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# How to Win in Iraq—and How to Lose

*Arthur Herman*

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*It is best if an enemy nation comes and surrenders of its own accord.*

—Du You (735-812)

TO THE student of counterinsurgency warfare, the war in Iraq has reached a critical but dismally familiar stage.

On the one hand, events in that country have taken a more hopeful direction in recent months. Operations in the city of Najaf in January presaged a more effective burden-sharing between American and Iraqi troops than in the past. The opening moves of the so-called “surge” in Baghdad, involving increased American patrols and the steady addition of more than 21,000 ground troops, have begun to sweep Shiite militias from the streets, while their leader, Moqtada al Sadr, has gone to ground. Above all, the appointment of Lieutenant General David Petraeus, the author of the U.S. Army’s latest counterinsurgency field manual, as commander of American ground forces in Iraq bespeaks the Pentagon’s conviction that what we need to confront the Iraq insurgency is not more high-tech firepower but the time-tested methods

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of unconventional or “fourth-generation” warfare.\*

In Washington, on the other hand, among the nation’s political class, the growing consensus is that the war in Iraq is not only not winnable but as good as lost—Congressman Henry Waxman of California, for one, has proclaimed that the war *is* lost. Politicians who initially backed the effort, like Democratic Senators Hillary Clinton and Joseph Biden, and Republican Congressmen Walter Jones and Tom Davis, have been busily backing away or out, insisting that Iraq has descended into civil war and that Americans are helpless to shape events militarily. A growing number, like Congressman John Murtha, even suggest that the American presence is making matters worse. The Democratic party has devoted much internal discussion to whether and how to restrict the President’s ability to carry out even the present counterinsurgency effort.

In short, if the battle for the hearts and minds of Iraqis still continues and is showing signs of improvement, the battle for the hearts and minds of

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\* In the modern period, first-generation conflicts like the American Civil War were characterized by decisive battles between large standing armies. Second-generation conflicts involved static defenses and industrial-size mobilization of resources and command, as in World War I. World War II inaugurated third-generation warfare, in which the decisive ingredients were large mechanized blitzkrieg-style maneuvers and devastating air power. That era culminated in the first Iraq war. In today’s Iraq war, by contrast, big decisive battles have been replaced by low-intensity running skirmishes with guerrilla-style combatants aiming not for military triumph but for political and ideological success.

Congress, or at least of the Democratic majority, seems to be all but over. In the meantime, still more adamant on the subject are many of our best-known pundits and media commentators. According to Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, who speaks for many, Iraq “is so broken it can’t even have a proper civil war,” and America is therefore now left with but a single option: “how we might disengage with the least damage possible.” To the left of Friedman and his ilk are the strident and often openly anti-American voices of organizations like *moveon.org*.

It is indeed striking that war critics like Senators Harry Reid and Joseph Biden, who in 2005 were calling on the Pentagon to mount a proper counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq, and to send enough troops to make it happen, should now be seeking ways to revoke legislative authority for that very operation. Exactly why they should have changed their minds on the issue is not obvious, although they and their colleagues do claim to be expressing not only their own judgment but the opinions and sentiments of the American people at large. If recent polls are to be trusted, however, these politicians may well turn out to be wrong about popular sentiment.\* And if past history and our current experience in Iraq are any guide, they are certainly wrong about the war on the ground.

In fact, the historical record is clear. The roots of failure in fighting insurgencies like the one in Iraq are not military. To the contrary, Western militaries have shown remarkable skill in learning and re-learning the crucial lessons of how to prevail against unconventional foes, and tremendous bravery in fighting difficult and unfamiliar battles. If Iraq fails, the cause will have to be sought elsewhere.

## II

**M**OST WARS are lost, not won. To most Americans, the nearest example of a failed war is Vietnam. As in Iraq today, we came up against a guerrilla-type insurrectionary force led by ideological extremists; in the end, we were forced to withdraw and surrender the country of South Vietnam to the aggressors. But an even more striking parallel to our present situation exists in the French experience in Algeria almost exactly 50 years ago. There, French troops and a beleaguered local government faced an insurgency mounted by Muslim extremists who had managed to gain the upper hand. In response, the leadership of the French army had to figure out, almost from scratch, how to fight unconventional wars of this kind—with re-

sults that have influenced the thinking of counterinsurgency experts ever since.

