

# Fighting Fallujah

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## INTRODUCTION

On 31 March 2004, four American contract security guards wandered blindly into the Sunni city of Fallujah and were brutally butchered in its streets. This relatively minor action was magnified by lurid telecasts of Iraqis desecrating the body parts. For sympathetic viewers of al-Jazeera the atrocities were a rallying cry. In America, there was deep revulsion and passionate cries for action. In a precipitous response, two strategic decisions were made of lasting consequence. The first was to order the Marines, over their protest, to attack Fallujah immediately on the enemy's terms. The second was to back off in the midst of the successful attack and order a "unilateral cessation of offensive operations." Together these decisions resulted in a major political defeat and a turning point in the insurgency.

The decisions to attack and then halt mid-stride undermined U.S. credibility and emboldened the rising insurgency. The Marine long term counter-insurgency plans were scrapped for immediate action. Additionally, these flawed decisions led to a strategic blind alley that left the United States with no feasible options for resolving the Fallujah crisis. With the cessation of offensive operations, thousands of Marines, while under insurgent fire, were unable to either attack or withdraw from the partially occupied city. Beyond that, strategic progress in all of Iraq became dependent on ill-defined negotiations with the Fallujah insurgent's representative leadership—former Baathist generals. With aggressive military options off the table, the U.S. empowered its enemies and eventually sacrificed every negotiating point to extricate itself from an impossible position in Fallujah. At the same time, while the focus was on Fallujah, the insurgents gained the initiative in the surrounding Al Anbar Province and "Sunni Triangle."

The following analysis examines the divided command, poor planning, ignorance of

local power politics, crippled negotiations and miscalculations that drove decisions about Fallujah. Overseas interventions demand complete unity of effort between political and military actions at every level--from the tactical to the strategic. That unity of effort is achieved by forward-looking strategic direction and a campaign plan that is informed by an understanding of local realities. A clear chain of responsibility is essential. None of this was present in Fallujah in April 2004.

## **THE FALLUJAH PROBLEM**

Fallujah is a fiercely independent and violent city of 300,000 Sunnis that was a problem even for Saddam. The senior Marine commander in Iraq, LtGen. Conway, believed that Fallujans had a “chip on their shoulder” and “took perverse pleasure in being the toughest on the block.” Located 35 miles west of Baghdad, it thrived on smuggling. Saddam co-opted many of the tribes by recruiting them as enforcers in the army and security forces. He also selectively assassinated city leaders to further divide competing factions. Even in the best of times, outsiders did not stop for lunch in Fallujah.

This historical hostility to outsiders was heightened by the coalition’s actions after Iraq’s liberation in April 2003. First, Fallujah was bypassed during the initial attack to Baghdad. Neither the city, nor many of its returning soldiers had directly suffered defeat. With its Sunni power structure intact and unaffected by coalition military might, Fallujah and its parent Al Anbar Province would need particular attention to impose an acceptable political solution.

After Baghdad fell, however, the overstretched coalition forces did not have the time, means or direction to understand, much less influence, this future hotbed of Sunni resistance. Initially, Al Anbar Province, the size of Wyoming, was patrolled by a single armored cavalry regiment. In one year, six were successively shuffled through Al Anbar Province: the 82d Airborne Division twice, the Third Armored Cavalry twice, and finally the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division. The largely mechanized Army units lacked infantry and did not get the time to establish a presence in their vast and complex area of operations.

Organized as juggernauts for land battle and lacking direction for post-conflict operations, the succession of temporary custodians provided seams for the opposition. As a result, the window of opportunity created by the rapid collapse of the Saddam regime was forfeited. The year-long power vacuum was exploited by the former regime loyalists, criminals, jihadists and disaffected Iraqis who were to eventually coalesce into an insurgency.

By the time an 82nd Airborne Division battalion was assigned to Fallujah, hostile city leaders were strong enough to resist the U.S. presence and the potential for misunderstanding was high. Relations were further poisoned on 28 April 2003, when soldiers killed 17 civilians during a demonstration over the coalition’s occupation of a girls’

school. Two days later soldiers again fired on demonstrators protesting the shooting. The U.S. battalion was eventually stationed completely outside the city. A détente was reached when U.S. forces limited operations to a daily “show of force” patrol that would not be attacked if it did not stop for more than 15 minutes.

