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Strategic Amnesia and ISIS

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Forgetting history's hard lessons in Iraq.

by David V. Gioe

MARK TWAIN observed, “history doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme.” The study of military history teaches us valuable lessons that are applicable to today’s most intractable strategic problems; yet, these lessons are underappreciated in current American strategy formulation. Throughout the history of American armed conflict, the United States has discerned, at great cost, four critical lessons applicable to containing and combating the Islamic State.

First, as war theorist Carl von Clausewitz noted, war is a continuation of politics by other means; but resorting to war rarely yields the ideal political solution envisioned at the start of hostilities. Second, the use of proxy forces to pursue American geopolitical goals is rarely an investment worth making because proxies tend to have goals misaligned with those of their American sponsors. True control is an illusion. The corollary to this axiom is that supporting inept and corrupt leaders with American power only invites further dependency, does not solve political problems and usually prolongs an inevitable defeat. Third, conflating the security of a foreign power with that of America leads to disproportionate resource allocation and an apparent inability at the political level to pursue policies of peace and successful war termination. Fourth, alliance formation through lofty rhetorical positions imperils rational analysis of geopolitical and military realities. Publicly staking out inviable political end states invites a strategic mismatch between military capabilities and political wishes, endangering the current enterprise as well as future national credibility. America has paid for these lessons in blood; our leaders ought to heed them.

THE OBAMA administration’s effort to again increase the number of American military advisors in Iraq, coupled with the reconstruction of a new base at al-Taqaddum in Anbar Province, has given rise to accusations among both Democrats and Republicans about either mission creep (from doves and noninterventionists) or weak incrementalism (from hawks and liberal interventionists). Former defense secretary Robert Gates observed in May 2015 that there simply was no American strategy in the Middle East. Congressional hawks have used Gates’s observation to criticize the Obama administration’s cautious efforts in any ground campaign against

the Islamic State, and some have called for thousands of American boots back on the ground in Iraq. However, during a 2011 visit to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Gates also told the cadets that any adviser who counseled deploying large land forces to the Middle East should "have his head examined," suggesting that a larger military footprint should not be confused with a robust strategy.

Using rhetoric reminiscent of George W. Bush's "War on Terror," in 2014 President Obama pledged to "ultimately destroy" the Islamic State, but over a year later the Obama administration itself admitted that its strategy is not yet "complete." Indeed, even complete strategies often do not survive first contact with the enemy. As military personnel often quip, "the enemy gets a vote," and the Islamic State seems to be visiting the ballot box early and often. A candid comment about strategy formulation makes for an interesting sound bite (or cudgel). But discretion may be the better part of valor when facing the slippery slope of another open-ended commitment in Iraq. Many observers took President Bush to task for suggesting that an ideology could be defeated by applying military force, but their critiques could apply just as well to Obama's turn at the helm.

Pledging victory implies an end state that is ultimately acceptable to one's adversary—whether it's forced upon it (like the unconditional surrender of Japan in 1945) or a negotiated political solution (as in Korea eight years later). The Islamic State seems to show little taste for negotiation, and why should it? Most wars are prolonged in the hope that each side will come to the negotiating table with a better hand to play. The Pentagon service chiefs appear reticent to get further involved in Iraq absent a political solution. But the Obama administration has been bullied into increasing troop numbers by Congressional hawks who have conflated the security of Iraqis with that of Americans and the cohesiveness of the Iraqi state with core U.S. national-security interests. America has been here before.

Unlike at the height of its post–Cold War military power, America no longer has the ability to dictate events globally—to the overplayed extent that it ever did. This is particularly true in North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. Those who argue

that an American military campaign could defeat ISIS in a durable way place too much confidence in the ability of any American administration to control events abroad, especially in deeply rooted internecine conflicts. In fact, although what is happening in the Islamic State's Iraqi strongholds is both primitive and shocking, the state of affairs in Baghdad is what should be cause for even greater concern in Washington. Iraq, under its Shia-dominated government, has marginalized Sunnis and alienated Kurds, perhaps to the point of no return. Indeed, the billions of dollars invested in training Iraqi forces are for naught if the controlling political entity is a house divided against itself.

