

‘Victory’ in Fallujah: A Political Disaster

by Carl Osgood

During a Nov. 16 interview on Philippines radio (*EIR*, Nov. 26), *EIR* founder Lyndon LaRouche reported that the U.S. military assault on Fallujah, launched on Nov. 9, one week after U.S. Election Day, has settled nothing in Iraq. “You have an impossible situation, and an impossible war,” LaRouche said, “We have a general destabilization of the entire area of Southwest Asia. We have chain reaction effects around the world.” A few days later, he commented, “They have made all of Iraq, greater Fallujah.”

Lt. Gen. John Sattler, the U.S. Marine commander in Iraq, now has egg on his face. On Nov. 18, speaking to reporters at the Pentagon via video teleconference from just outside Fallujah, Sattler declared, “Based on some of the records . . . and ledgers we’ve been able to uncover, we feel right now that we have, as I mentioned, broken the back of the insurgency and we have taken away this safe haven.” It did not take long for Sattler to be contradicted, both from within the military and by subsequent events. Only one day after Sattler’s remarks, Lt. Gen. Lance Smith, the deputy commander of U.S. Central Command, when asked to respond specifically to Sattler’s comment, said, “I think it’s too early for me to say, given the broad perspective of Iraq, that the backbone of the insurgency is broken. We have certainly had a significant impact on the insurgency, but we know that the

important part is going to be to follow on with the success and not allow a safe haven to exist anywhere else, like Ramadi or Baqubah or some of those other cities where we know these folks go.”

Other officers were reportedly even more pessimistic than Smith. The *New York Times* reported Nov. 17, that senior Marine intelligence officers under Sattler warned, in a seven-page report, that if American troop levels in the Fallujah area are significantly reduced, insurgents will “rebound from their defeat.” The report says that rebels could thwart the retraining of Iraqi security forces, intimidate the local population, and derail the elections scheduled for January. It further warned that the insurgents, despite taking heavy casualties, will continue to grow, launch attacks, and try to foment unrest among Fallujah’s returning residents. It says that if American forces do not remain in sufficient numbers for some time, “The enemy will be able to effectively defeat 1st Marine Expeditionary Force ability to accomplish its primary objectives of developing an effective Iraqi security force and setting the conditions for successful Iraqi elections.” A very senior retired military intelligence contact, commenting to *EIR* about the *New York Times* report, said: “What this says is that the insurgencies are growing organically from the discontent of the Sunni Arab population, and that these insurgencies will continue to grow, recruiting new members and continuing to resist U.S. forces.”

Nor is that sober view limited to the Marines. The BBC reported Nov. 29, that Army Brig. Gen. Carter Hamm, the U.S. commander in northern Iraq, warned that continued violence in Mosul could undermine election prospects in that city. “Without the numbers of Iraqi police that we would like to have, it significantly increases the level of difficulty of establishing the environment we need for the elections,” he said. There are about 2,000 U.S. troops in Mosul, and Hamm insisted that there would be no more. “Clearly we need more Iraqi forces to counter the shortfall right now,” he said. “But what we need more than forces is clear intelligence.”

The pattern of the insurgency since Nov. 9 has been to increase its activities across a wider portion of the country, from Babylon and Babil provinces south of Baghdad (an area that U.S. military personnel call “the Triangle of Death”), all the way up to Mosul in the north, and west to Ramadi and the Syrian border. As the Fallujah assault was getting under way, insurgents launched a broad attack on Mosul, on police stations all over the city, and U.S. and Iraqi forces have been trying to regain control of this city of 1.7 million people ever since. Because of the unreliability of the police and Iraqi national guard, the Iraqi government has been forced to rely on Kurdish *peshmerga* militia, reportedly angering Arabs, to try to re-establish order in the city. Insurgent attacks have also hit Balad and Baquba, north of Baghdad and a half dozen cities south of Baghdad. The intensity of the fighting in other parts of Iraq is underscored by the fact that nearly half of the 138 deaths suffered by U.S. forces during the month of



U.S. soldiers of the 1st Cavalry Division in Fallujah on Nov. 9. The U.S. Administration is acting like the French at Dien Bien Phu, rather than exercising real leadership, as Gen. Douglas MacArthur did at Inchon.