Even more importantly, Fallujah was isolated from political developments in Iraq. Very little was done to positively engage the city. At the national level, Sunni engagement was crippled by disbanding the Army and the blanket decree that most Baathists, even those innocent of crime, would lose their jobs. Hostility was further magnified when no representatives from Al Anbar Province were included in the Iraqi Government Council or Baghdad ministries. Fallujah’s problems were off the radar for the Iraqi and U.S. political leadership preoccupied with organizing a central government in Baghdad. Fallujah also bristled at being placed under the administrative control of the Al Anbar provincial capital, Ramadi—a bitter rival for money and prestige.

Finally, the planned economic model for Iraq was disconnected from the immediate need and incompatible with stability operations. The plan relied on long-term capital projects implemented largely by outside contractors. The idle state industries outside Fallujah were slated for permanent closure based on their economic inefficiency. Unemployment, however, was already over 50 percent. Commander’s had little funding for starting micro-businesses, developing local markets and relieving unemployment through public works. Fighting an insurgency without an effective economic model was a crippling handicap. For a year, the coalition occupation had brought nothing but hardship, indignity and poor prospects to Fallujah. What was there for Sunni Fallujah in post-Saddam Iraq?

By March 2004, Al Anbar province had become a disaffected, insurgent sanctuary that was suspected of supporting attacks throughout the “Sunni Triangle.” Insurgent “ratlines” from Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia crisscrossed age-old smuggling routes throughout this expansive province—fueling attacks in Baghdad and the populated areas straddling the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Fallujah was the largest safe haven on these routes, a terrorist training ground and a command and control center. When the Marines began relieving the 82d Airborne Division during March 2004, Fallujah was already the hub of a rising insurgency.

## **BACKGROUND**

The April Battle for Fallujah can only be understood as part of a larger insurgent campaign being fought across Iraq. Although the battle was precipitated by a seemingly random event, the misguided travels of four contractors, it fit into larger insurgent actions that made April 2004 one of the bloodiest months of the war.

Before April 2004, there was a debate as to whether the opposition reflected the last gasp of former regime elements or a more organized insurgency. In December 2003, the

general responsible for Al Anbar, believed the province was on a “glide path to success” and the insurgency in disarray. By February, CJTF-7 “bubble charts” were largely green based on an optimistic assessment of a peaceful transfer of government and security to Iraqis--despite the growing awareness of the insurgency’s strength in Al Anbar Province.

During April 2004, the insurgents surprisingly mounted a wide ranging and coordinated offensive of which Fallujah was only apart. The insurgent campaign included:

Major and skillful attacks on Marines in Husaybah and Ramadi that exploited the absence of coalition forces committed to Fallujah.

“Shoot and scoot” rocket and mortar attacks on key facilities.

Complex attacks and ambushes on isolated convoys and units.

Interdiction of the single, extended supply line to Kuwait.

An information operations campaign that exploited embedded reporters and the internet.

Infiltration of Iraqi government and security forces.

Intimidation of Iraqis through terror.

Attacks on the supply lines to Baghdad and within Al Anbar were especially problematic until alternative supply lines were developed, air delivery was refined, convoys better organized and troops were committed to supply line security. With all forces committed and no operational reserve, units had to shift their operating areas to meet insurgent attacks. The unexpected surge of violence in April confirmed an insurgency capable of training, supplying and directing sustained and widespread attacks that exploited the ongoing relief of the 82d Airborne Division by the Marines.

The saving grace was that the insurgents had little popular appeal. They did, however, conduct an effective campaign of intimidation and infiltration of the Iraqi population. This campaign was effective due to the extreme brutality of the enemy, the relative isolation of coalition troops and the ineffective Iraqi Security Forces. This campaign was started well before April 2004. For instance, a sweep of Husaybah by the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment early in the occupation in 2003 was followed by over thirty murders of so-called “collaborators.” On Valentine’s Day, 14 February 2004, insurgents massacred 23 Iraqi policemen in an attack on the Fallujah police station.

By March 2004, this terror campaign had instilled a pervasive fear throughout the province, preserved the insurgent freedom of action and denied the coalition critical human intelligence. Lacking a compelling ideology, the insurgent vulnerabilities were its lack of a positive message and internal divisions. However, without an active coalition presence, the capacity to exploit these vulnerabilities was limited.

Unfortunately, that presence was largely lacking for the year prior to the April Battle for Fallujah. During March 2004, the larger Marine Division with its many more dismounted infantry began to deploy, intent on developing lasting, local relationships. The catch phrase for this campaign was “patience, persistence and presence.”