Iraq did not slide into its current state of affairs without outside help. The United States cannot escape some culpability for what Iraq (and Syria) have become, but expensive U.S. efforts to encourage good governance and interreligious and intertribal dialogue and cooperation have fallen short. Calling for a strategy to defeat an ideology or repair Iraq is tantamount to demanding that a physician devise a strategy to treat a patient admitted to the emergency room with a shotgun blast to the head. Even with the best of intentions, unlimited resources and the best expertise available, there isn't much that can be done to reach the status quo ante bellum.

SINCE THE end of World War II, the American military has struggled to translate tactical military success on the battlefield into durable political gains. Although America has no peer when it comes to accumulating post-9/11 tactical victories, the record is not enviable at the political level. Witness the bin Laden raid of May 2011 and the daring May 2015 Army Special Forces raid into Raqqa, Syria. These were spectacular tactical successes, and perhaps necessary from a moral perspective, but they achieved little at the strategic level. To be sure, the world is a better place without Osama bin Laden and ISIS financier Abu Sayyaf, and they richly deserved their fates. The problem is what comes next. The United States has been eliminating the leadership of Al Qaeda since the end of 2001 and has transferred those lessons to effectively remove the leadership of many Al Qaeda franchises in Yemen and North

Africa as well. No doubt the United States will further apply its lethal craft to ISIS in the near term. However, military history reveals that accumulating tactical successes does not equal strategic victory. The German military learned these lessons the hard way in both twentieth-century world wars. The Germans, although well equipped and tactically sound, were unable to realize their broader political desires through violence.

Soviet leader Joseph Stalin is said to have suggested that quantity has a quality all its own. If this is true, we must recognize American tactical successes for what they have achieved, even absent a broader strategy. The American homeland is arguably safer because those that seek to do it harm are impeded by those tactical successes. American military and intelligence operations have made enemy communications more difficult and secure staging bases hard to come by. The U.S. military killed or captured the top leadership of Al Qaeda and its like, retarding their operational planning and derailing their efforts to undertake spectacular attacks. If American strategy is threat mitigation through sustained special-operations raids and intelligence-driven covert action, it is working. Still, it is an open question how long this is sustainable, especially on the back of a shrinking, all-volunteer military force. American military and political leaders have spoken of a "generational war," yet they also shrink from serious discussion about national service or a draft.

Assume for a moment that the Obama administration were to pour troops into Iraq and loosen their rules of engagement, permitting direct American participation in the fighting. Could a couple of U.S. divisions retake ISIS strongholds? Absolutely. It would come at a bloody cost to young American soldiers, as when Fallujah fell to American forces in 2004 with 560 American casualties (and thousands more with psychological wounds), but the U.S. military could surely retake the large cities of Anbar province. Could they hold them? Not indefinitely. With the forces and resources available to the Pentagon, the United States could hold it for a time while building Iraqi capacity. This is a key pillar of the Army's counterinsurgency doctrine, but recent experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan lay bare the failure of this approach, at least on a timeline not measured in decades. The only dramatic success in Anbar province was a political one:

the Sunni tribes “awakened” to turn against Al Qaeda of Iraq and the monstrous tactics of AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Political settlement manifested on the battlefield—a much more promising proposition than the other way around.

Most war theorists conceive of war as a contest of wills. Put another way, the party who wants it most—and will thus sacrifice the most—usually wins in the long run. Consider, for instance, a group of mujahideen repelling the Soviets after a decade of fruitless bloodletting in Afghanistan. Or, for that matter, consider some of the same fighters showing NATO the exit a generation later. War’s fundamental character has not changed over time, and the contest of wills remains a bedrock principle. To apply the concept, consider what the average ISIS fighter would do to secure the success of the Islamic State against what the average American would do to roll it back. As things stand, the ISIS fighter is considerably more committed to his cause—particularly in the absence of convincing proof that ISIS poses an existential threat to the American way of life—and only 1 percent of Americans are actually involved in the so-called war on terror. In both of America’s greatest military successes in the twentieth century—the world wars—America came late, but with a total mobilization that called on the resources of a significantly larger proportion of the population. Moreover, that population was considerably more unified in purpose.

