

US Could Face Catastrophic Military Defeat In Iraq

What Baker And Hamilton Forgot

By Webster G. Tarpley

12-17-06

"Amateurs talk strategy; professionals talk logistics." -- Gen. Omar Bradley Washington, DC, December 16, 2005 -- The flawed assessment offered by the Baker-Hamilton report neglects a crucial aspect of the political-military situation of the US and other foreign armed forces in Iraq: the danger that the US army of occupation might be cut off, encircled, and annihilated as a fighting force over the next few months. This flaw in turn makes it easier for Baker-Hamilton to reject a priori the one rational response to the current reality, which is the extrication of US forces before it is too late. We do not need a new way forward in Iraq; we require a speedy way out of Iraq.

The real argument concerning Iraq has nothing to do with victory; the issue is now avoiding catastrophic military defeat for the US, in a form far worse than the Baker-Hamilton group has chosen to imagine. The looming specter is the worst of military cataclysms a battle of annihilation on the model of the Romans at Cannae, L. Crassus at Carrhae, or of von Paulus at Stalingrad.

US forces attempting to defend a zone of occupation deep within landlocked Iraq now face an extraordinarily critical situation. These forces are wholly dependent on a supply line based on two roads on either side of the Euphrates which stretch some 400 miles (about 650 km) from Kuwait north towards Baghdad. It is along these roads that gasoline, food, ammunition, and all other sinews of war must be transported by truck convoy. Two roads of 400 miles each add up to 800 miles of highway to defend an impossible proposition in the face of a sustained people's war by the Shiites of the lower Euphrates. The Iraqi resistance understood early on that these truck convoys represented a grave vulnerability for the occupation forces, and this has been the key to their most effective weapon so far, the improvised roadside bomb or IED. This vital aorta of supplies could now be cut in several places at once by the Shiite guerrillas of the Mahdi army or related groups.

COALITION OF THE WILLING MELTS AWAY

Originally, this area was supposed to be guarded by a multinational force drawn from Bush's so-called coalition of the willing. But, almost unnoticed in the US, the "coalition of the willing" has disintegrated and vanished from the scene, leaving a dangerous void. The 1,800 Italians completed their

departure on December 2. The 2,400 Poles say they are in the process of leaving. The South Koreans are reducing their contingent from 3,300 to 2,600. The Australians have come down from 2,000 to 1,400. The 1,650 Ukrainians, the 1,345 Dutch, and the 1,300 Spanish are long gone. Also gone are the 600 Japanese, the 462 Bulgarians, the 423 Thais, the 368 Hondurans, the 302 Dominicans, the 300 Hungarians, the 230 Nicaraguans, the 192 Singaporeans, the 150 Norwegians, the 128 Portuguese, plus assorted smaller forces. All in all, in excess of 12,000 coalition troops have already departed from the southern Euphrates area, or are in the process of leaving at least one full division.

That leaves 7,200 British forces, the remnant of a larger force which the British had fielded for the 2003 invasion. British Defense Secretary Des Browne and Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett said in late November 2006 that the UK contingent would hand security control over to the Iraqis in the province of Maysan on the Iranian border in January, and then hand over security responsibility in the southern port city of Basra by the spring of 2007. Browne predicted that by the end of 2007 British forces in southern Iraq would be "significantly lower - by a matter of thousands. The planning for this has been going on for some months."

In short, the most vital logistical link for the US forces stretches for 400 miles through regions now in the process of being deserted by the former allies and coalition partners. This area is very large, and there are no US land forces available anywhere to maintain a semblance of security. This adds up to a finding that the US position in central Iraq is simply untenable, now that the "coalition of the willing" has melted away. This fact must be faced, and a US pullout begun at once, before this massive danger turns into a catastrophic rout.

Are there any alternatives to this 400 mile double gauntlet from Kuwait to Baghdad? If there were alternatives, the US forces might shift their base, like McClellan moving his base from White House on the Pamunkey to the James River during the 1862 Seven Days battles before Richmond. But there are no alternatives to the Kuwait-Baghdad roads. The road from Amman, Jordan to Baghdad passes through Anbar province, where the position of the US Marines is desperate and the power of the Baathist-Sunni national resistance is growing. Turkey, angered by the US sponsorship of PKK terrorists which are supposed to attack Iran but also attack Turkey, shows no sign of offering alternative supply lines. In any case, the roads coming into Baghdad from the west, north, and northeast through places like Tikrit and Baquba are subject to constant attack by the Baathist-Sunni resistance. No alternative supply lines could come through these regions.

