

Bay of Pigs Meets Black Hawk Down

From the Archive: Unrepentant Iraq War hawks accuse President Obama of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory by completing the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces. But the terrible arc of George W. Bush's invasion was apparent to some military analysts from the war's first days, as Robert Parry reported just 11 days into the conflict.

By Robert Parry (Originally published March 30, 2003)

Whatever happens in the weeks ahead, George W. Bush has "lost" the war in Iraq. The only question now is how big a price America will pay, both in terms of battlefield casualties and political hatred swelling around the world.

That is the view slowly dawning on U.S. military analysts, who privately are asking whether the cost of ousting Saddam Hussein has grown so large that "victory" will constitute a strategic defeat of historic proportions. At best, even assuming Saddam's ouster, the Bush administration may be looking at an indefinite period of governing something akin to a California-size Gaza Strip.

The chilling realization is spreading in Washington that Bush's Iraqi debacle may be the mother of all presidential miscalculations an extraordinary blend of Bay of Pigs-style wishful thinking with a "Black Hawk Down" reliance on special operations to wipe out enemy leaders as a short-cut to victory. But the magnitude of the Iraq disaster could be far worse than either the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba in 1961 or the bloody miscalculations in Somalia in 1993.

In both those cases, the U.S. government showed the tactical flexibility to extricate itself from military misjudgments without grave strategic damage.

The CIA-backed Bay of Pigs invasion left a small army of Cuban exiles in the lurch when the rosy predictions of popular uprisings against Fidel Castro failed to materialize. To the nation's advantage, however, President John Kennedy applied what he learned from the Bay of Pigs that he shouldn't blindly trust his military advisers to navigate the far more dangerous Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

The botched "Black Hawk Down" raid in Mogadishu cost the lives of 18 U.S. soldiers, but President Bill Clinton then cut U.S. losses by recognizing the hopelessness of the leadership-decapitation strategy and withdrawing American troops from Somalia. Similarly, President Ronald Reagan pulled out U.S. forces from Lebanon in 1983 after a suicide bomber killed 241 Marines who were part of a force that had entered Beirut as peace-keepers but found itself drawn into the

middle of a brutal civil war.

The Bush Strategy

Few analysts today, however, believe that George W. Bush and his senior advisers, including Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, have the common sense to swallow the short-term bitter medicine of a cease-fire or a U.S. withdrawal. Rather than face the political music for admitting to the gross error of ordering an invasion in defiance of the United Nations and then misjudging the enemy, these U.S. leaders are expected to push forward no matter how bloody or ghastly their future course might be.

Without doubt, the Bush administration misjudged the biggest question of the war: "Would the Iraqis fight?" Happy visions of rose petals and cheers have given way to a grim reality of ambushes and suicide bombs.

But the Bush pattern of miscalculation continues unabated. Bush seems to have cut himself off from internal dissent at the CIA and the Pentagon, where intelligence analysts and field generals warned against the wishful thinking that is proving lethal on the Iraqi battlefields.

Secretary Rumsfeld has emerged as the principal bully in enforcing Bush's dangerous group think, a pattern that dates back to the war in Afghanistan when senior generals feared disagreeing with Rumsfeld. In one telling, though little-noticed passage in Bob Woodward's *Bush at War*, Bush asks Gen. Tommy Franks for his opinion, only to have Franks defer to Rumsfeld.

"Sir, I think exactly what my secretary thinks, what he's ever thought, what he will ever think, or whatever he thought he might think," said Franks, who is now commander of U.S. forces fighting in Iraq.

So, instead of recognizing their initial errors and rethinking their war strategy, Bush and his team are pressing forward confidently into what looks like a dreamscape of their own propaganda. At least from their public pronouncements, Bush and his aides continue to insist that their pre-war judgments about the Iraqi civilians wanting U.S. "liberation" were correct, with the people kept in check by fear of Saddam Hussein's "goons" as Fox News likes to report or "death squads" as Rumsfeld says.

Once Saddam is killed, this latest reasoning goes, the Iraqi people will begin celebrating like some Mideast version of the flying monkeys in "The Wizard of Oz," who were transformed into happy creatures once the Wicked Witch of the West was dead. However, there is little empirical evidence to support Bush's deferred rosy scenario of thankful Iraqis.

Saddam as Martyr

It would seem at least as likely that even success in killing Saddam would not stop Iraqi resistance and indeed could deepen the hole that Bush is digging.

Remarkably, in the first week and a half of the war, Bush has managed to make the unsavory Saddam into a cult-like hero across the Arab world. His death would make him a martyr. Even Arabs who disdain Saddam and his brutality take pride in the fact that Iraqis are standing up to the military might of the United States, the world's preeminent superpower.

Among the many historical facts that Bush may not know is that Arabs have bitter memories of how Israel crushed a coalition of Arab armies in the Six-Day War in 1967. Already Saddam has held out against the Americans and British for a longer period than that. Plus, the bravery of Iraqi fighters some of whom have charged into the teeth of fearsome American firepower is stirring Arab nationalism.

