

The Second End to Major Hostilities?

By Winslow T. Wheeler

In telling us his thoughts on the capture of Saddam Hussein, President George W. Bush did not err by re-announcing the “end of major hostilities” in Iraq. He didn’t have to; others have been making that mistake for him.

Commanders in Iraq, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, and others tell us Saddam’s loyalists will still take their toll of violence against our forces and Iraqis who serve them. Dr. Rice and others have learned from their past mistake of advising the President to declare the worst of the fighting and dying to be over. However, from occupation chief Paul Bremer’s ebullient “We got him” to the Army officer who declared “a tremendous negative impact on the Baathist insurgency” to a virtual horde of domestic prognosticators, we also hear a major corner has been turned. With Saddam behind bars, they imply or state outright the path now clear for a happy ending for the American adventure in Iraq.

That is not the case. The tipping point – that is, the Bush crowd’s version of the Indochinese “light at the end of the tunnel” -- is no where in sight. This sign-post in their linear vision of the war will remain invisible, indeed non-existent, as long as Washington D.C. continues fundamentally to misunderstand the nature of the conflict in Iraq.

Saddam’s capture has not sucked the air out of the violence in Iraq. The reason for the chaos remains at liberty, stimulating new attacks against Americans and others in a target rich environment. What sustains them is not Saddam Hussein; it is the occupation itself and the forces in Iraqi society it has unleashed.

Before the U.S. media jumped on its “all bearded Saddam; all the time” frenzy, we were reading daily about “getting tough” against “dead enders” and foreigners who were responsible for the attacks. Our soldiers have been fighting bravely as they are trained, equipped, and ordered, but Washington was and remains caught in a cultural warp fighting a war beyond its comprehension.

The occupation has been converting what were once welcoming, neutral, or merely taciturn Iraqis – for now mostly Sunnis -- into willing irregular fighters protected by a population that is either hostile and bitterly anxious for the Americans to be gone or simply offended and, for now, seeing no alternative to waiting for the Americans to be gone. We have also been virtually standing by – happy for them to kill someone besides our troops -- while Sunnis, Shi’ites, Kurds, and others take revenge against each other and among themselves.

It started with the looting back in May, when our forces – their number inadequate to the task – were ordered to stand by and watch as Iraqi society disintegrated. It continued with the lawlessness exacerbated by American troops responding to guerrilla attacks as if they were on a conventional battlefield and hunting down the enemy as if he were bandits isolated from the population. Apartment buildings riddled with holes from American machine guns, homes bombed from the air based on a tipster’s whisper, relatives imprisoned to help us find people beyond Saddam our intelligence can’t locate, and our soldiers blaring rock music while they bulldoze centuries-old groves of date and citrus trees: they tell us such insults are the exigencies of war. They also expand the ranks of a broader resistance and strengthen its resolve. Their leader is not Saddam Hussein, but we have been doing more than any Iraqi to help them find one.

Worse, these actions do not ignite just the Sunni minority; behavior no American would tolerate here, even from our own, let alone from an occupier, inflames across all the fissures in Iraqi society. It is just a matter of time before Iraq's patience for us to leave is at an end.

Iraq is not Vietnam, but we need to heed old lessons. After the American defeat in that war, a U.S. Army officer remarked to a North Vietnamese that his forces never defeated the American Army in a major tactical engagement. The North Vietnamese responded, "That may be true, but it is also irrelevant." Guerrilla wars are won and lost at the moral and strategic levels. The tactical fighting is an extension of the higher conflict; in fact, how tactical engagements are fought is at least as important as whether they are won.

Unless the American occupation alters course radically to put Iraqis in charge of their own fate and doing so with unseemly haste rather than the arrogance of patience, we will be asking our troops in Iraq to accept a bitter pill: that their sacrifice and the hope they saw with Saddam's capture were just more twists in an occupation for which the patience of Americans was only slightly longer than that of the Iraqis.

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