

Surging to Defeat

Petraeus's strategy only postponed the inevitable.

By Andrew J. Bacevich

THE UNITED STATES today finds itself with too much war and too few warriors. We face a large and growing gap between our military commitments and our military capabilities. Something has to give.

Although violence in Iraq has decreased over the past year, attacks on coalition and Iraqi security forces continue to occur at an average rate of 500 per week. This is clearly unacceptable. The likelihood that further U.S. efforts will reduce violence to an acceptable level—however one might define that term—appears remote.

Meanwhile, our military capacity, especially our ability to keep substantial numbers of boots on the ground, is eroding. If the surge is working as some claim, then why not sustain it? Indeed, why not reinforce that success by sending another 30 or 60 or 90,000 reinforcements?

The answer to that question is self-evident: because the necessary troops don't exist. The cupboard is bare.

Furthermore, recent improvements in security are highly contingent. The Shi'ite militias, Sunni insurgents, and tribal leaders who have agreed to refrain from violence in return for arms, money, and other concessions have by no means bought into the American vision for the future of Iraq. Their interests do not coincide with our own, and we should not delude ourselves by pretending otherwise.

It is as if, in an effort to bring harmony to a fractious, dysfunctional family, we have forged marriages of convenience

with as many of that family's members as possible. Our disparate partners will abide by their vows only so long as they find them convenient.

Unfortunately, partial success in reducing the level of violence has not translated into any substantial political gains. Recall that the purpose of the surge was not to win the war in a military sense. Gen. David Petraeus never promised victory. He and any number of other senior officers have assessed the war as militarily unwinnable. On this point, the architects of the surge were quite clear: the object of the exercise was not to impose our will on the enemy but to facilitate political reconciliation among Iraqis.

A year later, signs of genuine reconciliation are few. In an interview with the *Washington Post* less than a month ago, General Petraeus said that "no one" in the U.S. government "feels that there has been sufficient progress by any means in the area of national reconciliation." While it may be nice that the Kurds have begun to display the Iraqi flag alongside their own, to depict such grudging concessions as evidence of an emerging national identity is surely to grasp at straws.

So although the level of violence has subsided somewhat, the war remains essentially stalemated. Iraq today qualifies only nominally as a sovereign nation-state. It has become a dependency of the United States, unable to manage its own affairs or to provide for the well-being of its own people. As recent events in Basra have affirmed,

the Iraqi army, a black hole into which the Pentagon has poured some \$22 billion in aid and assistance, still cannot hold its own against armed militias.

The costs to the United States of sustaining this dependency are difficult to calculate with precision, but figures such as \$3 billion per week and 30 to 40 American lives per month provide a good approximation.

What can we expect to gain in return for this investment? The Bush administration was counting on the Iraq War to demonstrate the viability of its Freedom Agenda and to affirm the efficacy of the Bush Doctrine of preventive war.

Measured in those terms, the war has long since failed. Rather than showcasing our ability to transform the Greater Middle East, Operation Iraqi Freedom has demonstrated just the opposite. Using military power as an instrument for imprinting liberal values in this part of the world has produced a failed state while fostering widespread antipathy toward the United States.

Rather than demonstrating our ability to eliminate emerging threats swiftly, decisively, and economically—Saddam Hussein's removal providing an object lesson to other tyrants tempted to contest our presence in the Middle East—the Iraq War has revealed the limits of U.S. power and called into question American competence. The Bush Doctrine hasn't worked. Saddam is long gone, but we're stuck. Rather than delivering decisive victory, preventive war has landed us in a quagmire.

The abject failure of the Freedom Agenda and the Bush Doctrine has robbed the Iraq War of any strategic rationale. The war continues in large part because of our refusal to acknowledge and confront this loss of strategic purpose.

The great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr observed, “Even the wisest statecraft cannot create social tissue. It can cut, sew, and redesign social fabric to a limited degree. But the social fabric upon which it works must be ‘given.’”

In Iraq, to the extent that any meaningful social fabric has ever existed, events have now shredded it beyond repair. Persisting in our efforts to stitch Iraq back together will exhaust our Army, divert attention from other urgent problems at home and abroad, and squander untold billions, most of which we are borrowing from foreign countries.

THE PRESENT COURSE, WHICH INVOLVES **SOLDIERS GOING BACK FOR THEIR THIRD AND FOURTH COMBAT TOURS** WHILE THE REST OF THE COUNTRY HEADS TO THE MALL, **WILL BREAK THE ARMY** BEFORE IT PRODUCES POLICY SUCCESS.

To close the gap between too much war and too few warriors, we must reduce our commitments. That means ending the U.S. combat role in Iraq. It means exerting ourselves, primarily through diplomatic means, to limit the adverse consequences caused by our ill-advised crusade in Iraq. It also means devising a new strategy to address the threat posed by violent Islamic radicalism, to replace the failed strategy of the Freedom Agenda and the Bush Doctrine.

This reformulation of strategy should begin with an explicit abrogation of preventive war. It should include a candid recognition that invading and occupying an Islamic nation in the hope of transforming it qualifies as a fantasy.

There are people of good will who will disagree with this assessment. They will insist that we have no choice but to persevere in Iraq—although to say that the world’s sole superpower has “no choice” in the matter suggests a remarkable failure of imagination. They will insist further that restoring the social fabric of Iraq—engineering the elusive political reconciliation that will stabilize the country—remains an imperative. Such counsel seems certain to exacerbate the problem of having too much war and too few warriors. War is the realm of uncertainty, however. There’s always some chance of catching a lucky break. Perhaps next year the Iraqis will get their act together and settle their internal differences. Perhaps next year Congress will balance the federal budget. Such developments are always possible. They are also highly unlikely.