The armed insurrection against French rule in Algeria began in November 1954. The insurgent force, the National Liberation Front (FLN), was a direct prototype of today’s al Qaeda and the insurgent forces in Iraq. Its leaders were motivated less by nationalism than by virulent anti-Western (and, not incidentally, anti-Jewish) ideologies. Their goal was not military victory, which they knew was impossible in the face of French conventional force. Instead, they set out to provoke reprisals against Muslims by Algeria’s whites in order to trigger an all-out civil war. To this end they employed terror bombings, torture, and the savage murder of Muslim moderates and Algeria’s professional class. “One corpse in a suit,” an FLN leader was quoted as saying, “is worth twenty in uniform.” All the while, the main audience they were trying to reach and influence was not in Algeria; it was in France itself. As the American counterinsurgency expert Bruce Hoffman has written, the Algerian rebels “were counting on the fatigue and disenchantment of the French to help turn the tide if the war lasted long enough.”

It was a brilliant plan. Like American troops in Iraq today, French troops in Algeria found themselves reacting to one crisis after another, while a succession of commanders, strategies, and resources was rotated into the effort in piecemeal fashion. Even with 140,000 soldiers on the ground, in a country with less than half the population of Iraq in 2007, the French government found itself helpless to reverse the course of events. The rapidly deteriorating situation prompted Algeria’s white population to turn against its government. By late 1956, when terror bombings in the capital city of Algiers killed 49 people and maimed many more, the overstressed, overstretched French police and army were ready to throw in the towel.

But on August 1, 1956, a French lieutenant colonel of Tunisian descent named David Galula had taken command of the mountainous and rebel-infested Aissa Mimoun area of Kabylia. To the FLN’s unconventional mode of warfare, Galula responded with unconventional methods of his own.

\* Thus, an IBD/TIPP poll taken in February of this year showed 66 percent of respondents believing that it is “important” that the U.S. succeed in Iraq, including 53 percent of Democrats and 85 percent of Republicans; the number of those “very hopeful” that the U.S. *will* succeed had risen from 29 percent in December to 35 percent. A Public Opinion Strategies poll taken at the same time showed much the same result, with 53 percent believing that Congressional Democrats were pushing President Bush too hard to withdraw American troops.

These proved so successful so quickly that they were soon adopted by French commanders in other parts of Algeria.

As early as January 1957, French General Jacques Massu and intelligence chief Roger Trinquier were ready to apply some of Galula's techniques to the urban environment of the capital, Algiers. After weeks of hard fighting, Massu and his paratroopers broke the back of the insurgency in the city, installing a block-by-block intelligence network that kept the FLN on the run and encouraged moderate Muslims to step forward.

Indeed, the 1957 battle for Algiers marked a crucial turning point in the fight against the FLN. By 1959, Galula's principles had been extended across Algeria. Some 600 "specialized administrative sections" were set up, each headed by army officers to oversee civil as well as military affairs. The new structure finally allowed the French army to use effectively its superior numbers (including 150,000 loyal native troops, more than a third of the total) and conventional military hardware. Helping to put the guerrillas on the defensive were such tactics as the division of troops into "static" and "mobile" units to deal with terrorist outbreaks; the use of helicopters for counterinsurgency operations; and construction of a 200-mile, eight-foot-high electric fence (the so-called Morice Line), which shut down the FLN's sources of support from neighboring Tunisia. By January 1960, the war that many had considered lost three years earlier was virtually won.

**G**ALULA'S SUBSEQUENT book, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, laid out the blueprint for success in this form of warfare. From the start, Galula had discarded the assumptions governing conventional conflicts. A decisive battlefield victory of the kind familiar from World War II, he saw, would never work against indigent, loosely organized, but deeply committed insurgencies like the FLN. As he had learned from watching the British mount successful counterinsurgencies in Malaya and Greece, neither heavy casualties, nor the loss of weapons and bases, nor even the loss of leaders would stop the rebels. Ultimately, indeed, "military action [was] but a minor factor in the conflict."

What then? Essentially, Galula grasped that the new form of warfare had reversed the conventional relationship in war between combatant and civilian. No longer bystanders or useful adjuncts to the war effort, as in World War II, civilians were the critical determinants of success or failure. Without the

help or at least the passive acquiescence of the local population, the government would be doomed. In a crucial sense, it did not matter how many guerrillas were killed, or how many regular soldiers were on the ground; the center of gravity was the opinion of the local community.

Thus, the key to success lay in bringing to the surface the portion of the populace that hated the guerrillas, and then turning that minority into a majority by a combination of political, social, and cultural initiatives. But of course that crucial portion, Galula wrote, "will not and cannot emerge as long as the threat [of insurgent retaliation] has not been lifted." This was where military strategy came into play. Galula's approach boiled down to three stages, each with its own lesson for Iraq today.