Additionally, expeditionary wars on foreign soil represent challenges on several fronts. Deploying and supporting troops, heavy machinery and the routine supplies of war, especially over great distances into landlocked countries with rugged terrain, complicates logistics. This is also expensive and relies on the continued support of the citizenry back home. The expeditionary force is most often at a disadvantage in that it must secure victory while fighting far from home. Its opponents, comfortable on their home soil, do not have to win—they just have to wait out the invading force and not suffer catastrophic battlefield defeat.

During the American Revolution, George Washington employed a Fabian strategy against the expeditionary British force. Washington avoided large engagements on unfavorable terms, as his goal was to preserve a true fighting force and wear down his

enemy until Westminster decided to stop throwing men and material at the Continental Army. The militarily superior British pulled the plug on their colonial undertaking after six years of active fighting in North America. They had other strategic considerations and made a difficult choice to concede defeat in the North American theater of a larger war. Unfortunately, today Washington has more in common with Westminster: it holds a losing hand against a determined enemy pursuing a Fabian strategy. The British experience in America suggests that a professional military in an expeditionary capacity may come up short.

RECENT MEDIA coverage of daily life inside of the Islamic State suggests that U.S. officials should not be so condescending as to think that those living under harsh ISIS rule are mere sheep awaiting rescue. The millions of Iraqis and Syrians now living under ISIS domination far outnumber their new masters. Those under ISIS rule have few good options, and the costs of rash action are high. The Iraqi army is apparently unable to retake any of ISIS core territory, at least not without the help of American airpower, advisors and (most problematically) Iranian-backed Shia militias. It is perhaps not a foregone conclusion that Sunnis living in the Islamic State would prefer militias backed by Iran's Quds Force as their liberators from ISIS. They may well view this sort of "liberation" as out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Although patience in a twenty-four-hour, crisis-to-crisis news cycle is notable for its absence, given time some promising developments in ISIS territory could come to pass that undermine the Islamic State from within. Any lasting governing entity relies on some level of support or at least consent of the governed. The actions of ISIS toward its subjects suggest that over the long term they might not achieve this. Fear and brutality only go so far. Parents fed up with their children being indoctrinated with fundamentalist hate at school, women who cannot leave the house with their faces uncovered or without male relatives, men who are being extorted for ISIS taxes, citizens disgusted by summary executions and floggings, fathers who dread their sons becoming brainwashed to be martyrs and mothers who want their daughters to enjoy

equal rights will begin to find common cause against the Islamic State. They may decide to cautiously provide tips to the Iraqi army's special forces on the locations of ISIS leaders or their weapons caches. They may themselves begin to hide weapons and supplies for when the popular mood shifts.

To use a parallel from the American Revolution, those under ISIS rule may form their own Iraqi committees of correspondence, Iraqi Sons of Liberty and Iraqi minutemen. They may seek their own outside allies and develop their own internal intelligence networks. In short, they will eventually resist, as the early sparks of the ill-fated Arab Spring will attest. From the Orange Revolution to the Prague Spring, from the Polish Solidarity movement to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the oppressed eventually resist. The desire for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is not exclusively American, but Americans cannot be the sole guarantors either. History has shown that peoples who perceive themselves to be oppressed usually organize into a creditable rebellious force, although this usually takes years for suitable levels of organized frustration to congeal into a counterforce.

As in the American Revolution example, defeating a superior force often requires powerful allies. The French contribution to the American war effort was a key development, but the French refrained from becoming openly involved until after the American victory at Saratoga in the fall of 1777. It was only after the Americans proved to be a formidable fighting force and fully devoted to their cause that the French arrived. Indeed, foreign military assistance and training for "internal defense" can be critical to success, but first the will and ability to win must be convincingly demonstrated. An increasingly vocal minority of Americans, whom we now refer to as "Patriots" and "Founding Fathers," spent the greater part of the early 1770s organizing themselves and secretly preparing for violence.

