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Iraq -- a halftime assessment

Thomas J. Raleigh
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New York -- Recognizing the complexity of the challenges that confront coalition forces and the embryonic Iraqi government, it would be wise to observe developments in Iraq with a certain degree of pessimism. Premature predictions of victory, best-case planning assumptions, turning points, tipping points and other expressions of gratuitous optimism have not served the Iraqi people and certainly not American troops fighting in Iraq.

This thing is far from over.

The coalition is still in the early stages of a prolonged struggle to achieve a safe and secure environment in Iraq that will allow democracy to take root. A good deal of fighting may lie ahead. In any engagement, our troops will prevail.

However, our leaders should not become obsessed with attaining victory or success solely on the battlefield. Were they to do this, historians might say again that we won the battles but lost the war. This can be avoided by soberly assessing the tactical situation and adopting a more multidimensional and flexible approach.

While the recent elections in Iraq were encouraging, there has also been a downside. Sectarian violence -- Sunni versus Shiite -- has increased dramatically. Our troops find themselves in the position of simultaneously fighting an insurgency -- one that enjoys popular support -- and a terrorist threat from al Qaeda -- one that continues to elude wholesale detection and destruction.

These are different groups with different goals. Lumping Sunni insurgents and al Qaeda together as "terrorists" is not only inaccurate, it precludes the very strategy that the coalition ought to pursue: divide and conquer, or perhaps better, "divide and persuade."

Despite the recent arrest of several high-ranking insurgent and terrorist leaders, it still appears that our tactical intelligence remains abysmal. Lacking reliable sources who have access to information and are inclined to share it, coalition forces don't have an accurate picture of the size and scope of the insurgency, or of a footprint of al Qaeda and other mercenaries in Iraq. Nor do our troops know to what extent these hostile groups are coordinating their efforts.

The insurgents, on the other hand, have guys in our locker room before the game. Exploiting a network of informants that once worked on behalf of the Baathist regime, hostile operatives have penetrated coalition and Iraqi government institutions; Army bases, police stations and municipal offices are likely riddled with informers working for the other side. The results are the grisly attacks against coalition troops and Iraqi civilians we read about daily

This "intelligence gap," unfortunately, is not easily corrected. In the meantime, 30,000 insurgents (the latest estimate I have seen) can cause a lot of destruction. Moreover, I have been struggling for some time to recall a successful counterinsurgency -- one of similar magnitude fought in the 20th century in which the insurgents were defeated exclusively on the battlefield, and in a manner that could not be characterized as excessively brutal or as genocide. I have not come up with one.

It is time to re-evaluate how best to achieve American objectives in Iraq. In terms of a way ahead, I suggest a threefold approach.

First, train and validate the readiness and reliability of Iraqi security forces. Though this has been a key component of our strategy for some time, it remains unclear that the focus is where it ought to be. There has been a preoccupation with the number of Iraqis that have been trained rather than a focus on the number of Iraqi companies and battalions ready to fight. Progress is being made for sure, but there is little chance that the Iraqis will be in a position to provide their own security by yearend.

Second, marginalize al Qaeda. If, indeed, there is presently some degree of cooperation and coordination between the insurgency and al Qaeda, the coalition ought to drive a wedge between the two groups. The main effort might be psychological operations and a public information campaign that makes it clear that the coalition will not negotiate with al Qaeda, and those who provide aid and comfort to al Qaeda operatives will have no future in Iraq.

Third, pressure and persuade Sunni insurgents to accept a political solution. However despicable their tactics might be, Sunni insurgents are pursuing their objectives of legitimacy and power, as military strategist Carl von Clausewitz would say, "by other means." The insurgents are not terrorists and the coalition ought to make it clear that it understands this by recognizing a political wing of the insurgency (as Sinn Fein is to the IRA in Northern Ireland) and demonstrating a willingness to negotiate.

What do the Sunnis want? A share of the power? A time table for troop withdrawals? A degree of self-rule in Sunni populated regions? These and a great many other things can be negotiated (save any accommodation with al Qaeda), and all that it will likely require is an announced cease-fire and a suspension of the bombing campaign.

If our plan in Iraq is to "stay the course" under the delusion that "resolve" will carry the day, we are making a big mistake. We must recognize that we face a sophisticated, determined and multidimensional enemy, and that success in Iraq will require a sophisticated, flexible, and multidimensional approach; one that does not necessarily require the utter defeat of the insurgency on the battlefield.

If we do little more than "gut it out" until Iraqi security forces are trained, another 500 to 600 American soldiers and Marines will die this year fighting in Iraq; and come 2006, we may not be much closer to achieving U.S. goals than we are now. As of March 16, 185 Americans have been killed in Iraq in 2005. There is no doubt -- our troops are in for a very tough year.

Watch the trends, do the math, come to your own conclusions.

Thomas Raleigh is a retired Army lieutenant colonel, who served in infantry troop assignments, and as a military diplomat in Moscow and Vienna. He is the managing director for Real Textiles, an international consulting firm in New York City.