

A Little Tenderness

Under the headline “A little tenderness can turn around insurgents,” the *International Herald Tribune* on August 26 published an article on how to win the war in Iraq. I was on the point of consigning it to my already overloaded file of trivia when I realized that it was important, although important in ways the authors did not intend.

I have not met the authors, Scott Gerwehr and Nina Hachigian, who both work at RAND, a spin-off of the U.S. Air Force which is now largely funded by the Pentagon; they describe RAND as a “nonprofit research organization,” but obviously it is more than that. Being quasi-governmental it affords people like Mr. Gerwehr and Ms. Hachigian access to classified information and the time and opportunity to think about major policy issues. So what do they give us?

The article focuses on a program known as “open arms” (*Chieu Hoi*) which they say “succeeded in winning the support of nearly 200,000 [Viet Cong] fighters for the American-backed government of South Vietnam.” In return for better food, vocational training, jobs and clemency, some of the captives provided intelligence and a few even took up arms, ostensibly for us. If we did the same thing with the 10,000 or so imprisoned Iraqis, the authors argue, we could “reap huge dividends in terms of gaining intelligence for our forces, diminishing support for the insurgents and reducing anti-American sentiment among average Iraqis.” In short, snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

What is important about the article is not what it says about *Chieu Hoi* but what it tells us about ourselves. For all our great virtues, Americans are prone to seek gimmicks, forget history and adjust reality to fit our hopes. The article by Mr. Gerwehr and Ms. Hachigian exemplifies all three.

The gimmick is obvious: be (relatively) kind and your enemy will come to love you. That, we are told was the “brainchild” of three experienced counter-insurgency warriors.¹ Did it work in Vietnam? We now know that the Viet Cong had active agents throughout the South Vietnamese government (including the office of the president), the foreign press (including the *New York Times*) and the South Vietnamese general staff.²

¹ Sir Robert Thompson, then much lauded as the wise counter-insurgent, had won his spurs in the fight against the Malaysian insurgents. But that was not a “war” so much as a limited police action; the tactics that Thompson suggested for Vietnam were evidently inappropriate although also obviously beguiling. The other two men, Rufus Phillips and Charles Bohannon, were credited with having won the war against the Muslim insurgents in the Philippines. That insurgency, as we know, is still going on.

² The penetration of the South Vietnam government and the foreign press have been widely reported; perhaps less well known is the penetration of the South Vietnamese general staff. While I was still in the government, I was chairman of various task forces on one of which served a brilliant Marine colonel (later a Lt. general); in due course, he was sent to Vietnam as operations officer of the First Marine division. When he returned, he told me that his painful experience was that if any information on operations was passed to the Vietnamese general staff, the Marines inevitably walked into an ambush.

In contrast, I have yet to hear of a single penetration of the Viet Cong by any of our agents nor does anyone confirm any gainful intelligence from the 200,000 *Chieu Hoi* beneficiaries. But let us assume that Mr. Gerwehr and Ms. Hachigian are right: that we did get “good sources of intelligence” in this way. At best that would have been a small piece of the over all tactical “package” which included the assassination of about 23,000 Vietnamese suspects (the “Phoenix” program), the introduction of nearly half a million U.S. troops, the training of a whole South Vietnamese army, the development of such “winning” devices as the light weight rifle (the M-16) and the deployment of an armada of helicopters. The costs included the death of about 2 million Vietnamese and the derailing of the domestic American development program. What was the result? Defeat.

Why? Example after historical example – dating back to our own Revolution in 1775 -- should have taught us a simple fact: no people like to be dominated by foreigners. When they can do so, they will struggle for independence. That is the central reality of Vietnam and is the central reality of Iraq. The “good cop” (*Chieu Hoi*) “bad cop” (Abu Ghuraib) routine may work among natives of a country but not between foreigners and natives. It has been repeatedly tried and seen to fail everywhere. Apparently none of our leaders has any historical memory.