CONSIDER A familiar scenario, so familiar that it reads like many recent headlines from Iraq: Enemy forces are gaining momentum and seizing territory at an alarming rate. They have a stronghold in the shape of a triangle just over an hour's drive from

the capital. With the political dysfunction in the capital city and, even after American training, local troops underperforming, it seems that only an American-led search-and-destroy mission could root out the enemy, protect the capital and shift the battlefield momentum. After a period of airstrikes, American armored and helicopter-borne infantry forces duly arrive in the insurgent triangle and for three weeks attempt to clear the area of enemy forces, but they are unable to discern civilian from insurgent—it's possible they are one and the same, but absent uniforms or a recognizable chain of command, they are uncertain. These American troops are killed by booby traps and snipers, but never identify the enemy. Eventually declaring the area "cleared," American soldiers destroy some enemy weapons caches, and American senior officers brand it a successful operation.

No, the above scenario isn't Baghdad, the nearby Sunni Triangle, the crumbling Iraqi National Army and the advancing Islamic State. The year was 1967 and the operation, called Cedar Falls, was to be the largest of the Vietnam War. Its purpose was to clear the "Iron Triangle" of Viet Cong irregular forces that were threatening Saigon—a nearly failed state propped up by American power. Frustratingly, the enemy would not stand and fight in the face of overwhelming American tactical and material superiority. The Viet Cong forces moved across the porous border into Cambodia and simply returned when the American forces departed the area. After the operation had ended, and at the cost of more than four hundred American casualties, many senior American officers counted Cedar Falls as a success, pointing to the numbers of weapons stockpiles that were destroyed and the fleeing enemy. In retrospect, the failure of Cedar Falls was emblematic of American efforts in Vietnam. In reality, the residents of the Iron Triangle, much like their countrymen throughout the rest of South Vietnam, found aspects of the Viet Cong message appealing, and surely no worse than the repressive and corrupt government in Saigon.

In hindsight, the theory that Vietnam's fall to the Communists would make the rest of Asia topple like dominos into the Soviet sphere proved to be alarmist and false. Further, what appeared in 1965 to be in America's core national-security interests was identified by 1970 as irrelevant, a significant diversion of American resources from

more pressing concerns and a major source of political and social tension on the home front. American political leaders declared that the Republic of Vietnam should be responsible for its own security and promptly began a period of "Vietnamization," in which American forces trained and equipped the South Vietnamese military, paving the way for an American withdrawal. Saigon fell two years after the American withdrawal, but that would have happened no matter what year the Americans finally decided to pull the plug. This is worth remembering when hawks seek to blame the Obama administration for the current state of affairs in Iraq because it pulled out American troops in 2011. Even if the United States had kept thousands of troops in Vietnam until 1983, Saigon would have fallen by 1985. Political problems can be papered over with military force for a long time, but in the end the result is the same.

Such parallels from the Vietnam War are haunting, and should not be tossed aside in current strategy formulation. These are the lessons learned at the cost of 58,220 American soldiers who gave the last full measure of devotion in Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, America paid a heavy price in lives and treasure to prop up a corrupt and unrepresentative government, which it hoped could function as a regional ally and bulwark against the seemingly prevailing ideology in the region. American military personnel attempted to both provide population-centric security and bring massive firepower to bear on the enemy. With the benefit of hindsight, many military historians have declared the Vietnam War "unwinnable," yet America was not less secure because of the loss.

In the same way that Viet Cong forces took advantage of the porous border with Cambodia during operation Cedar Falls, ISIS fighters in Iraq would just as easily slip across the border (which they control) into Syria and wait for the Americans to leave. And just like the residents of the Iron Triangle outside Saigon, not all Sunni residents of Anbar province view being governed by ISIS as particularly worse than a corrupt Iranian proxy government in Baghdad. The politics of the region, particularly the animus between Shia and Sunni Islam, are a jumble of tribalism, mistrust, anarchy and greed. The government in Baghdad is helplessly divided and, as history consistently reveals, American military efforts cannot fix a political problem.

