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How to Win in Iraq

A stable Iraqi state would constitute a strategic victory—and the only one still possible.

by William S. Lind

Among the bits of lore of the United States Senate is a story that dates back to before I arrived there in 1973 as a staffer to Sen. Robert Taft Jr. of Ohio.

A senator—from New York, perhaps—known for depending wholly on his staff while treating it with contempt, told his assistant for foreign policy, “I want to give a major speech on the Vietnam War tomorrow morning. Stay here all night and write it.” With that, the senator headed out for a Capitol Hill reception rich with giant shrimp and large checks.

The staffer did as he was bidden, despite the fact that it was his anniversary, and his wife had made grand plans. The next morning, the senator found the text of the speech in his inbox. Snatching it eagerly, he proceeded directly to the floor of the Senate. His voice booming, he laid out a brilliant and incisive analysis of the war. At the bottom of the seventh page, he proclaimed, “I will now lay out my plan for winning the Vietnam War.” Page eight began with the words, “Now you’re on your own, you S.O.B. I quit.”

At the risk of finding myself in the same situation, I offer my plan for winning in Iraq.

The starting point, despite the disastrous course of the war to date, is to realize that the only possibilities for victory lie at the strategic level, not the tactical level. In part this is because we have botched the tactical level beyond redemption. While the efforts of General Petraeus and the Marines in Anbar province to apply classic counter-insurgency doctrine and protect the population instead of brutalizing it are laudatory, they come too late.

In larger part, we cannot win at the tactical level because this kind of war is not additive. You cannot win at the strategic level simply by accumulating tactical successes, as our Second-Generation, firepower/attrition-oriented military automatically assumes. The strategic level follows its own logic, and strategic victory requires a sound strategy. When, as is currently the case, we have no strategy, this fact works against us. If, however, we adopt a prudent strategy, it can work for us. Because a higher level of war trumps a lower, we can yet redeem our many tactical failures at the strategic level. In other words, we can still win.

To devise a successful strategy, we must begin by defining what we mean by winning. The Bush administration, consistent with its record of military incompetence, continues to pursue the folly of maximalist objectives. It still defines victory as it did at the war’s outset: an Iraq that is an American satellite, friendly to Israel, happy to provide the U.S. with a limitless supply of oil and vast military bases from which American forces can dominate the region. None of these objectives are now attainable. None were ever attainable, no matter what our troops did. And as long as those objectives define victory, we are doomed to defeat.

Fortunately, another objective, the one that actually matters most, may, with luck and skill, still be achieved. That objective—restoring a state in what is now the stateless region of Mesopotamia—must become our new definition of victory.

This definition is not arbitrary. On the contrary, it reflects a correct, Fourth-Generation understanding of the threat. The serious threat to America, in the Middle East and elsewhere, is not any state. Rather, it is posed by a growing congeries of non-state organizations, which we label “terrorists.”

Non-state forces win when states are destroyed and are replaced by stateless regions. Even the long-term objective of al-Qaeda is not a state but a restored caliphate, a type of social organization that precedes the state by centuries. In the meantime, stateless chaos will serve very well, thank you.

And thank us they do because our initial invasion of Iraq and subsequent blunders, such as sending home the Iraqi army and civil service, destroyed the Iraqi state. It has not been rebuilt. We created the illusion of an Iraqi government in Baghdad’s Green Zone, but it is a government without a state, which is to say a Potemkin parliament. As long as Iraq remains stateless, our non-state enemies win.

The other side of the same coin, however, offers us a chance for victory. If a real state can be restored in Iraq, al-Qaeda and the other Islamic non-state forces lose. That is true regardless of the nature of a restored Iraqi state. States dislike competition, and the definition of a state says that it must have a monopoly of violence within its borders. If that suggests something about the state of the state—in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere—well, it should.

Winning the war in Iraq therefore means seeing the re-creation of an Iraqi state. I say “seeing,” not “re-creating,” because our strategy, if it is to have a chance of success, must proceed from a realistic understanding of the situation in Iraq. We do not now have the power to re-create a state in Iraq, if we ever did. That is due in part to military failure, but it has more to do with a problem of legitimacy. As a foreign, Christian invader and occupier, we cannot create any legitimate institutions in Iraq. Quite the contrary: we have the reverse Midas touch. Any institution we create, or merely approve of and support, loses its legitimacy.

That means our new strategy must employ what the British military theorist Basil Liddell-Hart called an “indirect approach.” This is chancy. So is war itself. You cannot guarantee events; you try instead to influence them. Again, this reflects a realistic appreciation of the situation in Iraq. Our vaunted “boots on the ground” have been fought to a stalemate by flip flops in the alleys. In this kind of war, a stalemate means we have lost tactically. A combination of good strategy and some luck may yet enable us to pull our chestnuts out of the fire, but we are in no position to dictate events. We must try, instead, to shape and ride them.

An indirect approach to winning the war in Iraq on the strategic level has three central elements. The first is the lesson of Nixon’s trip to China.

That brilliant diplomatic move of establishing a rapprochement with China in effect won the Vietnam War for the United States. The threat that drew us into a major war was not North Vietnam, a power of purely local significance. Rather, it was Mao’s doctrine of exporting wars of national liberation. (The phrase at the time was “Two, three, many Vietnams.”) The new relationship Nixon established with China ended that threat, rendering our defeat on the ground in Vietnam irrelevant.

In the case of the war in Iraq, Iran is China, and the first component of a strategy to win in Iraq is to establish a rapprochement with Iran. That is, a general settlement of differences. The Iranians have

offered us such a settlement—including a compromise on the nuclear issue—on generous terms. But the Bush administration, true to its hubris, refused to consider it, going so far as to upbraid the Swiss for daring to forward the overture to us. It seems, however, to remain on the table.

