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## Playing cowboys and Indians

The military's emphasis on capturing Fallujah reveals a mind-set stuck in Western frontier mode.

By David J. Morris



Nov. 12, 2004 | Fighting continued in the streets of Fallujah Friday, but it is clear that the city, a sinister den of marauders and hostage takers and the occasional haunt of the nefarious Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, will soon be in U.S. hands. Given the intense, almost apocalyptic coverage the battle is receiving, it is tempting to think that this might be the decisive battle of the insurgency and that the long agony of the Iraq occupation is on the wane. Indeed, the Grand Inquisitor of the Pentagon, Donald Rumsfeld, has speculated that the seizure of Fallujah could be the much-anticipated "tipping point" of this analogy-obsessed war, that it could convince the Iraqi populace that peace and democracy are just around the corner.

While no one questions the profound, ongoing sacrifices of the soldiers and Marines slugging it out in the town, it is nevertheless important to recognize that within the context of the dynamic insurgency the United States faces in Iraq, Fallujah's impending recapture is largely symbolic; it is but one victory in this war of a million ambushes. In short, the saga of Fallujah is long on drama, short on actual tactical value.

The fact that so much official emphasis is being put on recapturing Fallujah is disturbing. It points to larger problems in the American approach to Iraq. The idea that groups of insurgents in the Sunni Triangle would assemble inside the Fallujah city limits and wait to be slaughtered by the American war machine is ludicrous. The offensive to retake Fallujah was one of the most telegraphed operations in recent history, and as a result any foresighted insurgent with half a brain would have exited the town weeks ago, long before the U.S. cordon of the town went up. It's likely that the only fighters remaining in Fallujah are hardcore locals bent on martyrdom.

Furthermore, the Pentagon's sky-high expectations of the Fallujah battle are emblematic of a larger problem with U.S. military thinking: a conceptual misunderstanding of what type of war we are fighting in Iraq. The military pines for the crowning set-piece battle that will turn the tide -- the shootout at the OK Corral -- instead of realizing that large battles are largely irrelevant when you're fighting insurgents. Any guerrilla stupid enough to go toe-to-toe with the American juggernaut isn't worthy of the name.

There are other long-term problems with the assault on Sunni-dominated Fallujah as well. On Tuesday, Iraq's official Sunni political party threatened to quit the interim government unless the American assault on Fallujah was halted. Such a revolt against the U.S. action, if it spreads to all of Iraq's Sunni population, would serve to disenfranchise one-third of the Iraqi electorate and cement the insurgency among that demographic. While few informed observers would disagree that Fallujah had to be dealt with decisively, the widespread negative reaction to the Fallujah invasion raises the question: How much does it matter that the U.S. coalition controls one particular city if it has alienated the rest of the Iraqi populace? The problem the American forces will face as soon as Fallujah falls is the same that they've faced since Baghdad fell last April: How to win the peace?

As for winning that peace, the U.S. Marines do have a plan -- they have earmarked tens of millions of dollars for rebuilding Fallujah. The hope is that by repairing the city's infrastructure and demonstrating goodwill, the coalition can get the city's residents to at least grudgingly accept the American-backed interim government in Iraq. Nevertheless, whether it can successfully pacify and police the city remains an open question, and given that the allied Iraqi forces have played a surprisingly small role in the Fallujah operation thus far, U.S. servicemen and women are likely to be patrolling the streets there for the foreseeable future.

The prospect of a large American peacekeeping force in Fallujah underscores the problem that has plagued the U.S. presence in Iraq ever since Baghdad fell: There simply aren't enough troops to occupy all of Iraq. And the need to commit 10,000 to 20,000 troops to dealing with Fallujah means that the insurgency is likely to gain ground elsewhere. In this way, counterinsurgency warfare is strangely like the child's bop-'em game at Chuck E. Cheese's pizza parlor: You smash the pop-up monster with a mallet to your left only to have another one pop up right in front of you.

For many American officers in Iraq, Fallujah has become the perfect microcosm of the war as a whole, the battleground city that will herald the fate of a nation. I'll go one step further: The U.S. experience in Fallujah has inadvertently exposed something fundamental about the American character as a whole and how we tend to perceive the intricate problems of the world. Oftentimes, Americans want to take decisive action, hoping to sweep away centuries-old problems in one bright, shining moment, neglecting to fully weigh the consequences.

I saw indications of this mentality one day toward the end of my brief tenure in Iraq, while passing through a Marine base on the outskirts of Fallujah. Walking through one of the many headquarters buildings on the base, I noticed on an officer's desk an enormous stack of westerns by the popular novelist Louis L'Amour. The paperbacks had apparently been requested by the troops and were donated by a concerned-citizens group back in the States. Only later, as I reflected on the profusion of American Indian call signs being used by several Marine units in Iraq and the repeated references to Iraq as the "Wild West," did it strike me that, however facile the idea may seem, the American mind-set is still stuck in Western frontier mode.

Thus our shortcomings in Iraq are a failure of the American imagination as much as anything else. We're the cowboys, trying to get the Iraqis to make like Indians. I only hope that we're wise enough to play sheriff for a while after our moment at the OK Corral has come and gone.

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**About the writer**

David J. Morris is a former Marine officer and the author of "[Storm on the Horizon: Khafji -- The Battle that Changed the Course of the Gulf War](#)" (Free Press). He was embedded with the Marines in Fallujah, Iraq, in May and June 2004.

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