

ED KILGORE,
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The Democratic Strategist has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As The Democratic Strategists' editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

**A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
STRATEGY MEMO**

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By JAMES VEGA

ISIS has recently won a series of victories that have cast doubt on the idea that it can be “degraded and destroyed” anytime soon using the Obama administration’s essentially cautious approach. In consequence, the GOP’s Neo-Conservative chorus has shifted into high gear with its demands for a change of strategy.

With minor variations the Neo-Con alternative to Obama’s current course is as follows:

1. Send somewhere between 10,000 and 25,000 additional US troops to Iraq. The widely repeated slogan is “bombing is not enough, we need boots on the ground”
2. Don’t, however, send combat-ready battalions and regiments of front-line GI’s. Send only specialized support units like forward air controllers to direct air strikes, limited numbers of small, elite “special ops” units like the one that killed Bin Laden and regimental and brigade level advisors to “stiffen the spine” of the Iraq government forces.
3. Vow to be really, really, really serious (not like that wishy-washy Obama, of course) and genuinely committed to degrading and destroying ISIS.

Democrats, who Republicans always sneeringly dismiss as hopelessly ignorant and untrained in the fine, rugged and manly arts of military doctrine and strategy may find this three-part package a little bit hard to understand. While it is certainly plausible that forward air controllers, special ops teams and regimental and brigade level advisors might be helpful to the current Iraqi government, it is hard to accept that they really represent what most people mean by putting “boots on the ground” or to imagine that this level of intervention will actually prove decisive in degrading and destroying ISIS.

Resolving common-sense doubts of this kind basically depends on understanding the alternative military strategy from which these specific recommendations emerge. It is always an overall military strategy that explains specific decisions about the number and type of troops that should be employed in any particular military campaign and how they should be deployed to achieve the objectives set for them.

But here’s the odd thing. **In the latest pronouncements of the major GOP Neo-Cons,**¹ there is a lot of tough rhetoric and loud assertions that Obama’s strategy “isn’t working” but you just can’t find any clear statement of the alternative overall military strategy that they are advocating—there are none of the snazzy acronyms like RMA (Revolution in Military

¹ <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/05/what-a-new-iraq-surge-could-look-like-118395.html>

Affairs) or cool insider references to military manuals like FM-3-24 that were so prevalent in GOP rhetoric during the war in Iraq. The absence of any reference to a specific alternative military strategy has to make a sensible person wonder if there really is any coherent alternative plan behind the GOP Neo-Cons three recommendations.

In fact, there is indeed an alternative military strategy that the Neo-Cons have in mind, but to put it in proper context you have to see how it grows out of the military doctrines and strategies that have preceded it.

The Powell Doctrine and the RMA

The basic doctrine that set the foundation for US military action in Iraq is generally known as The Powell Doctrine. Developed in response to the Vietnam War, it was the basis for the first, 1991 invasion of Iraq. While various versions of the Powell doctrine exist, the three key concepts in the doctrine are the following:

1. Use massive and disproportionate—indeed, if possible, overwhelming—force. There should be no gradual dribbling of troop deployments to a conflict spread over months and years as there were in Vietnam.
2. Have clearly defined objectives for the military campaign.
3. Have a clearly defined exit strategy.

The Powell doctrine worked just fine in the first gulf war. The campaign ended in a matter of weeks with complete victory, a rapid withdrawal and an incredibly small number of American casualties.

One could argue, in fact, that the doctrine actually worked too well. The easy victory **whetted the appetite of a group within the defense establishment**² that had an essentially neo-colonial project in their minds. In plans they circulated during the late 1990's, it was proposed that America would invade Iraq again, overthrow the government and install a new one that would cheerfully allow an almost inconceivably massive and permanent US military presence in the country and also pass a series of laws, drafted in the U.S., that would create a pro-western, U.S. style political system and a no-limits free enterprise economy that would have the country quickly up to its neck in pizza hut franchises and U.S. oil companies.

The military doctrine that undergirded the second invasion of Iraq was the “RMA”—the “Revolution in Military Affairs.” It asserted the view that modern “smart” weapons—symbolized by hyper-accurate cruise missiles and integrated digital command and control of the battlefield would make it possible for a smaller force to quickly achieve decisive results against a numerically superior but technologically inferior enemy. Citing the RMA for support, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld dismissed concerns that the force they were sending to Iraq might not be adequate.