The first was *concentration of force*. Whereas terrorists were able to do much with little (witness, in today's Iraq, the improvised explosive device or the lone suicide bomber), government forces could do but little with their much. Even after having expanded in number to 450,000 men—nearly one soldier for every 23 Algerians—French forces could not confront the elusive FLN everywhere. So Galula divided his own district into zones: "white," where government control was complete or nearly complete; "pink," where insurgents competed with the government for control; and "red," where the insurgents were in complete control. A successful counterinsurgency involved turning pink zones into white zones, then red into pink, through a block-by-block, neighborhood-by-neighborhood struggle to force the terrorists into the shadows.

The second of Galula's lessons was the need for a *visible and continuous* military presence, in order to build civil institutions of support and trust. In counterinsurgencies, the classic Clausewitzian dictum—that war is the continuation of politics by other means—turned in on itself. Through constant policing and patrolling, by running down insurgents and punishing them on, if possible, "the very spot" where they committed a terrorist attack or outrage, and above all by visibly supporting and rewarding allies, the military occupation would itself become a political weapon: outward and conspicuous proof that supporting the government translated into increased security, peace of mind, prosperity, and eventually social and political advance.

Toward this end, Galula's third lesson was that the counterinsurgency must project a sense of *inevitable victory*. The local populace had to see the military and civilian authority as the ultimate winner. For that, native troops were essential. In counterinsurgency terms, they were more than just aux-

iliaries in the fight; they were also signposts of the future, of a secure post-insurgency order around which the local populace could rally.

### III

AS RECENTLY as two years ago, Galula's book was virtually unknown in Pentagon circles. Today it has become the bible of American counterinsurgency thinkers like General Petraeus, whose field manual (known as FM 3-24) it largely informs. Its masterful approach to breaking, isolating, and then uprooting a terrorist insurgency is the core of our revised near-term strategy for Iraq, a strategy based, in Petraeus's words, on the principle that "you're not going to kill your way out of an insurgency."

The current surge of 21,500 troops in Baghdad is a textbook example of Galula's lessons in action. First, as in the northern city of Mosul in 2003-4, where he used a similar grid system, Petraeus aims to turn things around in the single most vital "pink" zone—namely, Baghdad and its environs, within whose fifty-mile radius 80 percent of the violence in Iraq takes place. Critics have already charged that our recent successes in suppressing the militias in this area signify only a temporary respite. But Petraeus, like his predecessor Galula, understands that in counterinsurgency warfare, temporary respites are all there is. The goal is to make those respites last longer and longer, until eventually they become permanent. As he has said, "The idea is to end each day with fewer enemies than when it started." Anything more ambitious leads to overreaching, disenchantment, and ultimately failure.

The Baghdad surge also illustrates the second of Galula's lessons. "Increasing the number of stakeholders is crucial to success," writes Petraeus, again self-consciously following both Galula's model and his own prior experience. In the northern district of Kabylia, for example, Petraeus had his men operating schools for 1,400 children, including girls, offering free medical support, and helping with building projects and road construction. One of his proudest accomplishments was the help given by troops of the 101st Airborne in rebuilding and opening Mosul University.

Petraeus's field manual states: "Some of the best weapons do not shoot." They come instead in the form of meetings held with local leaders, wells drilled, streets repaired, soccer leagues organized. In the current surge, one of his stated goals is to get American soldiers out of Baghdad's Green Zone to meet, eat with, and even live with Iraqi

families. Such "cultural awareness," to quote Petraeus again, "is a force multiplier." Political victories won street by street and neighborhood by neighborhood do not so much destroy the insurgency—it cannot be destroyed in any traditional sense—as replace it, forcing the bond between insurgent and citizen to give way to a new bond between citizen and government.

Finally, in an application of Galula's third lesson, Petraeus's men in northern Iraq trained more than 20,000 Iraqi police who even now continue to patrol the border between Iraq and Turkey. It was, in fact, Petraeus's success in organizing and staffing a reliable Iraqi security force that convinced his superiors to put him in charge of training the new Iraqi army and to make him commander of American ground forces this year. Now his experience is being put to the test on a broader scale as we attempt, in his words, to "build institutions, not just units"—a process as vital to American success in Iraq as it was to French success in Algeria fifty years ago.