We Americans not only are oblivious of the past, but we also insist on adjusting the current world to fit our preconceptions. This is certainly true of the Bush administration, but, to be fair, it was also true of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations: Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was as unwilling to listen to information and analysis that did not “fit” his world view as is Donald Rumsfeld. That is why it is so important that we have some informed, independent and *influential* intelligence evaluation process. Only by a vigorous application of judgment can we hope to avoid costly mistakes or to correct them before they become disasters. Intelligence evaluation, is a casualty of the Bush administration.

What would such an evaluation process now be telling the leaders of our government? We can reconstruct at least some of the intelligence “appreciation,” from what is now appearing *outside* government councils. Here are the key elements:

1) The war is being lost. In every category the decline is evident. First “security:” In the last year, active combatants have risen from “a handful of diehard Baathists” to perhaps 15-20 thousand; their supporters have increased from “practically none” to probably several hundred thousand. Attacks have risen from an average of 45 a day to more than 70. US personnel killed have neared 2,000 and those wounded, many grievously, now amount to at least 15 thousand. American-appointed Iraqi police have suffered about 30% more casualties. Consequently, instead of being pulled back US troops are being augmented from 138,000 to 160,000.³

³ Major-General Douglas E. Lute recently remarked (quoted in *The Independent* on August 25, 2005) that it was “very difficult” to deny the “perception of occupation” while there were so many US troops in Iraq. That is the Iraqi side; on the American side, the general staff is publicly concerned about the size of its commitment; it is seeking recruits from categories of Americans it had previous rejected including drug addicts, school dropouts and delinquents; and it is urging that the draft be reintroduced.

Economic figures are no more encouraging: Oil production is down about 90,000 barrels/day; electrical production is down about 5%, unemployment has hit 50% - 65%,⁴ and so on.

2) Whatever the purpose of the war was – preventing terrorism, protecting oil production,⁵ creating democracy, stabilizing the Middle East, none of which was ever precisely defined – it is not being achieved:

- Iraq was not before but has since become a training ground for terrorists, and their activities are spreading far beyond the Middle East;
- Oil prices have risen to unprecedented levels;
- Iraq had a constitution and elections, courtesy of the British, already in the 1920s and no one thought that they equated to democracy. The current American-inspired and edited constitution is far from “democratic,” is a travesty of civil rights, and is also probably as irrelevant as was the constitution the British gave Iraq. Elections are just as unpromising. In the last election, while many voted (interestingly almost the same proportion, 83%, as in the South Vietnamese election of 1967, under similar dangerous conditions), they voted not for programs or for candidates but by ethnic groups and, at least in the Arab Shia areas, by command of the supreme religious leader, himself a Persian national. Experience tells us that democracy is not a gift one people can give to another. It either grows internally or not at all and it does not grow from the top down but from the “roots” upward.
- Rather than stabilizing Iraq (which hovers on the brink of civil war) or the rest of the Middle East (where everyone admits that anti-American and anti-American-sponsored-regime sentiment is rising), the Middle East shows signs of increasing instability.

3) As in a business venture, so in “politico-military” affairs, it is wise to have an exit strategy. “Staying the course” is not an exit strategy. A common mistake of political leaders is to rush into situations without thinking how to get out. This is not just Mr. Bush’s mistake. In the Johnson administration, the “rapid reaction force” (RRF) was the hot new idea. Few thought about a “rapid withdrawal strategy” a RWS. American leaders of both parties are prone to throw aside caution and rush into situations; then having created or exacerbated an intractable problem, they proclaim that the die is cast and so we must deal with the situation as it has become rather than lamenting (or learning from) the way we created it.

Thus, the argument today is that if we pull out of Iraq, we will leave chaos behind us. Undoubtedly, we will, because Iraq is already chaotic. But, I believe that a close reading of the history of other insurgencies shows that the only way out of the chaos is withdrawal of the foreign forces and that failure to withdraw perpetuates chaos.

⁴ Robin Wright and Ellen Knickmeyer, *Washington Post*, August 14, 2005.