² http://www.amazon.com/Muhammad-Idrees-Ahmad-Road-Iraq/dp/B00SB52OQ4/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1434727090&sr=8-2&keywords=The+Road+to+Iraq%3A+The+Making+of+a+Neoconservative+War+by+Muhammad+Idrees+Ahmad

The RMA, however, was a doctrine developed for conventional army-to-army warfare. It did not provide any guidance for defeating guerilla insurgencies or managing long-term colonial administration. In fact, the size and composition of the invading force Cheney and Rumsfeld sent to Iraq actually ignored the **conclusions of most major strategic analyses about the forces necessary to fight a guerilla insurgency**³ and, as a result, while the initial invasion was over in week, even after several years of bitter fighting, effective control of the country had still not been achieved.

A new strategy: “armed social work”

The response to this problem was the counterinsurgency strategy developed by Gen. David Petraeus and John Nagl and codified in **Army Field Manual FM-3-24**.⁴ The strategy called for creating stability through what it termed “*armed social work*.” After first conducting “*clear and hold*” operations to drive insurgents out of particular neighborhoods, towns and cities, U.S. troops would establish secure geographic perimeters with barricades and checkpoints and then control movement, check documents, patrol and police streets and manage literally all the major municipal services in the area until stability was restored and locals were ready to assume the responsibility. This necessarily implied the need for a heavy commitment of troops and resources, a commitment that it would be necessary to maintain for at as much as a decade from the time it was instituted and possibly more (In the military counterinsurgency literature, one common estimate of the average time counterinsurgency campaigns have needed to successfully pacify guerilla insurgencies is around 13 years).

Now no military experts (and certainly not General Petraeus himself) really believed that the quickly improvised and temporary “surge” in 2008 had, in a matter of just a few months, actually accomplished the genuine long-term “pacification” of Iraq. In fact, behind the Bush administration’s description of the surge as representing an unambiguous “victory,” it was actually discussed in entirely different terms within the community of serious military strategists. It was widely and openly agreed that it was the rebellion of key Sunni tribes against Al Qaeda in Iraq that had changed the strategic situation far more than the temporary increase and redeployment of U.S. troops. It was further argued that this “Anbar Awakening” had created a unique opportunity for U.S. troops to disengage during the lull in fighting. The key military argument in favor of such a withdrawal was that the U.S. presence had actually become quite literally counterproductive. The presence of American forces was allowing the Shia/Iranian dominated government of president Nouri-al-Maliki to refuse to make vitally necessary compromises with the Sunni minority. If the Americans actually left, it was hoped, the Maliki government might be forced to make the political compromises that were indispensable for establishing genuine long-term stability.

This, sadly, did not happen and in between 2009-2014 one can find dozens of articles in the western press warning with increasing urgency that the mistreated Sunnis were eventually going to revolt. What was not anticipated, however, was the unique character that the rebellion would take as an Islamic jihadist force with global ambitions or its ability to

³http://www.amazon.com/Learning-Eat-Soup-Knife-Counterinsurgency/dp/0226567702/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1434669672&sr=1-1&keywords=how+to+eat+soup+with+a+knife

⁴http://www.amazon.com/Counterinsurgency-FM-3-24-U-S-Army/dp/1581606060/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1434669672&sr=8-2&keywords=fm-3-24

successfully recruit former soldiers and officers of Saddam Hussein's Baathist military, including former generals. This latter step provided ISIS with trained military leadership and cadre that allowed it to fight and maneuver in a much more highly professional manner than anyone had anticipated.

The three part Neo-Con plan: is it really a strategy?

With this background describing the strategic doctrines of recent years, what can Democrats now make of the GOP Neo-Cons three part plan above? To repeat, it calls for the following:

1. Send somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 more US troops to Iraq. The widely repeated slogan is "bombing is not enough, we need boots on the ground"
2. Don't, however, send battalions and regiments of combat ready front-line GI's. Send only specialized support units like forward air controllers to direct air strikes, limited numbers of small, elite "special ops" units like the one that killed Bin Laden and battalion brigade level advisors to "stiffen the spine" of the Iraq government forces.
3. Vow to be really, really serious—not like Obama, of course—and genuinely committed to degrading and destroying ISIS.

There are two important points to note about this plan:

First, the simple fact is that this is not an alternative military strategy to the one we are currently conducting; it is a modification or extension of the existing strategy.

- America already has air strike controllers operating in Iraq. Adding close-support ground-based controllers as well or giving them more independent authority over targeting does not constitute an alternative military strategy.
- America is already conducting commando style, special ops raids. Authorizing more such raids does not constitute an alternative military strategy.
- America already has advisors at the division level in Iraq. Providing advisors at the regimental and brigade level as well does not constitute an alternative military strategy.

