

NYT. Perspective | Inside the C.I.A.: Iraqi Insurgents Take a Page From the Afghan Freedom Fighters
November 9, 2003 By MILT BEARDEN

As the daily attacks against American forces in Iraq increase in number and sophistication, the Bush administration continues to portray its adversaries as an assortment of die-hard Baathists, criminals, thugs and foreign terrorists, all acting out of desperation.

Certainly, there are Baathists and foreign terrorists operating against the American-led coalition, and their ranks probably include criminals. But the overarching reality is that the American and British forces are facing a resourceful adversary whose game plan may be more fully developed than originally thought.

My own experience in war has largely been on the side of insurgents. I served as the Central Intelligence Agency's quartermaster and political agent to the Afghan resistance against the Soviet occupation from 1986 until the Soviets left in 1989.

From my perspective, the Iraqi resistance has taken a page from a sophisticated insurgency playbook in their confrontations with the American-led coalition.

The insurgents' strategy could have been crafted by Sun Tzu, the Chinese military tactician, who more than 2,500 years ago wrote, in "The Art of War," that the highest realization of warfare is to attack the enemy's strategy.

So it was probably no accident that as American forces approached Baghdad, expecting tough street fighting, the bulk of the Iraqi forces melted away. The American troops, forced to shift strategy on the run, have been bedeviled by the consequences of those early chaotic days ever since.

Next, according to Sun Tzu, you attack his alliances.

This, again, is what the Iraqi insurgents did. Presumably acting on the assumption that the Jordanians were being too helpful to the United States, insurgents detonated a car bomb outside the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad on Aug. 7, killing 11 and wounding scores. Less than three weeks later, as an increased role for the United Nations was debated, suicide bombers attacked the organization's headquarters in Baghdad, killing 22 people, including the United Nations special representative to Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello.

Then, in mid-October, as proposals for an expanded peacekeeping role for Turkey were argued, a suicide bomb detonated outside the Turkish chancery in Baghdad, killing one bystander and wounding a dozen others.

When Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, began in late October, Baghdad was rocked by a series of suicide bombings that killed dozens and wounded hundreds, including an attack on the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

In addition, there have been countless attacks against individual Iraqis viewed as allied with the United States, whether police recruits, members of the Iraqi Governing Council or figures in the judiciary. A pattern of attack against American allies seems clear.

Consider the following: Since the focused attacks began, most Arab League missions in Baghdad have distanced themselves from the coalition; the United Nations secretary general, Kofi Annan, has withdrawn his international staff from Baghdad; the Red Cross followed suit, prompting other international aid organizations to pare down in Baghdad as well. The Turkish government, for a number of complex political reasons, has now reconsidered sending troops.

Even Spain, part of the original coalition, has decided to withdraw the bulk of its diplomatic staff from Baghdad. It appears that after disrupting the American strategy, the insurgents have made progress in undermining its alliances.

Next, Sun Tzu prescribed, attack their army.

This is occurring with increasing lethality. To misread these attacks as desperation is dangerous. In the last two weeks, there have been multiple attacks on the coalition headquarters in Baghdad, with mortars and rockets landing inside the secure green zone. Shoulder-fired missiles have brought down a Chinook helicopter, killing 16 soldiers. The crash of a Blackhawk helicopter, killing an additional six, is still under investigation, but according to some reports a rocket-propelled grenade may have brought it down. One or two casualties are logged almost daily.

Ordinary criminals and thugs could not deliver this kind of punch. Mortar tubes, base plates and ammunition have to be smuggled to within a few thousand yards of the green zone, carefully set up and then launched either in a shoot-and-scoot attack or with timed delay.

Similarly, a rocket attack on the Rashid Hotel while the deputy defense secretary, Paul Wolfowitz, was there required imagination, ability and training. Die-hards, maybe, but focused ones with a strategy and the skills to carry it out.

These growing attacks against American forces have two clear goals: inflict casualties and force a reaction that alienates the local population. Both are being achieved, as the quick-response raids by coalition troops to seize those behind the attacks fuel Iraqi alienation.

That suspicion is reflected in an incident described in a New York Times article about a group of American soldiers who tossed handfuls of candy to Iraqi children along a road in Falluja, inside the volatile Sunni triangle. " 'Don't touch it, don't touch it!' Iraqi children squealed. 'It's poison from the Americans. It will kill you.' "

This is reminiscent of Afghan children being terrified that Soviet soldiers were seeding the countryside with booby-trapped toys, or that wells had been poisoned, or food aid adulterated. All those stories were false, many of them propagated by the C.I.A. But the important thing was that the locals believed them.

Similarly, American troops are not offering poisoned candy, but the point is that the Iraqis families believe it.

For every mujahedeen killed or hauled off in raids by Soviet troops in Afghanistan, a revenge group of perhaps a half-dozen members of his family took up arms. Sadly, this same rule probably applies in Iraq.

The Soviet Union tried to denigrate the Afghan mujahedeen by calling them bandits. This did not help the Russian cause. Americans are confronting a foe that is playing down and dirty - but remarkably effectively - on his own turf. Yes, there are criminals and foreign terrorists among them, but the Pentagon seems to understand little about the identity of its enemy beyond that.

Sun Tzu also said "know yourself and know your enemy, and of a hundred battles you will have a hundred victories."

There were two stark lessons in the history of the 20th century: no nation that launched a war against another sovereign nation ever won. And every nationalist-based insurgency against a foreign occupation ultimately succeeded. This is not to say anything about whether or not the United States should have gone into Iraq or whether the insurgency there is a lasting one. But it indicates how difficult the situation may become.

Milt Bearden, a 30-year veteran in the C.I.A.'s Directorate of Operations, served as senior manager for clandestine operations. He is the co-author with James Risen of "The Main Enemy: The Inside Story of the C.I.A.'s Final Showdown with the K.G.B."