"A FOREIGN TROOP" :

Quagmires in History

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Introduction

On July 16, 2003 the American military commander in Iraq, General John P. Abizaid, declared that the enemy was engaging "a classical guerrilla-type" war against the 130,000 U.S. forces stationed in that defeated country. In retrospect, this was a shocking departure from what was heralded in April 2003 as a brilliant and swift conventional war rout of the Iraqi Army, which, of course, it was. For the U.S. command the war was over; for hidden insurgents within Iraq, plus imported irregulars from outside, it was about to begin. This reflects the historic and deep disparity between the strategic "cultures" of regular versus irregular theories of conflict. The ambush attacks which have continued since then have forced wholesale reappraisals of U.S. policies, dramatically leaked last October in Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's famous memo on the war against terror.

The dreaded word "quagmire" is properly discouraged from the official vocabulary, but the possibility of a "long hard slog," as Secretary Rumsfeld described it in his memo, is very close to what quagmire implies. By Webster's short definition, quagmire is "a bog which recedes when stepped upon," with the implication that the initial step is the real mistake and that, analogous to the other "Q" word – "quicksand," the greater the effort expended, the deeper one sinks.

Quagmires are to be avoided, especially by large-force units without lifelines. Can the U.S. gracefully exit from Iraq, leaving stability and democracy behind? Hopefully yes, but time will tell. In the meantime, the signal that “guerrillas” are involved has changed the nature and content of the entire episode.

The word “guerrilla” - and the companion term “insurgency” - recalls the early stages of the Vietnam War some forty years ago, but the deeper history of the word, and the U.S. involvement against guerrillas, is a part of an American past which still remains largely obscure to the general public. If the ghosts of past insurrections have returned to haunt us in Iraq we have nobody else to blame for the ignorance of our own history or for the presumptions which brought us to these dilemmas in the first place. But we are not the first to discover this problem. If there is any consolation in Secretary Rumsfeld’s reappraisals, it might be the recognition that his problem is far from isolated. The current U.S. scenario in Iraq has multiple precedents throughout history. By historical consensus an excellent example of modern counterguerrilla war was the effort waged by the British in arresting the rebellion in Malaya during the 1950’s. As Professor Doughtery of the University of Pennsylvania once wrote, even the British Army, with centuries of experience in colonial wars, was forced, as Rumsfeld has been today, to search for new tactics from scratch:

> During the first two years of the war, the British relied almost exclusively on conventional military measures to put down the rebellion. But they gradually realized that the orthodox modes of warfare taught at Sandhurst were not applicable against an elusive jungle foe who was bent on protracting the conflict as long as possible. … By early 1950, the British had recognized the fact that they were making little or no headway against the MRLA [guerrillas]. They began to devise new approaches, which required a fuller strategic perspective of the situation. (1)

To students of insurgency the current dilemmas in the occupation of Iraq recall similar episodes from American history as well. Largely hidden from the greater picture of conventional strategic dominance, the record of U.S. occupation of foreign lands, with difficult terrain and alien politics, offers a sobering reflection upon the capacity of Americans to transform the political cultures of other populations, even given a huge preponderance of force and generous intentions. There are many cases, but space confines us to only two, both in the nearby Caribbean, within the U.S. geopolitical "sphere of influence," where U.S. soldiers and administrators were free to improvise and dictate terms of occupation, or so they thought.

Rewind: The Past

In Haiti, the U.S. intervened in 1915 to put down violent unrest and prevent a possible German protectorate. The occupation lasted over 19 years, during which the marines eventually subdued a five-year long peasant insurrection led by a partisan band of northern "cacos," who resented the U.S. presence. With the "German problem" long since forgotten, the occupation seemed to take on a life of its own. Subsequent occupation policies saw the U.S. take control over nearly every aspect of Haitian life. According to one specialist, "… the occupying forces treated Haiti as if it were a minor satellite capable of being manipulated at will." (2) Americans (in particular Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Franklin D. Roosevelt) wrote the constitution; the U.S. supervised every election; 1,600 miles of roads were built, plus 15 steel, 68 concrete and 127 wooden bridges. In 1915 Haiti had one car; in 1929 there were 3,000. The U.S. installed a telephone system, built new wharves and lighthouses, school buildings, police barracks, hospitals, courthouses and a new national college. Clean water was supplied to 10 cities and 64

villages. A local constabulary, composed of Haitian recruits, the *Gendarmerie d' Haiti*, was formed to eventually replace the marines. It never did.