## **THE DECISION TO ATTACK FALLUJAH**

From the start, Marines considered Fallujah a special case which had to be dealt with. The Marine motto was “no better friend; no worse enemy.” Throughout the rest of Al Anbar, the “no better friend” track predominated with an aggressive program of civil affairs (economic development and humanitarian assistance programs), information operations, and positive engagement with local leaders. The Marine plan for Fallujah was more complicated, recognizing the need to undercut the insurgency. The operational concept was to create successful relations in surrounding communities, both to isolate Fallujah and to encourage city “moderates” to cooperate. At the same time, the Marines would develop intelligence to identify political pressure points and the information required for targeted raids against city insurgents. Marines would further isolate, marginalize and contain Fallujah by destroying terrorist supply lines and safe havens that fed into Fallujah from the west.

This long-term counter-insurgency plan was premised on painstaking intelligence work and developing trust with local Iraqi leadership. It also assumed that ultimate victory could only come after political and economic progress. Military actions, when required, were narrowly targeted to minimize collateral damage and prevent the resulting backlash of animosity. The risk was that the Marines would not have the time or forces to implement this plan. The recently elected city councils, cooperative Governor and new provincial council required a security “wind break” from terrorist intimidation. Troubles in Fallujah could pull units off these successful stability operations elsewhere for offensive operations in an already lost city.

By 31 March 2005, Fallujah was in a high simmer. The newly arrived Marines patrolled outside the city, conducted raids, and were containing the violence that had resulted in two ambushes and a firefight in the past week. Tense security negotiations were also ongoing between the Marines and the Fallujah Provisional Council. Into the volatile situation stumbled four Blackwater security contractors who, without coordination, entered this restricted zone. They were butchered, dismembered and their bodies wildly desecrated in an outpouring of celebration. On U.S. television, these isolated, heinous acts were amplified into a general perception of brazen lawlessness and disorder. After these murders, the passionate pressure for reprisals exposed weaknesses in the coalition command structure and planning.

The initial response was relatively muted. Bgen. Mark Kimmit, the spokesman for Combined Joint Task Force-7 (CJTF-7), the Marine’s higher headquarters and senior military command in Iraq, stated that:

There often are small outbursts of violence. They [the Marines] will go in, they will restore order and they'll put these people back in their place...We are not going to rush pell mell into the city

This reflected the Marine view that the incident, however tragic, was still just that—an incident. The murderers had long left the city. Time was still needed to develop intelligence on other insurgents. A siege on Fallujah would be “collective punishment,” tie up thousands of Marines needed elsewhere, and miss the insurgent leadership that would quickly relocate. Aside from revenge, there was no clear end state for a large scale attack. What were the objectives? What were the consequences of violent street fighting in a major city of 300,000? Who would run the city once it was taken? Indeed, a well-established insurgent stratagem is to incite such a heavy-handed use of force against a civilian population. To immediately and blindly attack Fallujah, in the Marine view, enter into battle on the insurgent's terms and before there was an effective operational and political framework for success.

As constant media coverage of the atrocities continued, views in Washington hardened. The Defense Department and U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) recommended “a specific and overwhelming attack” to seize Fallujah. CENTCOM believed that the only thing Iraqis respected was power and that the only response could be power. LtGen. Conway reportedly presented the Marine position up the chain of command, arguing: “We felt...that we ought to let the situation settle before we appeared to be attacking in revenge.” Fallujah had become strategically important as a symbol of U.S. resolve. Pentagon spokesman, Lawrence Di Rita explained: “If you're going to threaten the use of force, at some point you're going to have to demonstrate your willingness to actually use force.”

As pressure mounted, CJTF-7 pushed for more demonstrative Marine action. At one point, CJTF-7 even suggested that the Marines destroy the railway bridge from which American body parts had been hung. The Marines responded with plans for specific, targeted raids to include one on the photo shop that produced propaganda videos of the killings. They also requested more time and intelligence for focused military action. The Marine leadership in the field was caught short by an overnight change in direction when BGen Kimmett presented to the press a fiery denunciation of the murderers and promises of sweeping Marine action.