This is not to say that these proposals are necessarily wrong, just that they simply do not constitute a fundamentally new or different military strategy and should not be described in that way.

Serious military strategists clearly recognize this distinction. Michael O'Hanlon, a respected military analyst at the Brookings Institution, for example, has argued that there are urgent practical reasons for taking measures of this kind in order to insure the stability of the current Iraqi government. At the same time, however, he makes it absolutely clear that he does not consider these steps to represent a new military strategy but rather an adjustment within Obama's existing strategy. **As he says:**⁵

⁵http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/06/11-iraq-isil-washington-obama-strategy-risk?utm_campaign=Brookings+Brief&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=18401534&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-W1l-RbCQT8siebEFYV52m8N7nxbwExcll8ZyobKdBeHCXHjz3V6_h0bDo7BPXjtx7oiJrpT7ZqBF2ldQuJewrc44v2Q&_hsmi=18401534

...Mr. Obama's basic strategy in Iraq is not unsound. But poor and tepid implementation of even a good strategy can spell defeat. Obama should keep with the basic gist of his strategy but at the same time intensify the American role roughly threefold, in terms of troop numbers

Second, while GOP Neo-Cons propose these three ideas as if making the decision to choose them is simply a matter of displaying greater military resolve, determination, "machismo," "true grit" or "will to win" than Obama has shown, the reality is that they involve complex and difficult trade-offs.

- Giving American forward air strike controllers more authority over targeting makes the U.S. more directly responsible for minimizing civilian casualties and more vulnerable to international criticism when they occur. As the military's experience with the Taliban in Afghanistan has demonstrated, collateral damage and civilian casualties are a major problem for bombing campaigns. In the case of columns of military vehicles or supply bases, the decision is not difficult. More difficult is the situation when forward air controllers are faced with the decision of whether to target an apartment building filled with 100 civilians and also 7 ISIS fighters with RPG rocket launchers.
- More commando style raids increase the risk of U.S. soldiers being captured by ISIS and then publically humiliated and tortured, potentially for weeks and months on end, on globally distributed video.
- Adding more U.S. advisors to specific Iraqi military units makes the U.S. more directly responsible for those units' successes, failures and conduct. As many Iraqi army units are paired with Shia militias with a history of brutality against Sunnis, this could result in making the U.S. being held more directly responsible for actions that profoundly alienate the Sunni population.

Again, this is not an argument that these particular recommendations are necessarily wrong; just that such choices are not simply a matter of having the courage to choose a more theatrical, testosterone-fueled machismo and hyperventilating patriotism than Obama has displayed.

In fact, while the GOP Neo-Cons present these three measures as if they were the obvious choice of any serious military strategist, the truth is that many U.S. military leaders are actually extremely wary. **As a Washington Post article noted⁶** after the recent ISIS attack on Ramadi:

...the president's top military commanders argued against a change in strategy that would reduce the onus on Iraqi forces and pull U.S. troops deeper into the war. Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, like other military officials doubted that the gains from using embedded advisers and attack helicopters were worth the possible cost in American blood, said several U.S. officials familiar with his position...A senior Pentagon official described the mili-

⁶http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-white-houses-iraq-debate-military-brass-pushed-for-doing-less/2015/06/13/8db17e30-1138-11e5-9726-49d6fa26a8c6_story.html

tary's objections to the higher-risk options in starker terms: "We have become very sensitized to the idea that we don't want to risk lives and limbs if there isn't a high probability of a payoff," said the official. "Our calculus is different."

...What did the U.S. military learn from the last decade of support to the Iraqi army?" asked Emma Sky, author of "The Unraveling," who spent four years in Iraq as a senior adviser to the U.S. military. "We can give the Iraqi army lots of equipment and training, but we cannot address the psychology and morale of the force and its willingness to fight."

(One important but unstated reason for the cautious attitude about endorsing escalation among many within the U.S. military leadership is the deep sense of anger and embarrassment many still feel because they allowed themselves to be pressured and manipulated into the invasion of Iraq by the Neo-Cons in 2002 despite knowing that the invasion and occupation was very likely to be a major strategic blunder. Colin Powell is the most well-known member of this group but he is far from alone.)

The Real Neo-Con Strategy

The GOP Neo-Cons however are now cautiously beginning to argue for what is indeed a fundamentally alternative military strategy to Obama's current approach—the massive re-introduction of fully equipped U.S. combat brigades and divisions to Iraq.