Despite the efforts of successive U.S. administrations to bring democracy and modernity to Haiti, the resentment of the population remained just beneath the surface. In 1929 it broke. A student revolt led to a national strike against the U.S. presence. Riots sprung up in major cities. In Cayes, a group of marines became surrounded by a crowd of 1,500 hostile peasants. The frightened Americans opened fire, killing at least 12 and wounding even more. After nearly two decades the intervention was finished, with the marines being withdrawn as expeditiously as possible. For Haiti's part, it continued its long tradition of tyrannical rule, including the bloody dictatorships of the Duvalier family. Nineteen years of occupation had not produced a serious dent within the country's entrenched political culture.

Between 1853 and 1925 the U.S. had dispatched troops to Nicaragua on eleven occasions. In 1926 another of the country's chronic civil wars broke out and the U.S. went in for a twelfth time. During the subsequent seven year occupation the U.S., according to a New York Times correspondent, "ruled Nicaragua more completely than the American Federal Government rules any state in the Union." The initial motive was fear of an alleged Mexican intent to replace U.S. influence with its own. As President Coolidge told Congress, "I have the most conclusive evidence that arms and ammunition in large quantities have been, on several occasions since August 1926, shipped to the revolutionists in Nicaragua…" References to this foreign plot were soon forgotten and, as in Haiti, the original national security objectives were quickly lost within early-century U.S. efforts toward what is now called "nation-building."

Despite a lopsided American presence, including supervision of the fairest elections in Nicaraguan history, the marines found it impossible to contain the northern guerrilla campaign led by August C. Sandino. At first, the power of over 5,000 marines and bluejackets so impressed President Calvin Coolidge's emissary, Henry L. Stimson, that he cabled back to Washington that, "there will be no organized resistance to our action." Another local militia, the *Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua,* was formed to replace the marines. But the *Guardia* only reflected the political divisions in Nicaragua and offered little help and a ton of headaches, including several mutinies. After seven years of frustrating counterguerrilla operations, public and congressional displeasure back home and widespread international condemnation the State Department in 1932 was so frustrated that the Assistant Secretary felt that it would be "preferable to run the risk of revolutionary disturbances now and let the strong man emerge without further waste of time." That is exactly what happened, as the U.S. hand-picked *Guardia* chieftain, Anastasio Somoza, together with his sons, dominated Nicaraguan life and politics until the dynasty was finally deposed by second-generation Sandinistas in 1979. In effect, Nicaragua had come full-circle, with neither the democracy nor the stability which twelve U.S. interventions had intended.

Fast Forward: A Retrospect

U.S. interventions in the 1990's, unlike Iraq, scrupulously avoided casualties, but this resulted from the 1994 tragedy in Somalia, where 18 U.S. soldiers were killed by urban insurgents, with some dragged through the streets in full view of newsreel cameras. The Clinton Administration retreated ignominiously from Somalia but, having been burned, never repeated the same mistake.

The bite had been taken from the American bark, and U.S. foreign policy went through its long period of hibernation, disguised as “assertive multilateralism.” Subsequent interventions into Haiti and the former Yugoslavia, particularly the air campaign over Kosovo and the occupation of Bosnia, (still ongoing) have not carried the burden of American casualties.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 abruptly reversed the American course. Almost immediately, the U.S. leapt out of hibernation, with the announcement of a new “pre-emptive” doctrine of warfare and the repeated promise to sweep the “axis of evil” – indeed, evil itself – from the world stage. From a tame and cooperative strategic mouse, cowering from further casualties and espousing social and judicial treaties on behalf of a benevolent “globalization,” the new American lion roared its “unilateralist” and “Wilsonian” loudest under George W. Bush and declared wholesale war on terror.