As in Iraq and Afghanistan, not all wars are worthy of continued American involvement, and hardly any wars in U.S. history could be considered existential. During the Korean War, President Harry S. Truman correctly elected not to expand the war into China, despite the vociferous urging of General Douglas MacArthur. Likewise, President Johnson did not permit an invasion of North Vietnam, despite the fact that in both cases the enemy center of gravity lay beyond the local battlefields of Korea and South Vietnam. Neither president opted to unleash the supposed guarantor of continued American existence—the nuclear triad. While it is true that these conflicts were limited wars without existential risks, it is proper that they were conducted as such by the U.S. administrations that oversaw them. Escalation to total war, or an existential fight for national survival, is only appropriate in the direst circumstances, in which a loss on the battlefield might mean national calamity. Despite the repulsive and brutal conduct of ISIS, the stakes for the United States are not that high. Confusing a messy, localized civil war with an existential threat to American national security is a strategic mistake.

AMERICAN POWER toppled the Taliban and Saddam rapidly with modestly sized forces, but the maelstrom and "surges" that followed pulled hundreds of thousands of American and allied troops into its wake. Like the process of Vietnamization, in both Iraq and Afghanistan U.S. forces sought to train, advise and equip allies in the hopes that they could stand on their own and American troops could leave with some political gains realized. In Iraq, the United States spent nearly a decade and approximately $20.2 billion on a dubious mission to train the Iraqi army to secure the country. This army had years to develop under the tutelage of the finest American instructors and was the beneficiary of millions of dollars of U.S. military hardware. Yet it is the black flag of ISIS that waves atop U.S.-made Humvees, armor and heavy weapons. This suggests that motivation, loyalty and esprit de corps matter more than the latest technology, hardware and training cadre.

Again, war is a contest of wills, and the U.S. policy at present is to stiffen the spine of the locals who are expected to do the fighting. The U.S. Marine Corps tried this in South Vietnam with Combined Action Platoons, a small group of Marines and a Navy Corpsman residing in a rural hamlet, strengthening the local militia forces. The CAP program is often judged as successful because it denied sanctuary to enemy forces, but successes at such a low level had little impact. The political dysfunction in Saigon overshadowed stability in rural hamlets.

Stiffening the spine of local forces, sometimes referred to as Foreign Internal Defense, can work if there is a baseline level of common mission already in existence among the host nation forces. American advisors can provide expertise and technology, but vision and commitment need to be homegrown. In addition to the lack of discipline and esprit de corps that accompanies good militaries, a major failing in the Iraqi army is the lack of a shared vision of the end state for Iraq. It isn't obvious that a Shia soldier in the Iraqi Army, from Basra for instance, considers it a good idea to fight ISIS in Anbar province. He may not view Anbar as his home or even part of his conception of Iraq. It is understandable, then, that he may want victory there less than an ISIS fighter does. Anbar just doesn't mean as much to him.

In the early sixteenth century, Machiavelli observed that troops who are not fighting for their own homeland are not inclined toward bravery because their "trifle of a stipend" is acceptable until war comes and then they "run from the foe." This begs the question whether members of the Iraqi army can be said to be fighting for the U.S. conception of a single federated Iraq, or for their own religious sect or tribe. American military and political leaders hoped that a reliably paid and equipped Iraqi army would fight like those defending their homeland. In fleeing before the ISIS advance, they proved to resemble the "mercenaries" and "auxiliaries" of whose dubious dedication Machiavelli warned.

WHAT IS to be done? Washington continues to substitute tactical action for strategy, and thus continues to throw good money and American lives at the chimera of a

pluralistic and tolerant Iraq (and Afghanistan) while at the same time breeding dependency on America. American decisionmakers would be well served to avoid ideologically guided wishful thinking as this often tempts the strategist to ignore history's warnings. Americans aren't the only ones who brush aside historical lessons with wishful thinking. Why would Adolf Hitler open himself up to a two-front war and invade the Soviet Union in June 1941? His extreme ideology compelled him to brush aside Napoleon's harsh lessons about invading Russia.