The rapidly escalating response to the murders precluded effective communication between the divided political and military commands in Iraq. Without unity of effort and the context of a long view, Fallujah spiraled into a crisis—a crisis beyond the capacity of the coalition command structure to forestall. Ambassador Bremer, head of the Coalition Political Authority (CPA) that directed political actions in Iraq, ostensibly worked for the U.S. Secretary of Defense but increasingly reported to the National Security Advisor. General Sanchez, the commander of CJTF-7 and senior military commander in Iraq, had an undefined “direct support” role to Ambassador Bremer but was in fact a “second viceroy.” He reported directly to General Abizaid, the commander of CENTCOM, who reported to the Secretary of Defense, not Ambassador Bremer. Both the CJTF-7 and CPA were ad

hoc staffs, with the CPA in particular consumed by internal disorganization, poor staff discipline and with many personnel untrained for the task. Another exacerbating factor, was CPAs impending dissolution three months from the battle's start. CPA personnel were departing; responsibility was attenuated; and dysfunction increased as the CPA approached the 30 June transfer of authority to Iraqis.

To further complicate matters, Ambassador Robert Blackwill had been sent from Washington as a special envoy to coordinate the creation of an interim Iraqi Government on 30 June. He worked closely with the U.N. representative, Mr. Brahimi, and independently for the National Security Advisor in Washington. The biggest impediment to sound, deliberate planning and strategic direction were these tangled command relationships.

Under these conditions, the common view of both the military and CPA representatives closest to the problem could not be heard. Teleconferences between Baghdad and Washington and heightened rhetoric substituted for integrated staff planning and decision-making. Statements like American "deaths would not go unpunished" and the attack on Fallujah would be a "struggle between human dignity and barbarism" set the public tone. In the estimate of one CPA officer on the ground, "groupthink" prevailed over strategic planning. On 1 April, LtGen. Sanchez briefed the Marines on the decision to attack Fallujah. He said that: "The President knows this is going to be bloody. He accepts that." Battalions were then pulled to Fallujah from their initial operating areas to focus on Fallujah. On 5 April, the cordon around the city was complete and on 6 April the attack began.

## **THE DECISION TO HALT THE ATTACK MID-STRIDE**

On 9 April, after three days of hard fighting, the Marines were on the verge of success. They occupied one third of Fallujah, had suffered relatively few casualties and would need just four more days to clear Fallujah of insurgents. Most of the civilians had already left the city in anticipation of the battle and tight control of firepower further limited civilian casualties. In every way, the attack into difficult urban terrain was a success. Infantry squads had stormed insurgent strong points with the support of tanks and airpower. The AC-130 Spectre aircraft, in particular, provided precise, devastating fire and invaluable sensors. Humanitarian assistance and civil affairs preparations were made to quickly restore city services, rebuild and compensate civilians following the attack. Washington and Ambassador Bremer, however, faced a firestorm of protest over the selective images of violence and carnage trumpeted by the Arab media.

The Sunni leaders in the Iraqi Governing Council threatened to resign over what they considered "mass punishment" and an "illegal" act. The U.N. envoy, Brahimi, echoed their concerns, publicly calling U.S. actions "collective punishment" and, thus "unacceptable." British leaders complained that the attack was creating more insurgents among city residents and domestic political problems for Prime Minister Tony Blair. They called for a counter-insurgency plan with more emphasis on peacekeeping than war-making. Both the

coalition and Iraqi Governing Council were being portrayed as being at risk. U.S. domestic support was also coming in play. The President's job approval rating fell and he was attacked by some members of Congress such as Senator Joseph Biden: "We are on the verge of losing control in Iraq."

Adding to the pressure was a Shiite uprising in the south, led by the firebrand Muqtada al-Sadr. Following the decision to attack Fallujah, CJTF-7 executed a standing warrant to arrest one of Sadr's key deputies on 3 April. The timing could not have been worse. In response, Sadr sent aid to Fallujah and opportunistically went on the offensive. Initial clashes between Sadr's Mahdi Army began on 4 April rapidly spread throughout Southern Iraq. The Shia holy city of Najaf was soon besieged by 2,500 coalition troops. Sadr could potentially provide the ideological spark the insurgency lacked to start a general uprising. The improbable, worst-case scenario of a combined Shia and Sunni insurgency was now staring U.S. decision-makers in the face.

On 8 April, the United States approved a proposal from three prominent Sunni leaders to negotiate a Fallujah solution. Ambassador Bremer urged this decision in order to save the Iraqi Governing Council. General Abizaid, then in Iraq, was quoted as telling the Sunni leaders that "if you give me two days, I'll finish Fallujah." The response from Hassani, a Sunni leader on the Iraqi Governing Council was: "Yeah, you may finish Fallujah but I guarantee you, you'll have all Iraq as one big Fallujah."