### IV

WILL IT work? That is not the crucial question. It has been done before, and it can be done again; at least, it can be done on the ground. The crucial question is whether the political will exists to see it through to the end. Here, too, the French experience in Algeria is instructive—in a wholly negative way.

In under two years, as I have noted, the fight against the FLN insurgents in Algeria was all but won. But the war itself was lost. By late 1959, even as the army was scoring victory after victory, French President Charles de Gaulle had concluded that he had no choice but to offer Algeria "self-determination." Within two years, the French had pulled out and the FLN's leader, Ben Bela, was Algeria's president.

What happened was this: while the French military had been concentrating on fighting the insurgency in the streets and mountains in Algeria, an intellectual and cultural insurgency at home, led by the French Left and the media, had been scoring its own succession of victories.

In its haste to defeat the FLN, the French army had left a crucial hostage to political fortune. Military commanders had authorized army interrogators to use certain forms of torture to extract information from suspected terrorist detainees. This is not the place to debate the merits or demerits of torture in counterinsurgency operations—for the

record, Galula himself considered it counterproductive. Nor was French opinion particularly sensitive to brutality per se; the FLN's own use of torture and outright butchery—Arab loyalists routinely had their tongues and testicles cut off and their eyes gouged out—had aroused little or no outrage. But, as with the incidents at Abu Ghraib 50 years later, news of the army practice gave domestic opponents of the war a weapon with which to discredit the entire enterprise.

Led by Jean-Paul Sartre, a campaign of denunciation got under way in which French forces were accused of being the equivalent of Nazis—an especially freighted charge coming only a decade and a half after World War II and the German occupation of France. Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre's companion, went so far as to say that the sight of a French army uniform had "the same effect on me that swastikas once did." Although many of the antiwar agitators were Communists or leftist fellow travelers, their petitions and demonstrations included enough authentic heroes of the Resistance and eminent liberals like François Mauriac to bestow upon the movement a credible public image. The constant message it conveyed was that the true authors of violence in Algeria were not the FLN at all but the French, and that only when the latter departed would Algerians be able to sort out their destiny for themselves.

The French military and political leadership was completely blindsided by the attack. No amount of justification of the selective use of torture, not even the cancellation of the original authorization, could halt the criticism or stem the loss of public support for the war. Even as the FLN took to setting off bombs in France itself, leftist Catholic priests continued to raise funds for it, while those like Albert Camus who harbored doubts about the wisdom of handing victory to the terrorists were derided and silenced. The consensus that had informed French politics as late as 1956—namely, that abandoning Algeria was "unthinkable and unmentionable"—fell apart.

Divisions over Algeria doomed France's Fourth Republic. For its successor, the price of political survival was handing over Algeria to a totalitarian band that had lost the war on the battlefield but managed to win a stunning victory in France itself. The result was the massive flight of Algerian whites and, at home, a bloodbath as FLN terrorists put to death tens of thousands of Muslim Algerians who had been loyal to the French regime. Soldiers who had fought alongside the French were forced to swallow their medals before they were shot.

**B**EFORE LONG, a similar process would play itself out in Vietnam. By 1972, the American military there had broken the back of the Vietcong insurgency; had fought the North Vietnamese army to a standstill; and had forced the government in Hanoi to the bargaining table.\* Here at home, meanwhile, the end of the military draft had removed the domestic antiwar movement's most powerful wedge issue. Nevertheless, reorganizing itself, the movement began vigorously to lobby Congress to cut off support for the pro-American governments in South Vietnam and Cambodia. The refrain, exactly as in the Algerian case, was that this would both bring the killing and suffering to an end and allow the Vietnamese and Cambodians to "find their own solutions to their problems." Once Watergate destroyed the Nixon presidency, and "peace" Democrats took control of Congress in the 1974 mid-term elections, funding to keep South Vietnam free from Communist control evaporated. Victory was turned into defeat; the "solution" advanced by the anti-war Left turned out to be the crushing and disappearance of the country of South Vietnam.

It is hardly difficult to see the same process at work in present-day Iraq. Of course, as in the past, one can point to mistakes made in the conduct of the war. From the Galula perspective, for instance, splitting civil and military functions between the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and CENTCOM was a grave initial error. Another lay in the assumption that war-making in Iraq would yield quickly to peace-keeping, the way it had in Bosnia in the 1990's. The difference, though, was that in Bosnia, Americans arrived on the scene when Christians and Muslims had fought each other to a standstill, while in Iraq the military's main problem was not winding down a civil war but preventing one from breaking out in the first place.