November, were outside of Fallujah, where the bloodiest fighting was taking place.

The precariousness of the U.S. position in Iraq was further underscored by the Dec. 1 Pentagon announcement that the number of U.S. troops in Iraq would go up to 150,000 by mid-January, from the present 138,000. This is to be accomplished by extending the tours of those already there, at the same time their replacements arrive. Brig. Gen. David Rodriguez said that the purpose of the extensions is “to support the elections and continue to keep pressure on the insurgency.” He also said that he expected that the troop level would return to around 138,000 to 140,000 after the Iraqi election, if there is no change in the situation in Iraq. Given that “no change” has never been a characteristic of the insurgency, it remains to be seen what the situation will look like come February and March.

Parallels and Contrasts With Vietnam

Comparisons to the U.S. experience in Vietnam are commonplace, and there are valid parallels. Israeli military historian Martin van Creveld recently wrote that the most important reason why such a comparison is valid is that “the Americans found themselves in the unfortunate position where they were beating down on the weak.” He quoted Moshe Dayan, who spent a month as a war correspondent in Vietnam in 1966, who wrote that “any comparison between the two armies . . . was astonishing. On the one hand, there

was the American Army, complete with helicopters, an air force, armor, electronic communications, artillery, and mind-boggling riches; to say nothing of ammunition, fuel, spare parts, and equipment of all kinds. On the other there were the [North Vietnamese troops] who had been walking on foot for four months, carrying some artillery rounds on their backs and using a tin spoon to eat a little ground rice from a tin plate.” Van Creveld warns, “In international life, an armed force that keeps beating down on a weaker opponent will be seen as committing a series of crimes; therefore it will end up by losing the support of its allies, its own people and its own troops.” In other words, “he who fights the weak, and the rag-tag Iraqi militias are very weak indeed, and loses, loses. He who fights against the weak and wins, also loses.”

Perhaps more striking is the contrast between Vietnam and Iraq. In Vietnam, the U.S. was fighting an insurgency supported by a conventional army patronized by a superpower, the Soviet Union, and a very large next door neighbor, China. When the

insurgency collapsed, the war became wholly conventional. The insurgency in Iraq has no such superpower support, and no capability to fight toe to toe with the U.S. military in a conventional engagement. Yet, over the course of the last several months, it has only grown stronger and more deadly. When U.S. Marines entered Fallujah, they encountered a highly sophisticated, thinking enemy who was able to make them pay for every inch of ground they took. And the conduct of the insurgency after the Fallujah battle had largely subsided into daily firefights, suggesting that the insurgents’ command and control may not have been as disrupted as General Sattler had claimed.

Brian Gifford, a research fellow at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation at the University of California at Berkeley, noted this difference in a Nov. 29 opinion piece in the *Washington Post*, warning Americans not to be too complacent about the war in Iraq just because the American casualty rate appears to be much lower than in past wars. In World War II, the U.S. lost about 300 people per day, and about 15 per day in Vietnam. In Iraq, the average has been 2 per day, making it appear that “the daily grinds of those earlier conflicts were worse than what our forces are currently experiencing.” However, a closer look at the numbers tells a different story. “If our wounded today had the same chances of survival as their fathers did in Vietnam, we would probably now have more than 3,500 deaths in the Iraq war.” The death toll is kept down because of advances in body armor and trauma medicine,

allowing wounded soldiers to survive injuries that would have killed them in earlier wars.

Gifford further notes that the U.S. military was far larger in those earlier wars, 12 million men in World War II, and 3.5 million at the height of the Vietnam War, but only 1.4 million today, meaning the proportion of killed and wounded is 4.8 times what it was during World War II though only 0.25 more than during Vietnam. "These figures suggest that our forces in Iraq face a far more serious threat than the public, the media, and the political establishment typically acknowledge or understand." U.S. troops in Iraq face as difficult a mission as their fathers did in Vietnam, "in spite of the fact that his contemporary enemies do not field heavy armored vehicles or aircraft, and do not enjoy the support and patronage of a superpower such as the Soviet Union." Gifford notes that daily U.S. casualties have tripled since last April, while the insurgency has grown more effective in the face of heavier losses, and these facts make it "difficult to imagine an exit strategy that any reasonable person would recognize as 'victory.'"

