desert Storm victory in 1991 and the march to Baghdad in 2003, the press expected swift victory and were not cautioned otherwise. Since 2003, the mainstream press has relentlessly featured front-page stories of gore and chaos in Iraq. It is not the scale of the violence that is affecting public attitudes: 58,000 American Soldiers died in Vietnam, compared to about 3,000 deaths to date in Iraq. Rather, the polls suggest that public morale is sapped by years of effort without demonstrable progress.

How Iraq will turn out is problematic: no Iraqi soldier or cop dares go home in uniform. A government is not in charge when its security forces must hide their identity.

If history is a guide, even dramatic improvement in Iraq will not turn around the negative impression now held by a majority of Americans. As I said earlier, facts don't change attitudes, and that's especially true when egos and reputations are attached. We've seen it before. In the early years (1965-1967) of the Vietnam War, the U.S. high command in Saigon was so unremittingly optimistic in shaping every report that the press referred to the daily press briefing as "The Five O' Clock Follies." The military had lost credibility.

Nevertheless, the press did credit General Creighton Abrams with the success his counterinsurgency campaign achieved. In 1969, I took a public bus to visit a district 15 miles south of Da Nang in Quang Nam Province; today, there is no way an American will take a bus in Iraq. But the popular histories of the Vietnam War stopped with the dreadful strategy of General William Westmoreland. Abrams's dogged, successful

pacification campaign from '68 to '70 became a codicil to a foregone conclusion foretold by journalists who became part of the story. David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*, Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie*, Robert N. McNamara's self-justifying memoirs, and other fabled accounts essentially ended at Tet '68. The rest of the war became a journalistic footnote.

The same will be true of Iraq. To read the mainstream press, Iraq had shattered irreparably by the end of 2006. Tomorrow can bring only further descent into bloody civil war and chaos. That's the storyline upon which editors have staked their reputations, and if Iraq calmed down and achieved the violence level of California, there would still remain enough mayhem to continue calling the country a mess. There will be no Iraq ending that causes Democrats and Republicans, journalists and politicians alike to acknowledge that the war enhanced long-term national security.

Because America has tuned out the war, it has left dangling what it expects of its Soldiers. Unlike Vietnam, the vast majority of citizens respect the individual Soldiers and the military as an institution. Lurking behind that respect, though, there is more pity for the Soldiers serving in Iraq than pride or a sense of shared commitment and sacrifice. Iraq is not accepted as the nation's burden to resolve. The White House and the military high command bungled that by assuming a quick victory that did not require demanding a commitment by the public at large.

By the fifth year of fighting, the prevailing popular attitude seems to be, "Oh you poor Soldiers, you're away from home too long, and you risk being killed or wounded." Many, including retired generals, are opposed to the mission in Iraq, but support the Soldier, who does believe in his mission. This creates a contradiction that is alleviated by saying, in essence, "Well, do your duty, but don't take undue risks."

The unspoken social contract between the people and the Soldier has changed, at least temporarily. Duty, obedience, and separation from family are expected of the Soldier, but valor—risking one's life—is not publicly esteemed. The press attaches valor to names from past wars—Murtha, Kerry, Webb—when there is a political agenda. Acts of astonishing bravery in Iraq pass with scant notice.

War means taking the risk of dying in order to kill the enemy. The price of courage, in turn, is casualties. Both the public and our armed forces have

become accustomed to comparatively low risk and few casualties, while inflicting comparatively little damage. To carry over such public expectations against a future enemy would be disastrous.

Holding forth uncommon courage as the common virtue must remain the watchword of those who choose to serve. But in America, bile about Iraqi policy has lessened praise for valor, lest it be taken as endorsement of the policy. We must publicly salute courage if we expect it to remain a core American value. As the poet W.H. Auden once wrote, "Teach the free man to praise." The new secretary of defense has a chance to turn the public climate around by routinely singling out the valorous. The press will pick up the signal.

Strategy and Budgets

Supporting the annual operations in Iraq and Afghanistan consumes \$90 billion while the escalating costs of education and health care, combined with infrastructure repairs too long deferred, demand the attention of legislators. The Defense budget is a competition among the services under a fixed ceiling that is too low and unlikely to rise.