The current occupation of Iraq, at least partially the product of “pre-emptive” strategic theories, has offered a more characteristic side of military occupations in history, as outlined above: quick tactical success on the surface, which masquerades hidden and sullen resentment beneath that surface which, in turn, leads to ambush, disorder and, often enough, to guerrilla warfare. The notion that the Iraqi irregulars do not represent the “people” of the country, but only a faction, offers little solace, for the history of resistance to occupation exemplifies similar internal divisions. Guerrillas can exist with the support of a bare fraction of the populace and have done so time and again throughout history. The American Revolution, in this context, was waged by only about one-third of the colonial population. Both the cacos in Haiti, who defied the marines for five years, and the original Sandinistas, who did the same for seven years, were composed of small splinter groups from the general population.

Nor should we find solace that the hidden enemy represents only remnants of Saddam's army or that they may be thugs or killers. They certainly contain elements of both, but until the American public receives better information on the ideological composition of the Iraqi opposition to the U.S. presence, we have little confidence that our characterization represents the whole truth, even though it may represent a partial truth. Thus, the first priority for U.S. intelligence should be to bring the public an accurate and timely assessment of the political personality of the forces who have killed over 500 Americans since last April. "Know thy enemy."

Similar patterns of occupation and resistance against authority have appeared in American history, and in practically every instance the characterization of the enemy as "bandits" or some other form of criminal has masked deeper ideological or nationalist credentials. In Nicaragua, Haiti and in many other episodes of occupation, the American determination to label the unseen enemy as "bandits" only served to hide reality from U.S. authorities. Typical of thousands, the following cable in 1930 from the American Minister to Nicaragua, in a desperate effort to create civil order against the Sandinista partisans, revealed this cultural, historic bias:

> We may not see how the bandits can continue their depredations indefinitely in the face of such persecution as McDougal [Marine General, Douglas] is giving them but the fact remains that they do. … The seriousness of the bandit problem viewed from every angle is so grave that I have given the subject much thought and believe that I have hit upon a plan which gives promise of success if it should be carried out. … The fundamental idea is to occupy the bandit territory, retain it and restore civil order therein. To do this communications must be opened, i.e., roads must be built, and appropriate shelter must be afforded for the troops as they go forward. This is essential. (3)

Throughout American history there has been demonstrated a clear and definitive logic to occupation policies and a similar scenario has reappeared in Iraq over the past year. Even under the most optimistic of circumstances, ie. a stable and democratic Iraq within a reasonable time

frame, the U.S. is already committed to a protracted and lengthy protectorate. This will necessitate ground forces, which places the U.S. as an occupying force from outside, even within an imposed democratic polity. This, also, resembles a historic pattern, outlined in Haiti and Nicaragua, but not confined only to those cases. In each instance, even when the initial resistance ended, U.S. authorities found "exit" policies, as they are now called, extremely difficult. Each occupation took on a life of its own, as officials had to oversee a series of frustrations, setbacks and protracted dilemmas. These were accompanied by the attendant and growing displeasure of practically all of those involved: the population we were supposed to be helping, the troops on the ground and the growth of dissidents both at home and among foreign populations and governments. The historic record reflects a pattern of shifts in mentality from a relative enthusiasm at the beginning to a growing and nagging drop in attitude, ending in most cases to a mood bordering on desperation and the urge to get out of the responsibility at any cost.

A Strategic Perspective

Although the historic record is available, it is not widely appreciated, nor are its lessons fully absorbed. Throughout most of U.S. history the subject of insurgency/ counter-insurgency, terrorism/counter-terrorism has been unpopular and avoided. The legend of warfare in American history has been an-almost exclusive preserve of professional soldier, – a definition that armed conflict was organized only against other military forces in the field, at sea, and later, in the air. All else beneath this level was defined as "banditry," criminality or terrorism beyond the pale of civility, as, indeed, it was. Worse, the profile of the foreign revolutionary, guerrilla/terrorist has often been romanticized beyond reality by left-wing propagandists back home.