Normally it would be virtually impossible for the US military machine to be destroyed in place. Indeed, it is unlikely that Iraqi resistance fighters could defeat US forces in pitched battle in the open field. But this is not necessary for the US to be defeated in this way. If US gasoline and ammunition supplies were cut off, US force protection capabilities would be severely undermined. Some supplies might be brought in by air, but this could not be sustained for very long, especially because the surface to air missile

capabilities of the resistance are improving. The US forces in central Iraq might improvise a Chosun reservoir-style fighting retreat towards Kuwait, but here again losses would be extravagant, and much equipment would have to be abandoned.

It may be objected that US air superiority makes the eventuality discussed here impossible. But bad weather and sandstorms can disrupt air power. In addition, swarms of guerrilla fighters armed with modern RPGs spread out in ambush positions along 800 miles of roads may not be concentrated enough to represent remunerative targets. Where the roads pass through towns and cities, convoys would be hard to defend from the air against urban guerillas firing from buildings.

The threat to the exposed 800-mile US supply line may be compared to the kind of people's war unleashed against US forces in Mogadiscio, Somalia in 1994 not taking place not in one city, but along 800 miles of roads. The most dangerous variant would be a simultaneous national insurrection (or Sicilian Vespers) of Sunnis and Shiites, targeting most especially the supply convoys of foreign occupiers.

In technical terms, the Mahdi Army would need to deploy its forces in a series of well prepared defensive hedgehog positions along the two critical roads from Kuwait to Baghdad, possibly supplementing this with other hedgehogs blocking the exits from the remaining British and multinational bases in southern Iraq. These would be positions modeled on the Hezbollah defensive hedgehogs in southern Lebanon which gave such a good account of themselves against the attempted incursions by the Israeli Defense Force during the August 2006 war.

If US forces are indeed devastated in Iraq, it will not be an historical novelty. In the first Afghan War of 1839-1842, a British army which crossed the Khyber pass into Afghanistan was totally massacred. Another British force under General Gordon was wiped out in Khartoum, Sudan in 1885. An Italian force under Baratieri was decimated at Adowa, Ethiopia in 1896. A British army under Gen. Townsend, invading the Ottoman Empire during World War I, was pocketed, besieged, and forced to surrender at Kut on the Tigris in 1915-1916. The French were surrounded and destroyed at Dienbienphu, Vietnam in 1954. In each case, the arrogance and racism inherent in the imperialist mentality blinded the generals and other officers in charge to the trap closing around them. Non-European forces were held in contempt and systematically underestimated until the encirclement of the foreign forces had been completed. In Washington, any general reporting on the obvious danger represented by the almost defenseless US supply line would be placing his career in jeopardy. In any case, the report would hardly be taken seriously by the racist third-string neocon civilians still running the Pentagon. To all this must be added that the situation of US, UK, and other NATO forces in Afghanistan is if anything more hopeless than that of the Iraqi occupiers. If the Afghan resistance makes good on its promise of an unusual winter offensive this season, the stage will be set for the cutting of supply lines there as well. Afghanistan, of course, is even more landlocked and remote than Iraq, and therefore constitutes an even greater logistical nightmare.

THE BAGHDAD POCKET

Instead, the Pentagon and US Central Command appear obsessed with winning what they call the battle of Baghdad, where they may now be concentrating most of their troops. Much of this has to do with the prominent television and political attention accorded to atrocities taking place in Baghdad, as compared similar events in with outlying provinces. This obsession became overwhelming in July 2006; in October the US generals admitted that they had made no progress. Their response was to send more forces into the Baghdad pocket. The "plus-up" or "double-down" now avidly discussed by Bush with his military yes-men is widely billed as destined especially for the Battle of Baghdad. This amounts to sending more forces into a pocket when encirclement is almost complete. Can these military professionals be blind to the ring that is closing around them? Patrick Cockburn reported in late October that food was getting scarce in some Baghdad neighborhoods, as a result of Sunni-Baathist interdiction activity. But such shortages would hardly be felt by the career managing denizens of the Green Zone.

Today, the US Army and Marines are surrounded by a cruel and trackless ocean of hostile insurgents, resistance fighters, militias, and death squads. Their rear echelon and vital supply line are in the air, virtually defenseless against determined attack and interdiction. A serious effort by the Mahdi Army and/or the Badr Brigades on the roads north of Kuwait would have a very good chance of shutting down the truck convoys delivering gasoline, food, and ammunition to US forces operating in central Iraq. The only rational answer is to withdraw these US troops now.

