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Far graver than Vietnam

Most senior US military officers now believe the war on Iraq has turned into a disaster on an unprecedented scale

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'Bring them on!' President Bush challenged the early Iraqi insurgency in July of last year. Since then, 812 American soldiers have been killed and 6,290 wounded, according to the Pentagon. Almost every day, in campaign speeches, Bush speaks with bravado about how he is "winning" in Iraq. "Our strategy is succeeding," he boasted to the National Guard convention on Tuesday.

But, according to the US military's leading strategists and prominent retired generals, Bush's war is already lost. Retired general William Odom, former head of the National Security Agency, told me: "Bush hasn't found the WMD. Al-Qaida, it's worse, he's lost on that front. That he's going to achieve a democracy there? That goal is lost, too. It's lost." He adds: "Right now, the course we're on, we're achieving Bin Laden's ends."

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Retired general Joseph Hoare, the former marine commandant and head of US Central Command, told me: "The idea that this is going to go the way these guys planned is ludicrous. There are no good options. We're conducting a campaign as though it were being conducted in Iowa, no sense of the realities on the ground. It's so unrealistic for anyone who knows that part of the world. The priorities are just all wrong."

Jeffrey Record, professor of strategy at the Air War College, said: "I see no ray of light on the horizon at all. The worst case has become true. There's no analogy whatsoever between the situation in Iraq and the advantages we had after the second world war in Germany and Japan."

W Andrew Terrill, professor at the Army War College's strategic studies institute - and the top expert on Iraq there - said: "I don't think that you can kill the insurgency". According to Terrill, the anti-US insurgency, centred in the Sunni triangle, and holding several cities and towns - including Fallujah - is expanding and becoming more capable as a consequence of US policy.

"We have a growing, maturing insurgency group," he told me. "We see larger and more coordinated military attacks. They are getting better and they can self-regenerate. The idea there are x number of insurgents, and that when they're all dead we can get out is wrong. The insurgency has shown an ability to regenerate itself because there are people willing to fill the ranks of those who are killed. The political culture is more hostile to the US presence. The longer we stay, the more they are confirmed in

that view."

After the killing of four US contractors in Fallujah, the marines besieged the city for three weeks in April - the watershed event for the insurgency. "I think the president ordered the attack on Fallujah," said General Hoare. "I asked a three-star marine general who gave the order to go to Fallujah and he wouldn't tell me. I came to the conclusion that the order came directly from the White House." Then, just as suddenly, the order was rescinded, and Islamist radicals gained control, using the city as a base.

"If you are a Muslim and the community is under occupation by a non-Islamic power it becomes a religious requirement to resist that occupation," Terrill explained. "Most Iraqis consider us occupiers, not liberators." He describes the religious imagery common now in Fallujah and the Sunni triangle: "There's talk of angels and the Prophet Mohammed coming down from heaven to lead the fighting, talk of martyrs whose bodies are glowing and emanating wonderful scents."

"I see no exit," said Record. "We've been down that road before. It's called Vietnamisation. The idea that we're going to have an Iraqi force trained to defeat an enemy we can't defeat stretches the imagination. They will be tainted by their very association with the foreign occupier. In fact, we had more time and money in state building in Vietnam than in Iraq."

General Odom said: "This is far graver than Vietnam. There wasn't as much at stake strategically, though in both cases we mindlessly went ahead with the war that was not constructive for US aims. But now we're in a region far more volatile, and we're in much worse shape with our allies."

Terrill believes that any sustained US military offensive against the no-go areas "could become so controversial that members of the Iraqi government would feel compelled to resign". Thus, an attempted military solution would destroy the slightest remaining political legitimacy. "If we leave and there's no civil war, that's a victory."

General Hoare believes from the information he has received that "a decision has been made" to attack Fallujah "after the first Tuesday in November. That's the cynical part of it - after the election. The signs are all there."

He compares any such planned attack to the late Syrian dictator Hafez al-Asad's razing of the rebel city of Hama. "You could flatten it," said Hoare. "US military forces would prevail, casualties would be high, there would be inconclusive results with respect to the bad guys, their leadership would escape, and civilians would be caught in the middle. I hate that phrase collateral damage. And they talked about dancing in the street, a beacon for democracy."

General Odom remarked that the tension between the Bush administration and the senior military officers over Iraqi was worse than any he has ever seen with any previous government, including Vietnam. "I've never seen it so bad between the office of the secretary of defence and the military. There's a significant majority believing this is a disaster. The two parties whose interests have been advanced have been the Iranians and al-Qaida. Bin Laden could argue with some cogency that our going into Iraq was the equivalent of the Germans in Stalingrad. They defeated themselves by pouring more in there. Tragic."

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