Some CPA officials thought that the Sunni leaders were simply posturing to avoid blame for the consequences. In any case, the Iraqi Governing Council was arguably not worth the cost of halting military actions in Fallujah. The Iraqi Governing Council was a controversial and artificial construct with limited legitimacy. Built, over State Department objections, around Ahmed Chalabi and other expatriates, the Iraqi Governing Council had yet to prove itself. In the view of some in the CPA, the council was largely corrupt and had failed its first major test in Fallujah and thus reinforced its ineffectiveness. Ambassador Bremer, however, was intent on preserving the embers of Iraqi self-rule until a new Iraqi government was installed in the 30 June transfer of authority. Notably, Ayad Allawi, the pragmatic, current Iraqi Prime Minister, also recommended negotiations. The coalition concern was that "major military action could implode the political situation."

On 9 April, the Marines received the word to cease fire with the indication that the "unilateral cessation of offensive action" would be temporary. Instead negotiations sputtered over weeks. Seven battalions stood prepared for the attack order on a city now largely empty of civilians. For over three weeks, frontline Marines, tied to their cordon and under insurgent fire, expected each day to bring an attack order. That order never came. However, both Marine and CPA officials argued strenuously in favor of completing the attack. Regional CPA officials also argued for finishing the job in Fallujah. As one put it, the coalition would "take three weeks of pain and then go on our way. No one would remember those three weeks." Likewise, LtGen. Conway said to the press:

When you order elements of a Marine division to attack a city, you really need to understand what the consequences of that are going to be and not

perhaps vacillate in the middle of something like that. Once you commit, you got to stay committed.

Predictably, the lengthening standoff was hailed as an insurgent victory and became a rallying cry for the Fallujah resistance. Insurgent propaganda and a sympathetic Arab press capitalized on what could have been yesterday's news if the attack had been rapidly completed. Ominously, gun battles within insurgent lines indicated a consolidation and score settling that solidified a radical, insurgent leadership in the city. On 14 April, remaining moderate Iraqi leaders came out from the city to plead for intervention:

You must go in the city. The longer you wait, the worse the people will suffer. The people have gone 12 days without food. No one goes outside now. You must act now. Please help the people of Fallujah—the good people of Fallujah. All the fighters want is anarchy. The Iraqi Governing Council just wants to make news with the negotiations. The news is worthless. If the U.S. does not make law in Fallujah now, the U.S. will never make law in Iraq. Inside Fallujah, they say the U.S. has already lost the battle. You must go in the city.”

Even more important was the prestige gained by the insurgents and lost by the coalition throughout Iraq—the very outcome the original attack was supposed to prevent.

When explaining the decision to halt, General Abizaid was asked: “The Fallujah insurgents believe that they beat the Army, now they believe they have defeated the Marines. What do we gain by stopping?” The response from coalition leaders was that the insurgents, in their hearts, really knew they had been on the verge of defeat in the tactical battle. Regional CPA leadership below Ambassador Bremer dissented from the decision to halt, believing correctly that it strengthened both the Fallujah insurgents and Sadr.

The subsequent negotiations were painfully futile. The divisions within and among CJTF-7, CPA and the Iraqi Governing Council were magnified, as *twelve* separate and uncoordinated negotiating tracks were pursued. The sporadic, often conflicting and independent efforts included: special delegations from the Iraqi Governing Council, various CPA officials, a well-meaning special operations officer, Al Anbar provincial officials and CJTF-7 staff officers. More than anything else, these fumbled negotiations exposed the coalition's dysfunction, disunity and lack of planning.

These separate tracks also exposed divisions within the Sunni leadership and insurgency that could have been exploited by a ruthless and expert negotiating team. Working at cross purposes, however, the coalition “teams” were easy prey for the former Baath officers, veterans of an “Iraqi Army that had never won a battle nor lost a negotiation.” Without overall cohesion, negotiations originally delegated to subordinates were often superseded by episodic interventions by higher commands or well-meaning individuals who would parachute into the situation. Faced with a divided coalition command that was not able to define the appropriate levels of contact, Al Anbar's Sunnis were able to play the uncoordinated coalition negotiators against themselves. This played to

the Fallujans strength as they came from a culture and thousand year history of political survival through the intricate balancing of prestige before strength.