The reason a strategy to win in Iraq must begin with a rapprochement with Iran is that any real Iraqi state is likely to be allied to Iran. Even the quisling al-Maliki government cowering in the Green Zone is close to Iran. A legitimate Iraqi government, which is virtually certain to be dominated by Iraq's Shi'ites, will probably be much closer.

A restored Iraqi state that is allied with Iran will quickly roll up al-Qaeda and other non-state forces in Iraq, which is the victory we most require. But the world's perception will still be that the United States was defeated because its main regional rival, Iran, will emerge much strengthened. If Iran and America are no longer enemies, that issue becomes moot.

A rapprochement with Iran may encourage Tehran to use its influence in Iraq to promote the revival of a state, but that is in Iran's interest in any case once it is clear American troops are withdrawing. Conversely, until it is clear that America has given up its ambitions for large, permanent military bases in Iraq, Iran must continue to promote instability in its neighbor.

Once it becomes possible for both the U.S. and Iran to win in Iraq, we must move to the second element of our new strategy: allowing any elements that may hold the potential of restoring an Iraqi state to rise within Iraq. Consistent with an indirect approach, this means letting go.

At present, the United States works to suppress any elements that challenge the al-Maliki government. We teeter on the verge of open war with the most prominent of those elements, Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army. On the ground, al-Sadr is the leader most likely to restore an Iraqi state, and thanks to his steadfast opposition to the American occupation, he has legitimacy. While he may not have the support of a majority of Iraq's Shi'ites, majorities do not make history. He is the leader of the Shi'ites who count, which is to say the young men willing to fight. Nor is al-Sadr merely a Shi'ite leader; he has kept open channels of communication to at least some of the Sunni insurgent groups—and perhaps channels not of communication only. Some of the Sunni insurgents clearly have benefited from Iranian support, which may have come through al-Sadr. Of late, al-Sadr has taken care to restrain his followers from revenge attacks against Sunnis, stressing Shi'ite-Sunni unity against the foreign occupier. He has had his eye on the brass ring, the supreme leadership position in a restored Iraqi state, from the beginning. Now he may see it as within reach.

Our new strategy would let him grab it. Under his leadership, or that of anyone else in Iraq with a shred of legitimacy, a restored Iraqi state will not be a friend of America. Given what we have done to that country, we can hardly expect it to be. But our new strategy has no such unattainable objective. Its objective is solely the restoration of a real state, and that al-Sadr may be able to accomplish. If he can, we will have little to complain about in terms of his toleration of al-Qaeda or other Fourth Generation elements. Nor will his close relationship with Iran be a problem, given that we will no longer regard Iran as an enemy.

There is, of course, no guarantee that al-Sadr or anyone else in Iraq can restore a state. The only sure thing is that we cannot do so, as four years of failure have amply demonstrated. The one chance of victory we have left is to get out of the way of al-Sadr and anyone else in Iraq who might be able to re-create an Iraqi state, praying fervently that they succeed. Having failed in our own efforts, it is time to give the Iraqis and Dame Fortune our place at the gaming table.

Some may object that a rapprochement with Iran coupled with allowing al-Sadr or someone like him to become the leader of a restored Iraqi state will upset the Sunni regimes in the Middle East. Indeed it may, but that is not our problem. There is little the Sunni states can do about it, given the regions' geography. Syria is in a position to support a continued insurgency by Iraqi Sunnis, but Syria is ruled by an Alawite clique, and the Alawites are offshoots of Shi'ism. The Saudis will be both angry and terrified, but beyond supplying Iraq's Sunni insurgents with money and volunteers, which they are already doing, they cannot intervene. Saudi Arabia's armed forces are a joke, and overt Saudi military intervention in Iraq would quickly fail. All the other Sunni states are too far away to do anything effective.

Moreover, by accentuating the Sunni-Shi'ite rivalry within Islam, we may help fold Islamic expansionism back on itself, an essential quality of any indirect approach. As James Kurth wrote in a September 2005 article in this magazine entitled "Splitting Islam":

If the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict became not only intense and widespread but also prolonged, perhaps as much so as the Sino-Soviet conflict during the last three decades of the Cold War, the global Islamist movement might have almost no meaning or attraction at all. In the Muslim world there might be Sunni Islamists and Shi'ite Islamists, but each might consider their greatest enemy to be not the United States, but each other.

The third and final element of a strategy for winning in Iraq is to withdraw all American forces as rapidly as possible, which means within 12-18 months. That is the only way we can create the space necessary for al-Sadr or someone else to re-create an Iraqi state. If we remain and work against him, a dicey task becomes that much harder, undermining both him and our strategic goal. And if we work for him, he loses legitimacy, the *sine qua non* for re-creating a state in Iraq.

In this strategy, our withdrawal is not that of a defeated army. It is a strategic withdrawal—a necessary part of our strategy. That distinction is a critical for our prestige in the world, for the future health of America's Armed Forces, and for our domestic politics, which could be roiled beyond what any conservative would desire by a vast military defeat.

If our new strategy works and our withdrawal is followed by the restoration of a real Iraqi state, we will have learned our lesson about wars of choice, but avoided a catastrophe. If it fails and Mesopotamia remains a stateless region, Iraq is no worse off than it is now, and our troops will be safely out of the mess.

There is no chance the Bush administration, locked in a *Totentanz* with its dreams of world empire, will adopt this strategy. But the presidential debate season has already begun, and a bevy of candidates in both parties are looking around for something, anything that might get us out of the Iraqi morass without accepting defeat. If just one of them picks up on it, those yawningly dull debates might get a lot more interesting.

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