In a region where Palestinian teenagers have been strapping bombs to themselves to kill Israelis and now some Iraqis appear to be adopting similar tactics to kill Americans there is little reason to believe that eliminating Saddam will somehow make Iraq submissive to U.S. authority.

While the Bush administration once talked about administering Iraq for a couple of years after victory, that timetable was based on the pre-war assumptions that the war would be a "cakewalk" and that the Iraqi population would welcome U.S. troops with open arms. After that easy victory, a U.S. proconsul administration would weed out Saddam loyalists and build a "representative" government, apparently meaning that the U.S. would pick leaders from among Iraq's various ethnic groups and tribes.

However, now, with civilian casualties rising and a U.S. "victory" possibly requiring a blood bath, the timeline for the post-war "reconstruction" may need lengthening. Instead of a couple of years, the process could prove open-ended with fewer Iraqis willing to collaborate and more Iraqis determined to resist.

Grim Prospect

A long occupation would be another grim prospect for American soldiers. Given what's happened in the past 11 days, U.S. occupation troops and Iraqi collaborators can expect an extended period of scattered fighting that might well involve assassinations and bombings. U.S. troops, inexperienced with Iraqi culture and ignorant of the Arabic language, will be put in the predicament of making split-second decisions about whether to shoot some 14-year-old boy with a backpack or some 70-year-old woman in a chador.

In retrospect, it should be clear that the only way for Bush's military strategy to have worked was for the bulk of the Iraqi army to throw down its weapons in the first few days, at least in the southern cities. Mass surrenders and easy victories outside Baghdad might have convinced the Arab street and world opinion that the invasion had popular support or at least acquiescence inside Iraq.

A quick discovery of Iraqi chemical or biological weapons also might have buttressed the U.S. and U.K. strategy by showing that Saddam's regime was in defiance of the United Nations. The Security Council's majority would have looked naive in thinking that inspections would work. But neither development materialized.

Once the "shock and awe" bombing failed to crack the regime and Iraqis showed they were willing to fight in southern Iraqi cities such as Umm Qasr, Basra and Nasiriya where Saddam's support was considered weak, Bush's initial war strategy was shown to be a grave mistake.

The supposedly decisive "shock and awe" bombing in the war's opening days amounted to TV pyrotechnics that did little more than blow up empty government buildings, including Saddam's tackily decorated palaces. The U.S. had so telegraphed the punch that the buildings had been evacuated.

Bush also rushed the invasion without the full U.S. force in place. Once Turkey balked at letting the Army's Fourth Division use Turkish territory to open a northern front, Bush had the option of delaying the war by a month to transfer the division's armor and equipment to Kuwait. That also might have helped the U.S. diplomatic position by giving the U.N. more time to destroy Iraqi medium-ranged missiles and hunt for weapons of mass destruction.

`Feel Good'

But Bush, the self-described "gut player" who had pronounced himself tired of the diplomatic games, lurched ahead. Before his TV speech announcing the start of the war, he pumped his fist in the air and exclaimed about himself, "Feel good!"

The new watchword was a "rolling start," which meant that the invasion would begin before a full complement of U.S. forces was in place. So, American generals, who had wanted 500,000 troops and then settled for a force half that size, were told to launch the war with only about half of that lower number available.

There were doubters, but they were ignored. Before the war, one seasoned military analyst told me that he didn't believe the aerial bombing would be as decisive as the administration thought, and he worried that the slimmed-down

U.S. force would leave only about 20,000 front-line infantry troops to match up against a far bigger Iraqi army. The Americans also would be fighting in a foreign terrain. The risks, he said, were enormous, but his cautionary advice was unwelcome inside the gung-ho White House.

After the war began, these skeptics saw their warnings borne out. Faced with stiff resistance across Iraq, the U.S. forces found their supplies lines stretched and under pressure. There were too few forces to protect the convoys that were bringing not only armaments north for the siege of Baghdad, but also necessities such as bottled water for the troops.

Now, as the official optimism continues in Washington, the military options are getting grimmer by the day in Iraq. One strategy is for U.S. troops to wait for reinforcements before attacking Baghdad. Another choice is to begin the offensive against the Iraqi capital with renewed hope that the Iraqi army will finally crack and Hussein's government will disintegrate.

For the short term, the U.S. military thinks it might get lucky by slipping special-forces teams into Baghdad with the goal of killing or capturing the Iraqi leadership. That, of course, is the "Black Hawk Down" strategy of 1993, which was built around using raids by American special forces to kill or capture Somali warlord Mohammed Farah Aidid and his top lieutenants.

Though this strategy conceivably could work in Iraq, it carries the same risks that U.S. forces encountered in the streets of Mogadishu when the "Black Hawk Down" raid went awry and Americans rushed reinforcements to save stranded Americans. Such maneuvers would be even more dangerous in Baghdad.

Global Opposition

The other principal option available to Bush a siege of Baghdad carries its own risks, especially as anger seethes throughout the Arab world. Arab populations, including large segments of the educated elites, are demanding a more aggressive anti-U.S. response from Arab and Islamic leaders. That could take the shape of oil boycotts or even military intervention.