Whither the Election?

The main premise given for justifying the attack on Fallujah was to create a safe and secure environment for the elections. That not having been accomplished, despite the near leveling of that city, the United States and the Iraqi interim government are determined to forge ahead on the original schedule, mainly, as Iraqi Ambassador to the United Nations Feisal Al Istrabadi explained to a Dec. 1 event at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington, D.C., to satisfy procedural requirements stemming from UN resolutions and the Iraqi Transitional Administrative Law. He also argued that delaying the election would give a moral victory to the insurgents, "whose evident goal is to delay or cancel the elections."

Istrabadi had to acknowledge, however, one of the most significant voices in Iraq for postponing the elections, that of Adnan Pachachi. Pachachi led a meeting, at his house in Baghdad, of 17 mostly Sunni and Kurdish parties on Nov. 26, which issued a petition calling for postponement "of the elections for six months in order to address the current security situation, and to complete the necessary administrative, technical, and systematic arrangements." Even the Iraqi National Accord, the party of interim Prime Minister Iyad Al-lawi, though not signing the petition, endorsed it orally. Istrabadi acknowledged that Pachachi is making the point that elections must be reasonably credible. "Those who wish to interpose delay," Istrabadi said, "must establish that elections are more likely to be credible with delay than without, and that the entire political process would be enhanced rather than diminished, by a delay."

At virtually the same time that Istrabadi was making his remarks, two Iraqi scholars, while not endorsing postponement of the elections, were raising serious questions as to

whether or not the elections would be credible. Abbas Khadim, an adjunct professor of Islamic studies at the Graduate Theological Seminary at Berkeley, said, in remarks at the Middle East Institute, that the first problem is that people talk about the elections as if they were an end in itself, "like a theological religious doctrine." Secondly, the procedural situation is a mess. He said that nobody knows the law and, in any case, it's the vaguest election law he's ever read. The Arabic document, he said, reads as if it is a translation from another document, and apparently, not a very good one at that. The election law lumps all of Iraq into one district, which means that Iraqis are denied the possibility of electing someone they know.

Khadim further noted that there is no consensus on the legitimacy, the validity of the process, or even the possibility of carrying it through. "It is hard to have a consensus on an election if there's no agreement on the rules," he said. It is also exacerbating ethnic divides in the country. The Sunnis are against it, of course, because they will lose. On the other hand, they have legitimate concerns that have not been addressed very well. The Kurds, Khadim reported, have been sending mixed messages. He charged that they have been running an arrogant discourse that isn't helpful, and they're spending their energy and resources on things they can't get. The Shi'ites will benefit the most from an election, because they constitute the majority of the population, and they'll have the highest turnout. This will be a problem for the other groups who fear being dominated by the Shi'ites.

Following on Khadim's remarks, Laith Kubba, a program officer at the National Endowment for Democracy, said that in the present environment, elections are little more than a battle for power among the major constituency groups. He warned that if the election law is not changed, "we're setting the foundation for an ethnically divided country." As for the political impact of the Fallujah assault, Kubba said that on the one hand, "getting rid of factories that produce car bombs and shelter criminal networks is a plus, no question of that; but also everybody will tell you that the destruction of so many homes is bound to produce fresh recruits for those who want to resort to violence." If just 1% of the 250,000 people displaced from Fallujah decide to pick up arms and join the insurgency, that is twice as many new insurgents as the 1,200 that were claimed to have been killed during the assault.

As if to confirm Kubba's comment, Agence France Presse quoted Marines in Fallujah warning that politics are pushing some officers to make "dangerously optimistic assessments" of the situation there. They say that insurgents are likely to find allies among the city's residents, in large part because of the damage from the assault, and that is still being done by daily security operations in which Marines blast houses with gunfire before they enter. "The hardest part of this," said one, "is you have fence-sitters; a lot of them support the insurgents and a lot of them aren't going to be too happy when they see what's happened to their homes."