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A Retrospective on Combat in Iraq

Gary Anderson

When bombs began to fall on Baghdad on March 19th, 2003, I was doing some commentary with NPR anchor Neal Conan who was broadcasting a description of the kick-off of the war. One observation that I made to him that night was that, once the first shots in a war are fired, the plans of the side that initiates the fighting are subject to a series of permutations that the planners could not have predicted. I went on to further observe that, the longer a war lasts, it becomes subject to more and more permutations. As we near the August 31, 2010 deadline for the end of combat operations in Iraq, this long war has seen more than its fair share of ironic twists.

No-one in his right mind sets out to start a long and bloody war. Most planners have visions of short and glorious affairs. In every major conflict of the Twentieth Century, the war plan of the nation that initiated the conflict called for a short campaign. In fully sixty percent of those cases the war lasted longer than a year; and in eighty percent of those the initiating nation lost the war. Of those nations that lost long wars that they started, one hundred percent experienced regime change.

Considering the odds, we did not do as badly in Iraq as we could have. The “short” war, once it began, lasted seven years. Casualty rates, that were thought to be intolerable in the post-DESERT STORM era, were borne by the American public for years. The Bush Administration did not survive the war, but it would not have anyway once fighting lasted past the end of the administration’s second term; however, the Republicans lost power in 2008. Finally, although it indeed had some nasty permutations, the U.S. combat role is ending on a note tolerable to our nation.

Having listened to American combat involvement in Iraq start in a radio station, I spent most of the last part of it with an embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team partnered with a U.S. Army combat brigade in that country. For a year, I participated as our team's partner brigade cleared North West Baghdad and Abu Ghraib of Al Qaeda in Iraq; it then went on to hold the ground, and rebuild Iraqi civilian governance. I was there as the surge ended and the draw-down began; our partner brigade, the 4-2 "Raiders" was the last designated combat unit to leave Iraq.

My overall impression was that we had given the Iraqis a fighting chance to get back on their feet. However I was very skeptical of the elections last March. I believed then, and nothing I have seen since has changed my mind, that we were placing far too much faith in what the elections could produce given the limited capabilities of the Iraqi political elites. Despite the misgivings of many of my Iraqi friends, the majority of them went to their polls, and their votes

were counted. That result surprised me, but the fact that six months later they still do not have a government resulting from the elections does not surprise me in the least.

This is troublesome. The Iranians hover in the wings waiting for us to leave, and by many reports, there is a disturbing trend among many of the Sunni insurgents who came over to our side during the "Sunni Awakening" to return to the arms of Al Qaeda due to fears of Iranian domination as we depart. I frankly see no good option other than a long term American presence similar to the one we have maintained in Korea as a hedge against Iranian dominance. As author Tom Ricks recently said; "that is not necessarily a bad thing".

Although some on the political left have cried, "no more Korea's", our involvement on that peninsula has ensured the growth of an economically healthy and democratic South Korea. It has taken nearly six decades; but we should remember that Korea was a much more serious basket case than Iraq when active combat ended there, and Iraq is much more strategically vital to us than Korea ever was.

Overall, I'm glad that I went to Iraq, and I hope that I made some contribution to giving the Iraqis a fighting chance. Literally every Iraqi I knew who went to the polls last March was not voting so much for a given candidate, but against the Iranians. It was the one common theme in a country where any two given citizens can't agree on much else. Given Iranian ambitions in the region, if we did not have an Iraq, we would have to invent one.

Gary Anderson is a retired Marine Corps officer. He teaches a course in Alternative Analysis and is a Senior Fellow at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.

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