Some critics have argued that there were also not enough American troops in Iraq to provide the kind of sustained visible presence demanded by counterinsurgency operations. In the first three years of the war, these critics point out, American soldiers and Marines were forced to abandon friendly territory and collaborative allies on account of the paucity of their numbers. Even Petraeus's district around Mosul fell into chaos, and much of his work was undone, when his troops had to leave before Iraqi forces were ready to assume the security burden (and as the Iraqi civil adminis-

\* The best recent account is Mark Woodruff, *Unheralded Victory: The Defeat of the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army, 1961-1973* (1999).

tration fell into turmoil following the handover of authority from the CPA).

But mistakes are hardly unknown in war; nor are they necessarily irreparable. In fourth-generation conflicts in particular, as the case of French Algeria suggests, turnarounds can be achieved quickly by changes in thinking and action. General Petraeus's appointment, and the early success of the so-called surge, point to just such a major and hopeful change. Yet the current clamor to cut off funding, or to strip away congressional authorization for the Iraq effort, threatens to undo this potential turnaround before it has a chance to prove itself.

Under the slogan "strategic redeployment," for example—to cite the title of a position paper on Iraq released by the Left-liberal Center for American Progress—we have been assured that what incites the violence in Iraq is not the terrorists or insurgents but the American "occupation." Left to themselves, the contention goes, Sunnis and Shites will have no choice but to reach an accommodation and live together in peace. Indeed, to Sarah Shields, a Middle East expert at the University of North Carolina, today's jihadists are but the "latest example in a long line of peoples' fighting against occupation." The sooner we depart, she writes, "the fewer people will have been compromised by their connection with our occupation."

The argument is virtually identical to the one pursued by home-front defeatists in Algeria and Vietnam. What will happen to those already "compromised by their connection" with us, let alone to the hopes of millions of ordinary Iraqis, does not evidently concern its proponents—any more than it concerned Jean-Paul Sartre in Algeria, or Tom Hayden in Vietnam.

**I**N FOURTH-GENERATION warfare, whoever seems to own the future wins. To this day, thanks to Gille Pontecorvo's celebrated and highly propagandized 1967 film, most people assume that "the battle of Algiers" was an FLN victory when in fact it was anything but. Similarly, most people believe that the 1968 Tet offensive in Vietnam was a major setback for the United States, for so it was successfully portrayed in the media; in fact, it crippled the Vietcong as an insurgency. The same happened more recently in the battle of Falluja in 2005, where our eradication of a vicious jihadist network was presented almost entirely in terms of too many American casualties and too much "collateral damage."

Thus far, the antiwar forces in both the United States and Europe have been greatly successful in presenting the Iraqi future in terms of an inevitable, and richly deserved, American defeat. Not even positive results on the ground have deterred them from pressing their case for withdrawal, or from winning influential converts in the heart of the U.S. Congress. If they succeed in their ultimate goal of forcing a withdrawal, they will take their place in another "long line," joining the shameful company of those who compelled the French to leave Algeria in disgrace and to stand by as the victorious FLN conducted a hideous bloodbath, and of those who compelled America to leave Vietnam under similar circumstances and to similar effect.

Unlike the French in Algeria, the United States is in Iraq not in order to retain a colony but to help create a free, open, and liberal society in a part of the world still mired in autocracy and fanaticism. Will we stay long enough to defeat the jihadists, to engage Iraqis in the process of modern nation-building, and to ease the transition to a free society? Or will we quit before the hard work is done, leaving this vital part of the world to become an al-Qaeda sanctuary, bathed in chaos, anarchy, and blood? As the polls suggest, a large constituency at home is waiting to learn the answer to this question, and so is a much larger constituency abroad. But time is running short.

"Act quickly," Petraeus wrote in January 2006, "because every army of liberation has a half-life." This is true not only in the field but at home. James Thurber once said that the saddest two words in the English language are "too late." Terrible as it is to think that our surge may have come too late, it is much more terrible to think that feckless politicians, out of whatever calculation, may pull the plug before the new approach is fully tested.

And terrible not only for Iraqis. For the French, the price of failure in Algeria was the collapse of one Republic and a permanent stain on the next—along with the deep alienation of the French military from the political establishment that it believed (with considerable justification) had betrayed it. Here at home, it took the American military almost a decade and a half to recover its confidence and resiliency after the failure and humiliation of Vietnam. How we would weather another and even more consequential humiliation is anybody's guess; but the stakes are enormous, and the clock is ticking.