When it comes to Iraq, a far more likely prospect is that if the United States insists on continuing its war there, it will get what it wants: the war will continue indefinitely. According to General Petraeus, a counterinsurgency is typically a 10 to 12-year proposition. Given that assessment, and with the “surge” now giving way to a “pause,” U.S. combat operations in Iraq could easily drag on for another five or 10 years. A large-scale U. S. military presence might be required for two or three decades.

In that event, a conflict that already ranks as the second longest in our history will claim the title of longest. Already our second most expensive war, it will become the costliest of all. On one point at least, Donald Rumsfeld will be

able to claim vindication: Iraq will indeed have become a “long slog.”

For the United States to pursue this course would qualify as an epic misjudgment. Yet if our political leaders insist on the necessity of fighting this open-ended war, then they owe it to those who have already borne five years of combat to provide some relief.

Bluntly, if the country’s leaders in Washington are unable or unwilling to reduce the number of wars in which U.S. forces are engaged, then surely they ought to increase the number of warriors available to fight them.

Today, in a nation that according to President Bush is “at war,” approximately one half of 1 percent of the population is in uniform. The present course, which involves soldiers going back for their third and fourth combat tours while the rest of the country heads to the mall, will break the Army before it produces policy success. Worse, our present strategy—in which a few give their all while most give nothing—is morally indefensible.

If the war in Iraq is as important as some claim, then sustaining that war merits a commitment on the part of the American people, both to fight the war and to pay for it. If neither the American people nor their political leaders are willing to make such a commitment, then the war clearly does not qualify as genuinely important. Our loudly proclaimed determination to “support the troops” rings hollow.

The choice is one that we can no longer afford to dodge: it’s either less war or more warriors. ■

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Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Stop-Loss*]

No Exit

By Kara Hopkins

WATCHING “Stop-Loss” in a nearly empty Washington theater, I had a fantasy. On the back row sat the staff of the *Weekly Standard*. Then the senators who make windy speeches about “fighting terrorists there so we don’t have to fight them here.” Maybe a row of radio-show hosts who play “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” from the safety of their studios. Then right in front, the president and his war cabinet, spending two hours with the pawns they keep sending back to the bloody chessboard. Three tours. Four. Five.

Of course it didn’t happen that way. Not only did D.C. skip “Stop-Loss,” the rest of the country did too. It opened in seventh place at the box office. Americans aren’t looking to be entertained by something they’d like to ignore. I counted just nine heads in the dark—three with haircuts indicating they had already seen plenty.

“Stop-Loss” is less a great movie than a worthy experience. It isn’t meant to be enjoyable. The film opens in Tikrit with a jangle of images, grainy and unfiltered, narrated in the dialect Tom Wolfe called “F--k Patois.” Boredom cuts to piety turns to joking shifts to terror.

Staff Sergeant Brandon King (Ryan Phillippe), nearing the end of his second tour, leads his men into an alley ambush. Only half walk out. Stamped on the

young Texan’s brain: his friend’s bloodied face, a grenade rolling across the floor, bullet holes in a child’s chest. The images follow him home.

Director Kimberly Peirce found inspiration in the hand-held videos shot by her brother’s friends while he served in Iraq. The messiness suits her, and she doesn’t press hard after a point. Apart from a few soapbox moments, “Stop-Loss” doesn’t sermonize about the morality of the Iraq War. The human wreckage suffices.

King’s unit returns to Texas, but Peirce doesn’t allow the tension to dissipate. Her young men are still tight-wound and combat-ready. They endure their parade, kiss their girls, then embark on a full tour of the Little Shop of Horrors that is post-traumatic stress disorder. Binge drinking? Check. Random rage? On full display. Pulling guns on strangers? Impotence? Hallucinations? Flashbacks? Abuse? All present. When a troubled soldier walks over a hill, it’s a safe bet that he won’t be back. Suicide was the only symptom not yet catalogued.

This dramatic compression diminishes the gravity of the situation—a pitfall of setting reality to cinematic pace. Every returning vet isn’t tormented by a legion of demons. But if even a small percentage of the 650,000 soldiers who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan bear psychic scars, theirs is indeed a “long war.”

King seems able to cope. He survived and is getting out. Until he isn’t. As he tries to turn in his gear, King learns that he, like 81,000 other American soldiers, has been stop-lossed on the president’s order. Fine print rules. He will be returning to Iraq.

Up to that point, the young sergeant has been poster-boy bland—square-jawed and humorless. Of course he played high-school football and has a gritty mom and stoic dad. He does the hometown proud and doesn’t speak out of turn. But this asks too much.

Borrowing his best friend’s Jeep and fiancée, the winsome Michelle (Abbie Cornish), King takes off on a cross-country odyssey to see a senator in Washington who will surely set things right. The earnestness endears. “Why don’t you write a letter to the editor while you’re at it?” another AWOL soldier quips. King ends up with an old liberal fixer who slides a Canadian passport across the table.

But he’s too good a soldier to walk away without a fight. The values that came with the uniform declare war on each other: duty and humanity, brutality and decency. “You know that box in your head where you put all the bad s--t you can’t deal with?” he confesses. “Well, mine is full.”

His best friend re-enlists. “This is something I can be proud of,” he says, thumping the medals on his chest. “Did you think I’d end up selling cars? This is safety.” Another man from King’s unit—blinded, burned, missing an arm and a leg as a result of the Tikrit ambush—speculates that if he could go back and be killed in action, his family would get green cards. Another admits, “I miss blowing s--t up.” There is no easy ethic here.

But in the end there’s an obvious course for Sergeant King. He does the right thing—and it feels wrong. ■

Rated R for violence and profanity.

[Steve Sailer will return next issue.]