

October 3, 2006

COMMENTARY

More Troops, Please

By PETE HEGSETH

October 3, 2006; Page A26

I've heard President Bush repeatedly state he will send more troops to Iraq if the commanders on the ground ask for them. I think, having returned home from Iraq two months ago, that there must be a breakdown in communication somewhere along the line. Maybe units on the ground are painting too rosy a picture for the generals. Perhaps the generals aren't asking because it goes against the "can do" ethos of the Army. Possibly the military is being squeezed by the Pentagon to do more with less. Or maybe the White House doesn't want to admit more troops are needed. In any case, while I do not have the answers nor do I seek to place blame, it is painfully obvious there's a disconnect.

I volunteered to serve in Iraq because I believe in our mission there. I share the president's conviction about the Iraq war--we can and must win, for the Iraqi people, for the future of our country and for peace-loving people everywhere. But I'm frustrated. America is fighting with a hand tied behind its back. Soldiers have all the equipment we need--armored humvees, body armor for every body part, superior technology, etc.--but we simply do not have enough troops in Iraq, and we need them now.

After witnessing two national elections during three months in Baghdad, my Army unit moved north to Samarra, where we spent eight months sowing the seeds of progress. While we had success in uprooting the insurgency and building the local government, it wasn't enough. We had just enough troops to control Samarra and secure ourselves, but not enough to bring lasting stability or security. "Not enough" became the story of my year in Iraq.

The future of Samarra, and Iraq as a whole, ultimately lies in the hands of her people--their sympathies are the ultimate prize in this war. No matter how many insurgents we kill, city leaders we meet or policemen we enlist, it is all for naught if we cannot provide security and stability. Tribal sheikhs told us that even within Samarra--deep in the Sunni triangle--a vast majority of people just want peace and order and will side with whoever can provide it. Right now Samarrans rightfully question who that will be.

The end goal in Samarra is for Iraqis to do everything for themselves. But their government and security forces are not ready. Insurgents use death threats and murder to assert power over anyone working with the City Council or joining the police force. This atmosphere forces moderate Samarrans to keep their mouths shut, and their silence abets the insurgents who live and fight in Samarra. Despite killing scores of insurgents, we are unable to provide lasting security, and so the Samarran street slips away.



Two things are to blame for our predicament, one a corollary of the other. The first reason is that we did not have enough troops in Samarra. The skill and courage of 150 American soldiers prevented chaos, but was never enough to fully secure a city of 120,000 people or maintain the rule of law. The soldiers in the city were preoccupied with defending themselves and conducting night raids, and were therefore largely unable to regularly patrol during the day--thus giving insurgents reign to move freely and intimidate the local population. A visitor in Samarra on an average day would be hard-pressed to point out a single American humvee traversing local neighborhoods. The same is true for Baghdad.

Our four-vehicle civil-affairs patrol was often the only American presence deep inside the city and we were frequently greeted by locals with the question, "Where have you been?" Americans can't of course be omnipresent; but we should at least be there when it matters. When Americans are there, either the insurgents are not or they are on the losing side of a firefight.

Second, because of a lack of troops, American military leaders are forced to make a choice between mission objectives and self-preservation. Many of our leaders are opting to guard supply routes and coagulate on sprawling military bases, rather than consistently moving into dangerous areas and fighting the insurgency. In our case, we had 500 soldiers stationed outside Samarra who made infrequent trips into the city center. There is little reason why most of these troops were not stationed inside Samarra, canvassing every neighborhood with platoon-sized patrol bases and suffocating insurgent operations. Rather than take the risks necessary--like small patrol bases and frequent foot patrols--our unit opted to secure itself and its supply routes rather than commit resources inside the city. And while this approach is safer in the short run, it only prolongs mission accomplishment, ultimately endangering more troops. We often speculated our unit would be back next year, driving the same streets with even fewer guys.

In due time, the Iraqi Security Forces will take over Samarra, but they are not ready yet. If the Americans left today, the Iraqis would be co-opted by the insurgents--who are utterly ruthless, willing to kill family members of policemen or decapitate Iraqi soldiers to preserve disorder. It will take time. Both the Iraqi Army and Samarra Police need to get bloodied a bit and bounce back, proving their strength to the people. They will eventually be ready, but until then, security belongs to us.

I also understand calling for more troops is contrary to conventional thinking inside government and the military. Supporters of the current approach argue sending

more troops would further inflame anti-American sentiment, incite more violence and retard independent progress. My experience suggests otherwise. American troops are tolerated, even welcomed when they effectively provide security; but their presence is cursed when it does not accompany progress. Violence persists not because American troops are present, but because our presence is futile. Many local leaders asked us, "How come the most powerful country in the world cannot defeat local criminals and thugs?" They suggested our failure was part of a larger conspiracy to keep the Iraqi people suffering.



I have not lost the optimism that sent me to Iraq. We did make gains. Our 10-man civil-affairs team established good relationships with brave Iraqi leaders and sat across from them as equals. I watched city leaders battle insurgents, not only with guns but with newspapers and economic development. By the time we left, the City Council was meeting on its own accord and with increasing legitimacy, forming committees to oversee fuel allocation, new construction and security. Increased home construction was evident and local markets were open.

Even the security situation inside the city improved. Previous summers in Samarra had been extremely violent, but the summer of 2006 was different. Days passed without a significant attack inside the city. Less than 150 Americans, along with Iraqi counterparts, controlled a town of over 120,000 Sunni Arabs through targeted raids and sniper operations. One local insurgent even begged city leaders for amnesty in exchange for good conduct. Our unit killed or captured hundreds of insurgents, knocking the wind out of the local insurgency--*but never crushing it.*

I believe, as the president noted, that "the safety of America depends on the outcome of the battle in the streets of Baghdad." Why then do we have just enough troops in Iraq not to lose? Most of the people I've spoken with since coming home--those both for and against the war--believe we must finish the job in Iraq. Americans understand a defeat in Iraq would have horrible consequences for America and its allies for decades to come. America has the capacity to win and the will to support a winning strategy.

Why then are we pursuing a bare minimum approach?

First Lt. Hegseth served as an infantry platoon leader and civil-military operations officer in Iraq with the 101st Airborne Division.

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB115984019037880795.html>