In the years subsequent to the great Civil War, Americans have consistently adopted an autonomous image of conflict, elevating the armed forces to a special category reserved only for "real" war and its weapons of mass destruction (only the term is new). Official U.S. Army strategies always stressed heavy equipment, artillery, linear tactics, firepower and concentration for attack against enemy strong points, cities, industry and other vital conventional targets. A 1939 Army Field Service Regulation, for example, trained the American infantry to wage war in the customary style of U.S. Grant and the Union Army:

> The ultimate objective of all military operations is the destruction of the enemies armed forces in battle. Decisive defeat breaks the enemies will to war and forces him to sue for peace which is the material aim. (4)

In the Civil War and in both World Wars, the infantry was the backbone of the American military, joined in World War II, Korea and Vietnam by the greatest naval and air power in history. This faith and optimism in the quality and power of the American war machine is also present today, as the infantry attempts to police Iraq. Such qualities, as well, are amply demonstrated by the history of America's strategic "culture." Summarized in 1941 by the military historian, Maurice Matloff, the strategy aimed against Germany and Japan reflected many of the same currents which led to successive and brilliant victories over Saddam Hussein's army:

> [The U.S. was] already disposed to think in terms of meeting the German armies head on – and the sooner the better. Here was the kernel of the American theory of a war of mass and concentration, in keeping with the traditional 'sharp and decisive' war leading to the defeat of the enemies armies. It reflected American optimism, confidence in its industrial machine and material resources, disinclination to wage a long war of attrition, and faith of the military in quickly preparing for a large citizen army for offensive purpose. (5)

World War II was fought on the American side by an industrial and managerial superiority which overwhelmed Germany and Japan. In the war of mass machines the United States was clearly far ahead of any competitor. This “prodigy of organization,” as Churchill called it, was “an achievement which the soldiers of every other country will study with admiration and envy.” (6) This strategic tradition remains the cornerstone of American occupation policies in Iraq and, however magnificent it has been for national security in the past, conventional forces are usually the *least propitious* unit of the strategic arsenal against insurrection. We are discovering this same reality today in Iraq.

Today, in the setting of the war against terrorism, many of the same features which accompanied the historical American exuberance in foreign policy settings - psychological, cultural, strategic/military - have returned to the atmosphere of 2004. The suggestion here is not the precise repetition of history but a less ambitious notion that historic patterns are stubbornly cyclical, given the presence of factors in both the internal and external settings which offer rough parallels. In this regard, the following elements which have existed throughout U.S. history, are suggestive of a form of historical repetition in the case of Iraq today:

- The existence of an enemy who will not “play by the rules,” ie. the appearance of an “unconventional” opponent requiring an entirely new “counterattack;” (9/11, guerrilla attacks in Iraq);

- The deep American tradition to implement foreign policy goals into great crusades symbolized by lofty political goals; (pledges to democratize the Middle East);

- translation of this belief into the idea that democracy could and would be introduced into the local political culture through U.S. occupation policies; (same, optimism bordering on utopianism);

- The faith and optimism in the capacity of the conventional military machine to master the situation in a definitive and lasting manner; (“mission accomplished”);

- Surprise and drastic improvisation in the search for new tactics against terrorists and guerrillas; (Rumsfeld memo, debates over new tactics);

- Dissolution turning into frustration if the occupation does not translate into stability or if democracy does not flourish; (same);

- Public disapproval if the effort to bring result continues without visible end; (decline in approval ratings, growth of credibility gap, increased political attack);

- Final resolution: either withdrawal in the face of failure or translation of the occupation into a form of "total" war against the enemy and his support (jury still out, but general policies of the Bush rhetoric, "drain the swamp").

Conclusion

In a recent study of U.S. global military operations since Desert Storm, Professor Richard Schultz, Jr. of the Fletcher School, Tufts University, has outlined nine "mutually reinforcing, self-imposed constraints" which have prevented the full use of American Special Operations Forces (SOF) as front-line units in the war on terror, including both wars against Iraq. (7) The result has been a consistently fixed and bureaucratic rejection of almost any type of strategy falling below the threshold of the kind of conventional force operations which have dominated American history. The strategic "cultural war" continues inside Iraq and around the world, just as it did in the early Twentieth Century.