⁵ As Paul Wolfowitz suggested at an Asia Security Summit on June 3, 2003 and reported in two German (*Der Tagesspiegel* and *Die Welt*) one English (*The Guardian*) but no American newspapers.

Withdrawal, I argue, is the least bad of possible *existing* alternatives once the mess had been created.

4) What were the alternatives? It is important to raise this question not only because we should try to learn from the past but also and more important because we now face a new situation that is similar to Iraq as it was in 2003.

The first step should have been a sober assessment of the situation. Was Iraq really a mortal danger to the United States, as President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary Rumsfeld, National Security Council director Rice and others proclaimed, or was it merely one state among a number – several of which are our allies – that are ugly tyrannies. Did it have the capacity or intent to attack the United States? Was it in league with a vast terrorist network?

Once a realistic assessment of these questions was achieved, various alternatives were to be considered. Military intervention was one, but it seems to have been the only one ever seriously considered. Various others were already evident in 2003. They included an enhanced U.N. inspection program, more intrusive economic monitoring, a more “targeted” sanctions program, further restrictions on the “reach” of the Iraqi regime to Kurdistan and southern Iraq, serious consideration of regional issues including nuclear weapons reductions in other states and, finally, temporary inaction. I, for one, wrote about each of them well before the invasion.

5) When the alternatives were laid out and examined, the effectiveness and cost of each could have been evaluated. No attempt was made to examine the likely effects of any program other than “shock and awe,” but orders of magnitude on cost were evident in 2003 if not before. We can now say with some precision the cost: of the military option: so far nearly 2,000 Americans killed and 15-20 thousand wounded,⁶ a shattered Iraq with civilian and military dead never-to-be-fully reckoned but perhaps 100,000 and monetary costs to America of more than \$1.3 trillion already spent or projected over a five year period.⁷

Most important, of course, is what an informed, independent and influential intelligence evaluation process should be telling our government now about the much-hinted-at next Middle Eastern venture, the invasion of Iran.

⁶ Terrell E. Arnold, who has been responsible for training our most senior and most promising military officers as chairman of the Department of International Studies at the U.S. National War College in Washington, reports that Coalition dead and wounded may actually be twice what the US government admits and that, including the effects of our use of toxic weapons, “a long-term casualty rate for American forces of 40-50% appears realistic.” He can be reached at wecanstopit@charter.net.

⁷ Linda Bilmes, former assistant secretary of commerce, add up the actual expenditures, the projected costs over the coming five years (for which the military are planning), veteran’s costs, deficit financing costs, and the economic impact particularly on oil prices. Total \$1,372 million. *The International Herald Tribune* August 22, 2005.

Once again, are we to believe that the inhabitants will be out in the streets with smiles on their faces and flowers in their hands to greet us, that the war will be so short and easy as not even to be a “war,” that it won’t cost much, that it will protect us from terrorism, that it will ensure our access to cheap energy, that we can install a democracy and so forth. How many times since the Bay of Pigs have we fallen into such fantasy?

Are we likely to do so again? The portents are compelling: President Bush has proclaimed that Iran is a part of the “Axis of Evil” whose regime should be changed and that “all options” on how to achieve this objective are open. Vice President Cheney has gone further essentially to suggest that we expect the Israelis to do the job for us. And the administration has given the Israelis at least part of the means to do so, 102 F-16i fighter-bombers capable of reaching Iranian targets and some 500 “bunker buster” bombs to use on them. The Israelis are known to be practicing the operation on mock-up sites in the Negev desert.

Hearing the signals, the Iranians are preparing for an onslaught by laying in stocks of weapons for a guerrilla war and also are giving those who want a war a pretext for it by rushing their program to acquire a nuclear weapons capacity.

I have written extensively about what I think the result of this policy would be. Here, to summarize:

- We would sink into a bog of quicksand much deeper than Iraq. Even if Israeli aircraft and commandos were successful, which of course is problematical, the Iranian regime would survive and would emerge even more determined to acquire the ultimate defense, a nuclear capacity.

