

## Step by step...In or Out?

By

William R. Polk

Over recent weeks in a series of small, individually undramatic steps, and now in what may turn out to be a great leap forward, the Bush administration is moving deeper into the Iraqi quicksand. In the words of the American commander, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, "We are not walking away, we are not faltering, we are going to win this battle and this war."

Against whom will General Sanchez fight? For the past two months, military spokesmen in Iraq and Washington have reacted to the steady litany of attacks on the 130,000 American force by blaming "die-hard Baathists," "fringe elements still loyal to Saddam Husain," "criminals" and/or "foreign terrorists who have sneaked into Iraq." President Bush has described them as "a handful of people who do not want to live in freedom." This "handful" is now launching between 30 and 35 attacks a day on American targets. The latest C.I.A. estimate is that the insurgents number about 50,000 and are growing.

In *La Vanguardia* in a series of articles from July onwards, I warned that what was developing in Iraq was a classic example of guerrilla warfare and that, rather than being fought by a small band of fanatics, it was assuming the character of a national struggle. Now, General Sanchez has admitted that this is true: Iraq is at war.

Two questions must be asked: the first is what is the nature of the struggle?

Time after time since the Second World War, occupying governments have described their native opponents as bandits, fanatics or terrorists. When we approved of

their resistance, we picked other words – they were brave patriots, resistance fighters, stalwart supporters of liberty. The list is a long one, and their politics varied. Some were Communists, some were Democrats. Some really were bandits. But what unifies them all is a single motivation – they were inspired by nationalism.

In Vietnam, the American government tried to convince itself, and others, that its opponents were not nationalists but foreigners. Its slogan was “Ho Chi-Minh go home.” But, however much many Vietnamese disliked the Communists, they agreed that Ho Chi-Minh was at home. The foreigners were the Americans. And, as the war continued and grew more bloody, increasing numbers of Vietnamese wanted the Americans to go home.

The very expensive lesson the Americans should have been learning was that nationalism is the world’s most powerful single political ideology. In the contest between that ideology and military force, military force lost.

Today’s Iraq bears some resemblance to the early stages of the Vietnam war. True, there is no “north” with its organized army and no “south” with its disciplined Vietcong cadres. But what is becoming evident in Iraq today is that increasing numbers of people are acting as what that great strategist of guerrilla warfare, Mao Tse-tung, memorably called the “sea.” The sea, he said is the supporting element for guerrillas. Popular support is what makes guerrilla warfare possible.

So, when we read day after day of blatant attacks, like the one on the Rashid Hotel headquarters of the Americans in the very center of Baghdad on October 26, we know that what the American occupation forces face is not just small groups of wild-eyed fanatics or foreign gunmen. Such attacks could not be mounted without the support of large numbers of people and certainly not without at least the acquiescence of much

larger numbers. The existence of the “sea” can no longer be denied. And, if the American commander is to be believed, the “fish” are proliferating. Despite President Bush’s proclamation that the war has ended, their numbers are growing.

The second question is what can the American administration now do about Iraq?

Essentially, there are two possible answers: get in deeper or get out. Of course, there is a big difference in how each answer is spelled out. But consider them briefly in outline.

In the 1960s in Vietnam, the American answer was to get in, deeper and deeper. From a few hundred “advisers” in 1961, the American contingent grew to nearly half a million. Every time the news got worse, more troops were sent. Casualties mounted and vast amounts of treasure were spent. Area after area, and soon the whole south, was “insecure.” Even members of the southern president’s office, as we later learned, were secret supporters of the guerrillas.

By the beginning of the Nixon administration, the “in” strategy was clearly bankrupt. So, after trying to disguise its failure by “Vietnamizing” the war, America abruptly pulled out. The South Vietnam government, which had little popular support, quickly collapsed.

Today, in Iraq, something close to the early stages of this process can already be discerned: America “gets tough” while attempting to create “a South” in the governing council, the resurrected Iraqi army and what can be salvaged from the old bureaucracy. But, rather than making America seem more “Iraqi,” the new “Iraqi” organizations appear more and more alien.

Meanwhile the guerrillas hope that each American escalation – each attempt to “win this battle” with overwhelming military force -- will create more nationalist anger. They must believe that time is on their side – that, in Iraq as in Vietnam, as casualties mount, the Americans will get tired and will find some means to just “walk away.”

However, the C.I.A. station in Baghdad reported two days ago, according to *The New York Times*, that Iraqis now believe America will give up and leave. As the American elections loom in front of the Bush administration, the guerrillas must hope that they will not have to wait very long.

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