Another step in the right direction is to stop speaking in euphemisms when discussing the performance of the Iraqi (or any) army. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter noted that the Iraqi army "showed no will to fight" in Ramadi, but a White House spokesman characterized the dismal performance as a "setback." Investing rhetorically in an ally is a slippery slope, and almost always comes at the cost of sober and dispassionate analysis of battlefield performance. If unchecked, when "their" performance turns into "ours" and "they" starts to be "us," two unfortunate things usually follow. First, it conflates the security of the Iraqi state with that of American national security. And, more insidiously, cutting losses becomes harder. The fear of "losing face" has led many commanders to attempt to turn straw into gold with new strategies. It gets harder to withdraw absent a plausible "mission accomplished" narrative because of the inevitable argument that cutting losses is tantamount to forfeiting American military credibility. As Clausewitz reminded his readers, once the blood and treasure expended exceeds the value of an objective, that objective must be given up. Giving up an advise-and-assist mission for Iraqi allies will be politically impossible when the effort transforms from a military analysis of "them" into face-saving political measures involving "us." Moreover, despite some marginal but real tactical differentiation, publicly referring to forward operating bases (FOBs) or combat outposts (COPs), as "lily pads"—implying fleeting presence—is another misleading battlefield euphemism. With the Obama administration being bullied into dripping the U.S. Army back into Iraq a few hundred soldiers at time, it would be unsurprising if these "lily pads" remain into the next decade.

Military history warns that observers with skin in the game are unable to see strategy unfolding as it actually is. Despite evidence that the government in Saigon was increasingly corrupt and repressive, President Johnson observed in 1967, “Certainly there is a positive movement toward constitutional government.” In June 2005, the Bush administration claimed that there were 160,000 Iraqi security forces who were trained, equipped and on the verge of independent operations. The results of this training were on full display in the May 2015 ISIS victory in Ramadi. The list of misstatements goes on when we view our allies as we wish to see them, not as they are. Even if intelligence assessments in private offer more accurate assessments, their own skin in the game, coupled with a guiding ideological approach, will always color the vision of political leaders. Not succumbing to the temptation to offer a continual drumbeat of rosy analysis for public consumption is a critical first step to avoiding foreign-policy missteps, or at least reversing those errors already committed.

In fairness, few commentators are advocating a full-scale return to Iraq, but that’s not how long-term commitments are usually undertaken. Again, the case of Vietnam is instructive. In the early 1960s the Kennedy administration sent advisors to South Vietnam on a rather modest advise-and-assist mission. Once it became clear that this would be insufficient to accomplish the desired objective, “they” became “us” and “their task” became “our task.” The inevitable mission creep set in; by the end of the Vietnam War more than 2.5 million American troops had rotated through a country roughly half the size of New Mexico—and still lost. Some U.S. officials would reject that the new Iraq mission is anything like Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003–11), but it may look increasingly similar with the passage of time.

Eventually the American people will tire of nonstop war. After the horror of the Islamic State’s barbarism and the resulting surge of patriotism has subsided, the public will question the costs borne by so many troops, especially those who have done many tours without seeing any real progress. It is up to the Iraqis, and perhaps the greater Middle East, to decide their own fate. The international system seeks balance, and this often occurs through violence. We’re seeing that now in the Middle East. Given the cast of players, things may even get worse before they get better as

regional competitors become more involved and the stakes get higher. Yet the American people cannot want a pluralistic and tolerant Iraq more than the Iraqis do. Clausewitz noted that "One country may support another's cause, but will never take it so seriously as it takes its own." The study of military history reveals an abundance of material for defense strategists, commanders and policymakers. It is accessible and directly applicable to contemporary strategic dilemmas. Ignoring these lessons would be a disservice to those who made the ultimate sacrifice to reveal them.

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Image: Artillery being deployed by helicopter. US Army photo—public domain.