- Almost certainly the US would be drawn into the conflict. Then American casualties would be at least as high as in Iraq and the monetary costs would likely be far higher.

- If we “win,” however we define that elusive concept, we will have acquired a vast zone of occupation stretching from China to the Mediterranean with no identified means of withdrawal or even any means of achieving internal security. The likely result would be a protracted and very costly guerrilla war.

- Ironically, our action would serve to unify all factions in Iraq on the one thing on which they could then agree, opposition to the United States. It would swing the Shiis into action beside the Arab Sunnis and would make it difficult for the Sunni Kurds, who have strong ties to Iran, to stand aside, particularly if our Turkish allies take the opportunity to “liquidate” the Kurdish problem.

- Impinging as Iran does, culturally, religiously and politically, on other areas, we would inexorably be drawn deeper into problems in Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. If Israel were used as our proxy, we could expect revolts, coups and even revolutions in many of these areas and the great enhancement and growing popularity of anti-American terrorist movements far beyond. In short, we would have a virtually unending war.

- The 26 significant military bases we already have in the Middle East would probably have to be doubled – we are already building 14 new “enduring bases” in Iraq -- and new ones will doubtlessly be added to the many we already maintain in the rest of Asia and Africa. Our troops would prove insufficient and we would have to begin to draft young Americans.

➤ We would have increasing critical financial problems. China, our main creditor, would almost certainly cut back on purchases or even cease to buy U.S. government obligations. The price of oil, already up six fold (from just over \$10 to over \$60 a barrel) from just before the first Gulf War, would almost certainly go up still further, putting further strain on our balance of payments. Our currency, already under great pressure, would fall and our ability to borrow would drastically decline.

If even a part of these events are the likely outcome of an invasion of Iran, why is it apparently being considered?

There are two answers: one is political -- the program of the dominant Neoconservative clique in the Bush administration has always called for perpetual warfare⁸ and has always targeted Iran.⁹ Focusing attention on the danger of Iran might also appeal to other of the president's advisers, such as Karl Rove, since it might distract the public and diffuse the growing criticism of the war in Iraq. The other answer is "security." Iran is moving toward at least the potential of acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability. It certainly has most of the necessary ingredients and industrial capacity. There is some doubt about the timetable: the most reasonable approximation, I think, is between five and ten years from today. But, given our current policy and what I and most other observers think is a likely future American policy, Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons is inevitable.

Are there alternatives?

I think there are. I have spelled them out in two previous essays (available on my website, www.williampolk.com) so I will not repeat them here, but in essence they are to move away from threat and confrontation toward negotiation and conciliation on the one hand and on the other *toward* regional and then general nuclear disarmament. As the world's militarily most powerful state and the deployer of the vast majority of the nuclear weapons, America must take the lead. We know how to do this. We spent many years in difficult negotiations with the Russians developing approaches to this complex and sensitive issue. Now we had better go back over that learning experience and find ways to apply it to our current problems before it is too late.

The omens are not good. The administration has announced that it is moving in the opposite direction, planning a new generation of more usable nuclear weapons rather than working to eliminate the many thousands it and others already have. Sooner or later, it is almost inevitable that some of these will find their ways into non-governmental hands and even if this does not occur soon, eventual use of a weapon with truly horrible consequences is virtually certain.

⁸ Neoconservative spokesman and former CIA director James Woolsey set this out in a talk at UCLA on April 2, 2003

⁹ Pushed particularly by Vice President Cheney's chief of staff, Michael Ladeen through the "Coalition for Democracy in Iran" and in an April 30 2003 public lecture on April 30 at the Neoconservative lobbying organization, JINSA (The Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs)

Time is not on our side. As Fitzgerald had Omar Khayyam warn us,

The Bird of Time has but a little way
To fly – and Lo! The Bird is on the Wing.

I believe that decisions made on these issues in the next months -- or at best in the next few years -- will shape the twenty-first century. The Bird truly is on the Wing. It – and we – has little time to fly. We had better begin.

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