How the military and the Office of the Secretary of Defense reach budgetary agreement is an arcane art, but it is related to strategy. Three strategies are competing for funds. The first is the high-tech, standoff-strike model, an example of which is the 80-days 1999 bombing campaign to inflict economic pain and force Serbia to withdraw from Kosovo. This strategy has the decided advantages of zero casualties and few boots on the ground. It focuses upon "near peer competitors" (read China) and by itself can devour the entire defense budget.

Second, the Navy, underfunded in shipbuilding, has initiated a well-publicized national campaign (funded by wealthy donors to the Naval War College Foundation) to construct a new maritime strategy. In the '80s, Navy Secretary John Lehman unveiled an anti-Soviet maritime strategy that the Reagan administration embraced, leading to a sharp increase in the Navy budget. The current effort will result in a thoughtful document with influential support.

The third strategy entails fighting the long war against Islamic extremists plus having sufficient forces and equipment to hedge against land wars requiring hundreds of thousands of American Soldiers (e.g., another war in Korea).

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“Praise for valor”: GEN Peter Pace presents the Gold Medal of Remembrance to the son of U.S. Army SFC Paul Smith at the “A Time of Remembrance” ceremony in Washington, D.C., 21 May 2006. Smith was killed in Baghdad, Iraq, and posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

All three strategies have putative validity, and so funding will be spread among them. Ground forces for the long war are in trouble, though, because emotional reaction to the Iraq imbroglio will cloud judgments about funding. After Saigon fell, the Congress cut Army and Marine funding, prompting then-Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger to claim that the cuts “were deep, savage and arbitrary.” President Ford then fired Schlesinger, and the cuts held amidst an atmosphere of ennui that persisted for several years.

Given a defense budget hurtling toward a train wreck, strategic choices have to be made. Political

distaste for Iraq will severely affect the long-term funding of the Army and Marine ground forces unless there is forceful, respected military leadership that articulates a coherent strategy. The Army and Marines should replicate the Navy model and not make separate pitches based on weapons systems. Land forces need a general—General Casey or Petraeus leap to mind, but there may be others—who has a vision that acknowledges mistakes, incorporates lessons from Iraq, and moves beyond that belabored country.

Summary

Four lessons from Iraq are clear. First, senior military leaders in Iraq should convey a common set of expectations about aggressive mission behavior for the duration of this politically divisive war. Second, we have to evaluate our military performance with candor, and not copy the politicians who refuse to acknowledge error—no one gets through life, war, or a football game without a lot of mistakes. Iraq is a police war and the American and Iraqi systems are not identifying, arresting, and imprisoning at rates guaranteed to shorten and perhaps win the war. That these errors, acknowledged throughout the ranks, go uncorrected year after year tarnishes the reputations of our generals. Third, the social contract between the Soldier and the American public needs to be restored. The new secretary of defense should go out of his way to reaffirm the virtue of valor and urge the press and Congress to do the same. Courage, Aristotle said, is the virtue that makes all other virtues possible. As a nation, we have forgotten that. Fourth, the competition for defense resources is going to be fierce. To lessen the budgetary cuts that follow after an unpopular war, a credible general officer must articulate a convincing strategy for land forces. **MR**

NOTES

1. Thom Shanker, “U.S. General Discusses Goals of His Return to Iraq,” *New York Times*, 20 November 2006.

2. “Armed Services Committee Confirmation Hearing for Defense-Secretary Nominee Robert Gates,” 5 December 2006. In the hearing, Armed Services Committee Chairman John Warner, R-VA, remarked that General Peter Pace had told members at a private luncheon that “we’re not winning, but we’re not losing [in Iraq].”

3. Major General William Caldwell, “Iraq Operational Update Briefing,” Multi-National Force-Iraq, Baghdad, Iraq, 5 December 2006.

4. Kirk Semple, “Captain’s Goal: Bring Her Soldiers Home,” *New York Times*, 19 November 2006.

5. Will Weisert, “U.S. Troops in Insurgent Stronghold Welcome Plans for Change,” *New York Times*, 6 December 2006, online at <http://www.boston.com/news/local/connecticut/articles/2006/12/06/us_troops_in_insurgent_stronghold_welcome_plans_for_change/?rss_id=Boston.com+%2F+News>.

6. David S. Cloud and Eric Schmitt, “More Retired Generals Call for Rumsfeld’s Resignation,” *New York Times*, 14 April 2006.

7. General John Abizaid testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 15 November 2006.

8. White House News Conference with President George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, 7 December 2006.

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