Eventually and by default, the failing negotiations fell to the Marines, as the competing coalition negotiating teams drifted away—becoming “refugees from responsibility.” Under these circumstances, the Marines negotiated from a position of impossible weakness. They received little directions and were barred from any offensive military action to include even limited attacks. Although requested, CPA provided no explicit terms of reference to guide the negotiations. Six initial negotiating points were reduced to two “red lines”—the Sunni turn over of heavy weapons and expulsion of foreign fighters. Then even these points were sacrificed, as the political will for applying serious negotiating pressure crumbled.

From 9 to 29 April, seven Marine battalions were hostage to these futile negotiations. With Marines fixed in Fallujah, the insurgents enjoyed greater freedom in Al Anbar Province to move, interdict coalition supply lines, intimidate the population and develop sanctuary elsewhere. Compounding the problem was the, in part, self-inflicted Sadr uprising and concurrent siege on Najaf. These two running sores tied up troops, emboldened the insurgents and gave the initiative to the enemy. Every negotiating day brought more swagger to the insurgent negotiators who proudly wore the green Army uniforms of the Saddam regime.

After three weeks of failed negotiation, there were two obvious courses of action—to either attack or withdraw; both were rejected as politically unacceptable. With the Marines straddling the city and the coalition’s efforts in Iraq stalled, the coalition was at a strategic impasse. On 29 April, the Marines attempted to finesse the deadlock with a long shot solution--the agreement with Fallujah’s leaders to create the Fallujah Brigade.

## **THE FALLUJAH BRIGADE**

The Fallujah Brigade, local men under the command of a former Baath general, would be given responsibility for bringing order to Fallujah. This was a high-risk expedient that armed and legitimized traditional Sunni power bases such as former Baath generals, unemployed soldiers, tribes and religious leaders. The idea was to co-opt Sunni insurgents and drive out foreign jihadists by creating a responsible and accountable Sunni leadership. Sunni’s would be spared defeat and given the opportunity to govern themselves in Fallujah as long as they established order and prevented attacks on coalition forces. At its most optimistic, the Fallujah Brigade plan was the means to achieve the goal of a Sunni leadership that would participate in a post-Saddam government. The standing appeal to Sunnis was that they needed to join in Iraq’s political development or get left out. Giving the Sunni’s a “victory” in Fallujah and a vision of Sunni political participation might transform Sunni relations. In the words of one coalition commander: “For us to win we have to make the Sunnis think they won.”

Despite its hope as the positive tipping point for improved Sunni-coalition relations, the Fallujah Brigade construct was inherently flawed. “There are no George Washingtons” is

the standard coalition observation. This was particularly true in Fallujah where brutal men, emboldened by victory, vied for power. The first proposed leader for the Fallujah Brigade, was discovered to be one of Saddam's butchers and subsequently dismissed. As negotiations with Sunni leaders continued, they were warned that if they forfeited this opportunity for responsible government they would rue it a thousand years. Despite the warning and the opportunity, Fallujah quickly and inevitably hardened into an insurgent sanctuary. The insurgent "victory," fanned by a radical Arab press, inflamed rather than moderated Sunni leaders competing to control Fallujah.

Inconclusive military operations followed by divided negotiations in just one city could not bring to head a more general insurgency. In the end, the April battle for Fallujah, started on coalition's initiative, had resulted in insurgent safe haven, a strengthened and legitimized insurgency, diminished coalition power and defeat. The only practical option was to conduct a deliberate attack to root out an entrenched enemy, room by room, in dense urban terrain.

## **CAMPAIGN IMPLICATIONS**

The insurgent tactical actions achieved the strategic effect of fixing and extending coalition forces, isolating them from the population and winning the insurgents a propaganda victory in the Arab, and, to lesser extent, international press. The opportunity cost for tying units up in Fallujah was high. The committed units could not pursue long term plans for Iraqi political development, civil affairs, and Iraqi security force training. Insurgents gained the initiative by shifting their focus to the areas of least coalition opposition. Insurgent leaders, largely based outside Fallujah, could choose how many of their expendable foot soldiers stayed and fought in Fallujah or just dropped their weapons and walked away as "civilians." Tellingly, the dynamic enemy coalition of former Baathists, Sunni jihadists, criminals, international terrorists and local opportunists was able to coordinate an effective campaign around the Fallujah battle. The contrast with the coalition's narrow, short term and muddled response was stark.

