

An unwinnable war

Written by

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Paul Rogers - Now Donald Rumsfeld himself ? one of the Iraq war?s leading architects ? publicly accepts that the world?s most powerful military force, deployed by a state that spends almost as much on the military as every other country in the world put together, cannot counter 20,000 or so determined insurgents backed by a minority of the population of Iraq. It is an astonishing moment.

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Donald Rumsfeld has broken a taboo: the United States military cannot win in Iraq.

Donald Rumsfeld?s remarks about the Iraq war on 14 June combined a widely reported admission that the security situation was no better than when the Saddam Hussein regime was terminated in April 2003 with a characteristic piece of convoluted logic: ??clearly it has been getting better as we?ve gone along?, as ?a lot of bad things that could have happened have not happened?.

For a United States defense secretary even to acknowledge a military problem is unusual; the propaganda norm is to put a positive gloss on difficult situations. But more interesting still was Rumsfeld?s comment that: ??this insurgency is going to be defeated not by the coalition ? it?s going to be defeated by the Iraqi security forces, and that is going to happen as the Iraq people begin to believe that they?ve got a future in that country?.

The real point of Rumsfeld?s comments is their marked contrast with his and his fellow Bush administration officials? repeated assertions over the past twenty-seven months. Time and again they have proclaimed coalition successes over a retreating Iraqi insurgency: the killing of Uday and Qusay Hussein, the capture of Saddam Hussein himself, the major operation in Najaf, the destruction of rebel centres in Fallujah.

Now, Donald Rumsfeld himself ? one of the war?s leading architects ? publicly accepts that the world?s most powerful military force, deployed by a state that spends almost as much on the military as every other country in the world put together, cannot counter 20,000 or so determined insurgents backed by a minority of the population of Iraq.

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An escalating conflict

It also comes at a time when the tempo of the Iraq war is escalating in a way that is starting to have a sustained impact within the United States: on public and political opinion, on some senior military personnel, and ? perhaps most importantly ? on recruitment into the US army and its reserve forces.

The wave of insurgent violence in Iraq, noted in recent columns in this series, has killed more than 900 people since the administration led by Ibrahim al-Jaafari was sworn in on 3 May. This week alone, forty-five people died in two huge suicide bombings: on 14 June in Kirkuk, directed at civil servants queuing outside a government-owned bank, and on 15 June in an army canteen in Khalis, north of Baghdad, aimed at Iraqi soldiers.

The violence continues to exact its toll on the US military, even as it has increasingly switched from risky patrolling duties to training Iraqi security forces. In the first half of June, forty-one US personnel were killed (more than in the whole of March); in the five-week period to 7 June, over 600 were wounded, more than half of them seriously.

The US military?s training task is proving deeply problematic. There is, on paper, the appearance of progress. US military sources claim that 169,000 Iraqi police and security personnel have now been trained, with 107 Iraqi military and police special battalions now in operation. In practice, this is highly misleading, for only three of these battalions are assessed as being able to operate independently.

Such details form part of a lengthy report on the cultural divide between US and Iraqi forces which is already shading political and popular sentiment in the United States towards pessimism on Iraq (see Anthony Shadid and Steve Fainaru, ?Building Iraq?s Army: Mission Impossible?, Washington Post, 10 June 2005). Four indications of this shift are notable.

A new pessimism

The first is public opinion. In a recent Gallup survey, nearly 60% of respondents wanted a partial or complete withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, the highest figure since the war began. In a Washington Post-ABC News poll, the numbers believing that the Iraq war had not made the United States safer climbed above 50% for the first time, and nearly 40% thought that the situation was coming to resemble Vietnam (see Jim Lobe, ?US Dragged Down by News from Iraq?, Asia Times, 15 June 2005).

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The second is the changing mood in Washington. In the House of Representatives, which voted overwhelmingly for the war in 2003, a bipartisan group is drafting a resolution calling on the Bush administration to present an exit strategy. This follows a 32-9 vote by the House's international relations committee on a similar proposal (see Susan Milligan, "More in Congress Want Iraq Exit Strategy", Boston Globe, 11 June 2005). The two-year term of members of the House, compared with six years in the Senate, make them frequently more responsive to changes in public feeling.

The third indication of Iraq's new impact is the doubt among senior US military officers in Iraq about the prospects for US strategy. In a sense this merely confirms Rumsfeld's emphasis on the need for a political settlement, but the officers go further in assessing the insurgency as deep-seated, resilient and adaptable. Its character is seen in the way that it can respond to major counter-insurgency actions by quickly relocating its efforts (see Tom Lasseter, "Officers Say Arms Can't End Iraq War?", Knight Ridder Newspapers, 12 June 2005).

This aspect of the insurgency was already evident during the huge Fallujah operation in November. While it was underway, the insurgents transferred their attention to the larger city of Mosul and were able to occupy large sections of the city, forcing the US into an emergency transfer of troops to support the local Iraqi security forces (see "American dreams, Iraqi realities?", 18 November 2004). This, a common pattern throughout the insurgency, indicates the insurgents' remarkable ease of movement through many of Iraq's urban and rural districts.

A particularly telling recent comment came from Frederick P Wellman, a US officer training Iraqi forces. In the words of a newspaper report:

"Lt. Col. Frederick P. Wellman, who works with the task force overseeing the training of Iraqi security forces, said the insurgency doesn't seem to be running out of new recruits, a dynamic fuelled by tribal members seeking revenge for relatives killed in fighting. "We can't kill them all," Wellman said. "When I kill one I create three?."

The fourth example of worries on the American domestic front is the current state of US army recruitment. In May, the army recruited 5,039 new soldiers - short of both the initial (8,050) and secondary (6,700) target. The reserve forces faced a similar shortfall - the marine corps reserve goal was missed by 12%, the army reserve by 18%, and the army national guard enlistment was down by 29%.

These difficulties arise despite the deployment of 1,000 more recruiters, a lavish TV advertising campaign, an increase in enlistment cash bonuses to \$20,000, and a lowering of the educational requirements of new recruits (see Joseph L Galloway, "Army lowers standards and increases bonuses?", Knight Ridder Newspapers, 13 June 2005).

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This is all a long way from the Pentagon's recent aim of increasing the army's strength by 30,000 to 510,000 while improving the educational standards of recruits to ensure that they can handle the increasingly automated battlefield and the demand for versatile forces available for rapid deployment.

A cornered policy

When Donald Rumsfeld became defense secretary in January 2001, he advanced the idea that the United States could achieve its strategic objectives with smaller but much more high-tech armed forces, using new generations of equipment and highly competent personnel to maintain 'full spectrum dominance' whenever and wherever required.

The war in Iraq has forced the US to modify this aim. The emphasis on huge technological superiority remains, but it is now matched by a need for much larger numbers of troops. Now, the sheer human costs of the war suggest that not even the amended policy is working.

If the United States's Iraq predicament gets much worse, it is conceivable that conscription will reappear on the military agenda. This is where Donald Rumsfeld and the Bush administration really are in a bind. With the mood in the US starting to swing away from the war, any talk of restoring the draft would be deeply unpopular. Perhaps this explains why Rumsfeld is now expressing the hope that political change in Iraq can end the insurgency. In plain logic: he has no other option.