Rumsfeld's warnings to Syria and Iran on Friday to stay out of the Iraq conflict startled some in Washington, who feared that either the defense secretary was spouting off again or that he might know something about the potential for a widening conflict.

Washington also is witnessing a precipitous decline in U.S. standing with the rest of the world. For instance, in Spain, whose government is part of Bush's "coalition of the willing," 91 percent of Spaniards oppose the U.S. invasion, according to the latest polls.

The U.S. economy also could be dealt another body blow. While pro-war Americans are busy pouring French wine into the sewers and ordering “freedom fries,” they don’t seem to realize that trade wars can cut two ways, with many in the world now urging boycotts of Coca-Cola, McDonald’s restaurants and other American goods.

Bush’s other vulnerability is domestic, that the American people might catch on to how thoroughly he has bungled the Iraqi crisis.

Over the past several months, despite escalating rhetoric from his team about the potential dangers posed by Iraq, Bush could muster only four out of 15 votes on the U.N. Security Council, causing him to withdraw a resolution to authorize war. It was a diplomatic defeat of historic proportions, though the embarrassing vote count was barely reported by a U.S. news media that was excitedly turning its attention to the impending war.

War Boosters

Since the war began March 19, the cable news channels have been Bush’s most reliable handmaidens as they compete to demonstrate greater “patriotism” than the other networks.

While still insisting that its news is “fair and balanced,” Fox News has taken to broadcasting stirring sequences of American and British soldiers being interviewed about the war while a harmonica soundtrack in the background plays the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

Fox also describes the Iraqi government’s militia fighters as “Saddam’s goons” and has adopted Bush’s preferred phrasing for “suicide bombings” as “homicide bombings.” While denouncing the Iraqis for showing pictures of U.S. POWs, Fox continues to show footage of Iraqi POWs being paraded before U.S. cameras.

Fox’s super-patriotic tone apparently has helped it outpace its chief rivals, MSNBC and CNN, in the ratings war.

Though lagging, MSNBC and CNN have not trailed Fox by much in pitching their own news in the glow of red-white-and-blue righteousness. Like Fox, MSNBC uses a logo that superimposes the American flag on scenes of Iraq. CNN has adopted Bush’s name for the war – “Operation Iraqi Freedom” – as the subtitle for much of its coverage, even when the scenes show Iraqis being rounded up and handcuffed.

The major TV networks also have swapped professionalism for jingoism as their high-priced anchors wallow in the first person plural of the war, describing what “we” are going to do to Saddam. “One of the things that we don’t want to do

is to destroy the infrastructure of Iraq because in a few days we're going to own that country," NBC's Tom Brokaw explained on March 19, the opening night for "Operation Iraqi Freedom."

Eleven days later, with heavy fighting still ahead before the U.S. government can claim to "own" Iraq, the slanted U.S. media coverage continues to stunt the debate among the American people and inside the U.S. government. Bush and his aides are insisting that this truncated debate be maintained by saying that anything other than military victory is unthinkable. Only by charging ahead can the United States find a way out of the darkening tunnel.

'Big Muddy'

The administration's so-called "forward-leaning" strategy is an extension of the logic that led to the war. It started when U.S. forces were first shipped to the Persian Gulf region. That was necessary, the administration said, to show resolve and force Saddam to give up his weapons of mass destruction.

The administration then argued that once the U.S. troops were in place, there was no realistic choice but to use them. Otherwise, Saddam would thumb his nose at another Bush and America would lose credibility.

Now, the argument holds, that since the troops have been committed to battle, any result that leaves Saddam in power would be a humiliation to Washington and embolden other dictators around the world.

Here the historical analogy is closer to the Vietnam War during which Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon argued that a U.S. military withdrawal would have dangerous strategic consequences, touching off falling of dominoes across Southeast Asia. That logic led to a deepening U.S. military commitment in Vietnam and the expansion of the war beyond Vietnam's borders. Only after a decade of bloody fighting did Washington painfully negotiate a withdrawal from the conflict.

In Iraq, Bush is demanding that the American people follow him into this new "big muddy" and that having taken the first steps into the swamp there's now no choice but to press on. As a person who has never had much interest in history or other cultures, Bush may be only dimly aware of the worrisome historical precedents surrounding the trail he has chosen.

As New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd observed wryly, "I know our hawks avoided serving in Vietnam, but didn't they, like, read about it?" [NYT, March 30, 2003]

Unwittingly, Bush may be applying all the wrong lessons from America's worst

military disasters of the past 40-plus years. He's mixing risky military tactics with a heavy reliance on propaganda and a large dose of wishful thinking.

Bush also has guessed wrong on the one crucial ingredient that would separate meaningful victory from the political defeat that is now looming. He completely miscalculated the reaction of the Iraqi people to an invasion.

More and more, Bush appears to be heading toward that ultimate lesson of U.S. military futility. He's committed himself and the nation to destroying Iraq in order to save it.

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Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.
