

The Irish Voice

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Iraqi insurgents-- lessons from Ireland

By Thomas J. Raleigh

NEW YORK - This past St. Patrick's Day I did something different; I went to library. I needed to sort out the jumbled thoughts bouncing around in my brain relating to the war in Iraq, insurgency, counterinsurgency, and the little I know about Irish history. My intuition was that there is a lesson there. My instincts were right. An examination of what is happening in Iraq through a prism of Irish experiences can serve to put the Iraq insurgency into perspective and help explain why it has been so difficult to defeat it. It can also suggest a new approach towards achieving a safe, secure and stable Iraq as we mark the 2nd anniversary (20 March) of the invasion.

Few American are likely aware that the father of the modern urban insurgency was an Irishman. If Michael Collins didn't indeed invent this type of fighting, he certainly perfected it. Those who dismiss insurgents as "dead-enders" or "bandits" would be wise to note what Collins managed to achieve with only a few thousand lightly-armed men (my grandfather in County Clare among them). In only a few years, Collins and his "Flying Columns" compelled the British Empire to meet him at the negotiating table. How did he do it? The short answer is that by intimidation, infiltration, and assassination, Collins crippled British intelligence in Ireland.

But enough ancient history. Venture a guess as to what the following passage describes:

"The army's role ... stripped to its essentials, was reactive and bad for morale. The army's street patrols offered ready targets to snipers. Terrorist bombs, cunningly booby-trapped, killed and maimed ordnance teams sent to defuse them. In the countryside, where it was still a soldier's war, military vehicles were shredded in the sudden mayhem of culvert bombs triggered remotely. Even behind the wire at fortified bases...the soldiers were not safe from mortar attack."

Iraq 2004? 2005? No, Northern Ireland in 1972. The passage is from the book "The Irish War" by Tony Geraghty. After a British campaign eliminated Republican no-go areas - to include troublesome Derry, an IRA Fallujah if you will - the IRA went to ground and undertook a protracted bombing campaign. British forces gradually transitioned from conventional operations - patrolling, sweeps and the like - to unconventional operations led by the Special Air Service (SAS). Geraghty, a veteran war correspondent and former British army officer, writes "Coherently organized military intelligence proved to be the most pervasive influence that the SAS brought to bear in Ireland, a more potent weapon than its formidable firepower, skill-at-arms and courage."

Though it would be wise to examine whether we have the right mix of forces deployed in Iraq, I am not necessarily suggesting that we use in Iraq the sometimes controversial methods the British adopted in Northern Ireland. There are significant differences between the situations in Northern Ireland and Iraq in terms of the existing security environment on which the insurgency is superimposed. However, we must recognize that defeating any insurgency requires specialized troops and accurate and timely intelligence. Unfortunately, in terms of intelligence, we are - to use a baseball term - behind in the count.

As it was for the British in Ireland, intelligence is our Achilles heel in Iraq. Despite the occasional arrest of a high-ranking insurgent or terrorist leader, it nevertheless appears that – in the main - coalition tactical intelligence is sketchy at best. We sorely lack informers and agents who have information on the bad guys- insurgents, Al Qaeda, and other terrorists and mercenaries. I take little solace from the words of Defense Secretary Rumsfeld that “we know what we don’t know.” I have read how the British in Dublin Castle futilely tried to stay one step ahead of the IRA, and hunt down their bogeyman Michael Collins who casually rode his bicycle through Dublin streets. Today, the coalition in Iraq is in an equally unenviable, frustrating and vulnerable position as it struggles to wrest the initiative from the insurgency, and capture the elusive terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

In his book “Intelligence in War,” military historian John Keegan suggests that the targeting and destruction of fundamentalist networks absolutely requires old-school, up-close-and-personal human intelligence. Further, comparing us with other countries which have had a good deal of colonial experience in the region, Keegan contends that the United States is among the least capable of recruiting and developing agents capable of penetrating Arab-Islamic terrorist networks. In short, fixing our intelligence problem is no easy matter, nor something that can be done quickly. I think Keegan is right, and his concerns portend tough days ahead not only in Iraq, but also in the global fight against terrorism.

And while our intelligence stinks, what makes it worse is that there is much to indicate that those opposing us in Iraq have excellent intelligence. Just as Collins infiltrated British security structures in Ireland eighty years ago, today in Iraq hostile operatives have penetrated many coalition and government institutions, to include military bases, police headquarters and municipal offices. The results are the daily attacks we witness against coalition troops and Iraqi civilians; well-planned attacks that are based on timely and accurate intelligence.

In terms of the size of the insurgency, what are we up against? The administration, the Iraqi government, and the Pentagon have all thrown some numbers around. Estimates went from 2000 to 5000 last summer, to 12,000 to 20,000 in October, and now are as high as 30,000. Let’s compare these numbers with the conflicts in Ireland; “just for curiosity sake” as my father used to say.

At the height of the Anglo-Irish War, the IRA had only about 3000 active members fighting more than 50,000 British soldiers. More recently, in Northern Ireland, IRA membership peaked in the mid-1970s at 1,500. One might now understand the reason behind the level of violence we are currently witnessing in Iraq. 30,000 (!) - even 1500 – hostiles can make an awful lot of mayhem if you have little idea who they are and what they are planning to do next.

The insurgency, the “intelligence deficit”, the increasing challenge of force exhaustion, and the ever-shrinking coalition compel us to consider a new approach, a new strategy, to achieve coalition goals in Iraq. I suggest one that includes three mutually reinforcing and converging vectors. First, train and equip 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. I continue to detect - in Congressional hearings and on the Sunday news shows - a preoccupation regarding the number of Iraqis that have been trained. Though there is a certain intrinsic quality in quantity, the number of trained Iraqi soldiers (or police officers) is a statistic with little meaning. Instead, progress and success in the train and equip programs ought to be measured by the number of Iraqi units - companies and battalions - that are stood up and validated as ready to fight; capable of planning and conducting a full range of combined arms operations and coordinated security missions.

Second, marginalize Al Qaeda; drive a wedge between it and the insurgency. Make it clear that those who associate themselves with Al Qaeda will have no future in Iraq. This will reduce Al Qaeda's freedom of action and make it more susceptible to detection and destruction.

Third, but most importantly, pressure and persuade Sunni insurgents to accept a political solution. This will require the insurgency to establish a political wing (as Sinn Fein was/is to the IRA), the Iraqi government and other mediators to recognize it, and - when the time is right - for both parties to negotiate in earnest.

Negotiate? With those killers; those assassins?

Up until he led the Irish delegation to peace talks in London in October 1922, Michael Collins was the most wanted man in Ireland. As Martin Gilbert notes in his biography on Winston Churchill, in order to spare his Cabinet the embarrassment of having to shake hands with men regarded by some as murderers, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George came upon a simple solution; he used an extra wide table at 10 Downing Street to conduct the negotiations. (The parties reached an agreement that established the Irish Free State by Christmas.)

It may not be time - right now - to negotiate, but someone in Baghdad ought to be looking to buy some furniture.

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