



The U.S. loses by quitting in Fallouja

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As if to demonstrate that a picture can be worth a thousand bullets, two sets of photographs released last week have done incalculable damage to the U.S. position in Iraq.

The most remarked-upon pictures were those depicting sadistic abuses at Abu Ghraib prison. People all over the world who barely noticed Saddam Hussein's far greater barbarism are twisting themselves into paroxysms of rage over the actions of a handful of Americans. Less discussed, but just as harmful, were the photos of Marines turning Fallouja over to a symbol of the ancien regime - a former Republican Guard general who, with his green uniform, beefy build and bushy mustache, looked like a Hussein clone. The former images signal to Iraqis (and the rest of the Arab world) that

the Americans are hopelessly de-praved, the latter that they are fatally weak. It is hard to think of a more debilitating one-two punch.

The last-minute substitution of a different, less unsavory Iraqi general to command the makeshift Fallouja Brigade is a slight improvement, but it only confirms the baleful confusion permeating U.S. ranks. President Bush's mantra of "stay the course" rings increasingly hollow in the face of abrupt policy reversals that reek of desperation. First the U.S. kept Baathists out of government; now it is inviting them back in. First it dissolved the Iraqi army; now it is re-creating it. First it sidelined the United Nations; now it is counting on the U.N. to form a new government.

Some of these steps - in particular turning power over to Iraqis - are long overdue course corrections. But the backsliding in Fallouja and in the stronghold of rebel cleric Muqtada Sadr - Najaf - may prove costly to U.S. credibility.

When the latest revolt flared up, Bush grimly vowed to crush resistance from Fallouja die-hards and Sadr's Al Mahdi militia, which took refuge in Najaf. "Our decisive actions will continue until these enemies of democracy are dealt with," the president said April 10. Yet almost a month later, the Mahdists and Falloujaites still haven't been "dealt with." If this is "decisive action," it's hard to imagine what in-decision might look like.

The administration was probably right not to risk a battle in the holy city of Najaf that might have alienated the Shiite majority. The decision not to invade Fallouja is harder to comprehend.

This Sunni city has emerged as a stronghold for Baathists and jihadists who are perpetrating terrible atrocities against Americans and Iraqis alike. The Marines began the process of draining this swamp in early April.

Though they lost more than a dozen men, they were perfectly prepared to see this battle through to a victorious conclusion, as previous generations of Marines had done at Belleau Wood, Tarawa and Hue. But they never got the chance.

The White House became nervous that further Iraqi casualties would undermine support for the occupation among Iraqis and that further U.S. casualties would have the same effect among Americans. So the Marines were told to pull back and turn over security to a ragtag force of former Iraqi soldiers who are more likely to reinforce the insurgents than to repress them. This may all work out somehow, but U.S. troops have already tried a hands-off approach in Fallouja. It's hard to see why it would work now when it failed before.

The administration may deny that this decision - which will save lives in the short term but is likely to cost more in the long run - is a defeat. The combatants know better.

The Fallouja guerrillas were jubilant. They danced around, waving green Islamic banners and proclaiming, "God has given this town victory over the Americans."

The Marines were correspondingly glum. Pfc. Andrew Twocrow, who lost a buddy in Fallouja, spoke for many when he told Associated Press, "I wanted to stay there and fight it to the end."

If the administration is not willing to fight to the end against "thugs and assassins" - as Bush has accurately described our foes - then there is no point in having troops in Iraq. But if we remain serious about establishing a representative government - and does anyone have a better idea? - this is still, despite all of

our blunders, not an impossible goal.

The U.S. is improving the odds by turning over at least nominal political authority to Iraqis who will enjoy more legitimacy than L. Paul Bremer III ever could. But the coalition is still not doing enough to address a deteriorating security situa-

tion that hinders political and economic development. Given the abject failure of Iraqi security forces, restoring law and order probably requires the dispatch of more U.S. troops. It definitely requires cleaning out Fallouja, one way or another. Iraq can never become a free country as long as this city remains a refuge for desperadoes.

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