## **SOME BROAD LESSONS**

The standard joint operational construct focuses a campaign on defeating an enemy's conventional forces as the decisive action. The Fallujah experience argues for a different priority. Military force is a blunt instrument that only sets the conditions for a lasting political solution. Translating military victory into political success is notoriously difficult. Conventional military actions create windows of political opportunity that must be rapidly exploited, even as the battle is fought, by those skilled in setting a new order—civil affairs, diplomats, economists, law enforcement, and relief agencies. Post-combat operations, are not an afterthought but the *decisive phase* of any operation that goes beyond just inflicting pain on an opponent to seeking a new political order. Every military action must be

informed and backward planned from this end state.

Moreover, how conventional operations are fought will determine the nature and level of effort required in post-combat operations. Absent, a native ally such as the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, a quick conventional campaign based on bypassing resistance will require greater post-conflict operations to influence a political solution. This is especially true if whole-sale disenfranchisement of the Baath Party and Army are strategic objectives. Correspondingly, during the April Battle for Fallujah, the aborted military actions did not support the coalition's negotiating objectives. More importantly, the failure to think through the political end state and negotiation strategy was fatal. A campaign plan that maximizes political effects and achieves lasting objectives is also impossible without an interagency plan, clear command relationships and unity of effort.

The Fallujah Battle also reflects the changing face of modern war: the battle against terrorists, insurgents, guerillas, criminals and other non-state actors. Our enemies are more likely to conduct irregular attacks against predominant U.S. conventional strength. In this respect, four future trends played out: (1) the blurred distinction between law enforcement and military action when a networked enemy cell structure must be ferreted out; (2) the premium on intelligence; especially human intelligence; (3) the expansion of combined arms warfare to closely fuse, at increasingly lower levels, political, diplomatic, information, intelligence, psychological, special and conventional operations; (4) the predominant importance of cultural, rather than technological, transformation of power in irregular operations.

Irregular war, war termination, and reconstruction are ultimately about politics. Military forces operate in complex and unceasing competition between multiple players. "All politics is local" and so every town and tribe has its own dynamic. There is no such thing as an individual Iraqi. All are tied together by powerful familial or patronage links. Knowing how to manipulate this dynamic is a tremendous advantage. Despite intense study, the internal Sunni power struggles in Fallujah and Al Anbar were murky at best. For instance, tribes oppressed by Saddam were carefully targeted as potential allies. These tribes, however, needed careful cultivation and a demonstrated coalition commitment over time to build trust. They were also subject to terror and political undercurrents invisible to an occupation force. It is a testament to the insurgent terror and coalition political ineptness that few Sunni saw benefit in allying themselves with the coalition. After a year of occupation in an intensely brutal and Machiavellian world, coalition leaders in Fallujah were still largely blind to their enemies, local political divisions, and potential allies.

This cultural blindness is the greatest vulnerability in irregular war. A cultural transformation is required to focus America's national power on the irregular battlefield. Information "superiority" will not come from a sensor. There are three views of the battlefield: (1) the view of your own forces that comes from reports, (2) a bird's eye view of the entire battlefield that comes from sensors and (3) the view of the mind of our enemy, potential enemies and potential allies that comes from intimate cultural appreciation. In irregular operations against Iraqi insurgents and Islamic extremists the last view is by far

the most important and it is not delivered by technology.

There were, however, too many layers of control and filters between the battalions in Fallujah, 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, I Marine Expeditionary Force, CJTF-7, CPA and Washington. As much as possible, authority and broad combined arms capability must be pushed downward. Military staffs and commands must be streamlined and organized efficiently to keep pace with a networked enemy who exploits local political conditions. Likewise, relieving civilian organizations must be cohesive, have a strong professional ethic and trained as a tight team. Before civil institutions are in place, local commanders must be allowed to strike a balance between the ideal, practical realities, perfect justice and the immediate requirements for stabilization. Coordinated support of the local, accountable commander should be the principle that disciplines the multiple, inter-agency staffs.

Our young infantrymen, squad leaders, and lieutenants — those at the spearhead — are simply superb. They were unwavering in their commitment to victory over a brutal enemy. Morale, fighting spirit and a keen sense of humor were uniformly high in Fallujah. During one point in the “unilateral cease fire,” a private when asked about the enemy insurgents that were fortifying and booby-trapping positions 40 meters in front of him, nonchalantly stated that he would “just take care of them when the time came.” During firefights, seriously wounded Marines hid their wounds to stay on the firing line or begged to return to their units once first aid was applied to severe wounds.