Growing US hostility towards Muktada Sadr was signaled in early December, when he was demonized by a sinister photo on the cover of Newsweek. The US forces have already clashed with the Mahdi Army once, but with limited success. A plausible scenario of events that would propel Muktada Sadr and his Mahdi Army to cut the exposed US supply line is already in sight. On Monday, December 11, reports surfaced that US-backed intrigues were underway to oust Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki from office, and replace him with a new puppet prime minister subservient to Bush's new friend "His Eminence" Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim, to secessionist Kurds, and to pro-US Sunnis. Later in the week Senator McCain postured before the cameras in Baghdad, demanding that Muktada's influence over the Iraqi government be liquidated a campaign stunt of criminal irresponsibility which should not be forgotten. Maliki is considered an asset of Muktada Sadr. If Sadr's man is thrown out as prime minister, and if attacks by US and Iraqi puppet forces on the Mahdi Army follow, Muktada might well retaliate by moving to interdict the US logistical aorta between Kuwait and Baghdad, thereby severing the US logistical pipeline. As of today, Muktada's 30 members of parliament and 5 cabinet ministers continue to boycott the Maliki regime because of Maliki's willingness to meet with Bush in Amman, Jordan in early December.

As Patrick Lang has reported in the Christian Science Monitor:

"American troops all over central and northern Iraq are supplied with fuel, food, and ammunition by truck convoy from a supply base hundreds of

miles away in Kuwait. All but a small amount of our soldiers' supplies come into the country over roads that pass through the Shiite-dominated south of Iraq. Until now the Shiite Arabs of Iraq have been told by their leaders to leave American forces alone. But an escalation of tensions between Iran and the US could change that overnight. Moreover, the ever-increasing violence of the civil war in Iraq can change the alignment of forces there unexpectedly. [] At present, the convoys of trucks supplying our forces in Iraq are driven by civilians - either South Asians or Turks. If the route is indeed turned into a shooting gallery, these civilian truck drivers would not persist or would require a heavier escort by the US military. It might then be necessary to "fight" the trucks through ambushes on the roads. This is a daunting possibility. Trucks loaded with supplies are defenseless against many armaments, such as rocket-propelled grenades, small arms, and improvised explosive devices. A long, linear target such as a convoy of trucks is very hard to defend against irregulars operating in and around their own towns. The volume of "throughput" would probably be seriously lessened in such a situation. A reduction in supplies would inevitably affect operational capability. This might lead to a downward spiral of potential against the insurgents and the militias. This would be very dangerous for our forces. [] What about air resupply? It appears that only 5 to 10 percent of day-to-day military deliveries into Iraq are currently transferred by air. Inside Iraq, local deliveries by air probably amount to more. In a difficult situation, the tonnages delivered could be increased, but given the bulk in weight and volume of the needed supplies, it seems unlikely that air resupply could exceed 25 percent of daily requirements. This would not be enough to sustain the force." (CSM, July 21, 2006)

Moderate imperialists may still find the one reasonable option, the expeditious departure of US land forces, unacceptable. They should compare withdrawal not with the unattainable illusion of military victory (even at considerable cost), but rather with the decimation or even annihilation of the US expeditionary force in Iraq over the coming months. This would be a US disaster of incalculable proportions, but it is the outcome which Baker-Hamilton and most commentators have neglected. Compared to the thorough destruction of 150,000 troops, a speedy departure of army and marines, however embarrassing, appears far more attractive. Those who wish to support and defend US troops must face the fact that the only way to do this is to remove them from the ring that is presently closing around them in the US occupation zone in central Iraq.

The Baker-Hamilton report and other US observers talk of chaos, sectarian violence, and civil war as if these were totally undifferentiated and unorganized violence. In reality, it may only be a question of time until the Baathist-Sunni national resistance and the Mahdi Army converge on a campaign to expel foreign occupation forces by attacking their most obvious weakness: truck convoy logistics between Kuwait and Baghdad.

In the dream world of Washington discourse, the dire consequences of further deterioration in Iraq are imagined as being visited mainly on Iraqis. Washington operators act as if they had all the time in the world: 9 months for the Baker-Hamilton commission to deliver its report, several weeks for

other reports to be filed, and many more weeks for the White House to evaluate these reports. In the face of an altogether formidable adversary, this conduct is foolhardy in the extreme. To borrow a simile from Churchill, what if the bear blows first? Let us not wait in Iraq to find out. When the Israeli army broke its sword against the Hezbollah lines in southern Lebanon this past summer, the death knell sounded for the US-UK model of imperialism in the Middle East. Is the US ruling class viable enough to learn this lesson in useful time?

The following are some of the rare published accounts which deal with this critical question.

Baghdad is under siege, by Patrick Cockburn, 01 November 2006,
<http://www.uruknet.de/?p=m27896&hd=0&size=1&l=e>

[Disclaimer](#)

[Email This Article](#)

[MainPage](#)

<http://www.rense.com>

[This Site Served by TheHostPros](#)