Similarly, the political problems inherent in protracted occupations, which continue even if the original objectives have been gained and worse, if they have been repudiated, have resurfaced almost predictably in Iraq. As in Haiti and in Nicaragua generations ago, initial fears of a foreign threat quickly dissipated, leaving occupation policies left to the devise of military improvisation amidst political objectives to transform distant political cultures, each with its own entrenched heritage, stubborn personalities and regional/ethnic divides. Transformation to

democracy may not have been possible, but it wasn't done, and the interventions were universally seen as strategic failures.

The moods of decision-makers, most of whom were enthusiastic at the beginning, had soured 180 degrees in the face of reality. Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson, who originally authorized troops to Nicaragua, reversed course entirely and lectured against any and all future interventions. With America's declining public image in mind, he answered a reporters question on future occupations with a defiant rejection: "Not on your life. … it would undo all the labor of three years, and it would put me in absolute wrong in China, where Japan has done all that monstrous work …" By 1932 the American Minister in Nicaragua believed "that a disastrous turn of events after the withdrawal of the marines is probable," but he also privately noted that the marine presence may have been the source of the problem: " the possibility of conciliating Sandino will be greater if no marines remain in Nicaragua." The U.S. military hierarchy, in particular, was embittered by the experience. The Marine Corps Commandant blamed the host regime, once drafting an internal memo noting that "his acquiescence in the proposal to withdraw immediately was based on the failure of the Nicaraguan Government to give adequate support to the *Guardia*." The Chief of Naval Operations bitterly complained about "the good name of the Navy and the Marine Corps, which would be getting out with the stigma of having failed in its job and withdrawing in the face of reverses."

Critics at the time blamed U.S. authorities for, alternately, doing too much or too little. At times, emotions ran high, and opposition to the Nicaraguan occupation consumed most of the public's interest in foreign policy. A Senator Dill (D-Washington), once labeled the event as "one of the blackest and foulest crimes that has been committed against men." But most of the reaction was simply confusion against a series of equally confused and contradictory

administration justifications. Another Senator, Wheeler (D- Montana), probably reflected most political objections to the presence of marines in Nicaragua when he posed the rhetorical question, if the marines were fighting “bandits,” could they “not be put to better use in Chicago?” Similar frustrations were felt in the press, perhaps symbolized best by a Scripps-Howard editorial at the time, asking “What is all this fighting about? Why are these young men in marine uniforms being killed?”

But perhaps they all just found themselves embroiled in a quagmire from which neither military strength nor political will allowed escape. Whether we judge these cases as selective and atypical or representative and, thus, typical can be debated, but since they represent reality they cannot be easily dismissed.

With the country now mired deeply within Iraq, and the announced plan to democratize the entire Arab Middle East, Americans should be preparing (or bracing) for the realities of foreign occupation. As historian Jac Weller once described the British Army in revolutionary America as a “foreign troop,” (8) Americans should awaken to the realities and responsibilities of occupation if they intend to be the same and if they intend to impose democracy where it never existed..

The last point remains that there does, indeed, seem to be a pattern of historic cycle in the case of a “foreign troop” in occupation of distant countries. This does not necessarily determine outcomes, tactics, strategies, resolve, will or any of the other imponderables which exist in specific locales. All it suggests is a logical outline of comparison which, if detailed, might provide greater wisdom upon the subject than improvisation or panic. If the U.S. is to prevail in Iraq and preserve society against global terrorism, it may find its own history and the accompanying strategic culture as difficult to overcome as the enemy abroad.

Notes

1. "The Guerrilla War in Malaya," *U.S. Naval Institute Procedings,* September, 1958.
2. Robert Rotberg, *Haiti: The Politics of Squalor*, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1971), p. 119.
3. All quotes from the Nicaraguan case from John J. Tierney, Jr. "U.S. Intervention in Nicaragua, 1927-1933, Lessons for Today," *Orbis*, Winter, 1971.
4. Quoted in Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War*, (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 221.
5. Quoted in "The American Approach to War," in Michael Howard (editor), *The Theory and Practice of War,* (London: Cassell, 1965), p. 235.
6. Quoted in Ernest Dupuy, *The Compact History of the United States Army*, (New York: Hawthorn, 1956), p. 265.
7. "Showstoppers," *The Weekly Standard,* January 26, 2004.
8. "The Irregular War in the South," *Military Affairs,* Fall 1960.