Units took the sudden political transitions, enemy cease fire violations and long stand-offs in stride. In a great display of discipline, these tough units halted, after breaking the enemy’s back, within hand grenade range of an enemy that capitalized on the unilateral “cease fire” to recover, snipe and counterattack. At every strategic impasse, commander’s used their imagination, initiative and energy to employ raids in surrounding areas, humanitarian assistance, reconstruction aid, negotiations and painstaking intelligence operations to influence the stalled battle and ongoing negotiations.

The obligation of strategists and campaign planners is to rely less heavily on the ingenuity of frontline warriors. The coordinated employment of all elements of national power, to include diplomatic, informational and economic, are required to win a Fallujah. Yet, irregular warfare will always depend on these young leaders to sort out a complex battlefield in which the enemy hides among, manipulates and terrorizes innocent men, women and children. Our training, procurement and doctrine should reflect the overriding importance of the ultimate moral and precision weapon--the men and women on the ground. Fallujah is also the story of their initiative and fortitude creating strategic opportunities when it appeared there were none.

## CONCLUSION

The Fallujah problem is a microcosm of the war in Iraq and the global war on terror. Intervention forces have to prepare for the “politics in the raw” that Fallujah presented. In Fallujah, every aspect of military, economic, diplomatic and political power had to be brought to bear in a unified effort—just as if Fallujah were an independent state. A single, responsible authority for this effort was required in both Baghdad and Fallujah. In fact, a unified military-civilian structure must extend to every command responsible for a town, city, or province. The free agent contractors, knee-jerk strategic decisions, and failed negotiations were symptomatic of divided commands that could not focus America’s great power. Future interventions require integrated diplomatic and military planning, training, deployment and execution.

Granted, decisions were made under intense political pressure, time constraints and with many competing equities. This is still more reason to empower responsive, integrated commands that can provide proactive, not reactive, direction to complex interventions. The aim is a fast, integrated political/military decision-making cycle that can observe, orient, decide, and act quicker than the enemy and the media cycle. Commanders must be carefully trained and prepared for negotiations in the local culture. Negotiators should have a clear mandate and direct line to decision-makers.

Strategic misstep may have been avoided with a single, accountable “viceroy” in charge of Iraq and insulated from Washington’s bureaucratic competition. A subordinate “viceroy,” responsible for military and CPA actions in Fallujah, would provide the same local integration. As it was, divisions between the National Security Council, UN, State Department, CENTCOM, CJTF-7, CPA, Pentagon, and Iraqi allies confused strategic direction, accountability and feedback. Even within these organizations, “soft” and “hard power” advocates clashed. This brittle and unresponsive command lost the negotiations and initiative to those who were so soundly beaten in the previous April attack to liberate Iraq.

Winston Churchill observed how rarely leaders effectively combine “hard” military action and “soft” diplomacy: “those who can win a war well can rarely make a good peace, and those who could make a good peace would never have won the war.” To win, you need to be a “two-fisted fighter”—to have the strength of will to convincingly defeat the insurgents and then the magnanimity and foresight to give Fallujah local autonomy, political stakes in Iraq’s future, and reconstruction aid. Without the precondition of convincing defeat, the Fallujah Brigade quickly and predictably dissolved into the insurgency.

In a postscript, Marines re-attacked Fallujah in November 2004 to uproot the increasingly brazen insurgent sanctuary. Unlike the April attack, Sunni and allied leaders were carefully prepared for the attack. This strategic shaping and improved information operations minimized the media backlash and solidified support. Iraqi security forces were trained and armed to control the city once it was seized. Political will was in place before the decision to bring the bayonet home. Additionally, the failure of the Fallujah Brigade to seize the opportunity in April, discredited its Sunni leadership and further justified the November attack. Major reconstruction and civil affairs projects were in place to immediately follow the attack. This swift attack was a devastating defeat for the insurgents

who, with something now to defend in Fallujah, attempted to match the Marines in conventional battle. Clearly something had been learned from the April decisions.

Ultimately the Fallujah story is about our initial inability to organize and bring to bear America's vast national power. Negotiating a defeat in Fallujah, with the very Baathist generals we had so easily defeated in conventional battle, must give rise to critical self-examination. Moreover, the over reliance on brute force is a temporary and often counter-productive expedient that, more often than not, aggravates the underlying conditions that fuel an insurgency. Absent clear strategic and operational direction, the brave and discriminating actions in Fallujah of superb Marines, soldiers, sailors and airmen saved the day. Our obligation to these warriors is to learn well Fallujah's lessons.

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