The conservative *Washington Times*⁷, for example, suggests that:

... [Americans] should listen to the few retired senior generals who are speaking out. One is retired Army Lt. Gen. Michael T. Flynn, the former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency under Mr. Obama. Mr. Flynn is urging a much more aggressive approach to the Islamic State and jihadis worldwide.

"The United States must be prepared to provide far more combat capabilities and enablers such as command and control, intelligence, logistics and fire support, to name just a few things. We must engage the violent Islamists wherever they are, drive them from their safe havens and kill them. There can be no quarter and no accommodation."

Conservative political commentator *Ron Fournier*, writing in the *National Journal*⁸, is much more explicit about what this commitment will actually entail. He endorses the view of his colleague Kristin Roberts that:

...the United States can choose to engage aggressively, hoping that a greater assault than what's being accomplished by U.S. airpower and on-the-ground training will stop ISIS from destroying the governments in the region that still take Washington's calls. The cost of this choice is great: money and, more importantly, blood.

⁷<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/may/26/obama-islamic-state-strategy-sparks-doubt-resentme/>

⁸<http://www.nationaljournal.com/politics/how-to-defeat-isis-with-millennial-spirit-and-service-20150616>

Fornier adds:

If you choose the course of conflict and sacrifice, understand that a “greater assault” would require considerably more U.S. aircraft, military advisers, and combat troops. Estimates for “boots on the ground” [are] as high as 100,000 to completely destroy ISIS (former CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell).

The attraction that a full-scale military return to Iraq holds for many military strategists is understandable. There is no doubt that America’s best battle-tested combat divisions, if they returned to Iraq, could easily punch their way North and West from Bagdad through any conceivable defense ISIS might be able to mount and rapidly retake the central downtown areas of the main ISIS held cities in Iraq. Once installed, they could without great difficulty then create 1-2 mile perimeters around the downtown areas and proudly announce a massive defeat of ISIS. The Islamic Caliphate would no longer be able to claim that it controlled the main Iraqi cities. The Bagdad government’s flag would fly over the main municipal buildings in those areas and become striking symbols of the central government’s reestablished authority.

The downside, of course, is that outside these heavily defended urban fortresses, (the technical military term for which is “citadels”) the U.S. troops would control little else. The citadels would be regularly shelled by mortar and missile rounds, supply convoys would be constantly rocked by IED’s (improvised explosive devices) and patrols outside the citadels would be frequently attacked by snipers and guerilla groups. ISIS would continue to retain control of most villages, small towns and rural areas in the Sunni regions of Iraq and Syria and would persist in proclaiming its existence and ongoing viability.

Most Americans would not consider this to be a genuine “victory,” especially if it requires maintaining a large garrison of U.S. troops in Iraq for an indefinite period of years or even decades. **But among American military strategists there is a small but vocal group that considers this kind of modern “imperial garrison” strategy an absolutely necessary sacrifice⁹** that Americans must make to prevent the Arab world from sinking into complete chaos and barbarism that will eventually threaten the U.S. itself. This group looks back nostalgically and enviously at the proud and resolute attitude displayed by the British public in the era when Britain was an empire and had troops permanently stationed in India, Afghanistan, Iraq, Africa and many other parts of the globe. The British saw their far-flung troops as carrying out a heroic civilizing mission among the more backward peoples of the world. Today’s American advocates of a substantial and essentially open-ended U.S. military presence in the unstable areas of the middle east defend such a decision as necessary to defend America itself from attack and as *“the price we must pay for freedom.”*

Many Americans will disagree with this approach but it is undeniably a coherent alternative to our present strategy and is therefore one that can be seriously and thoughtfully debated.

⁹ <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/121923/robert-kaplan-american-imperialisms-most-ambivalent-salesman>

The Neo-Con “creeping quagmire” or “Big Muddy” strategy for escalation in Iraq.

Most of the GOP Neo-Cons, and particularly the political candidates and elected officials among them, are not willing to openly admit that this is their strategy, however. Instead, they pin their hopes on what can more accurately be described as “stealth” strategy—a plan to slowly but surely build popular acquiescence to a major military presence in the Middle East by a very gradual step by step escalation that is presented at each step as very cautious, temporary and firmly limited in scope.

There is no current name for this step-by-step strategy of escalation. It could, however, reasonably be called a “*creeping quagmire*” or “*big muddy*” strategy in honor of its similarity to the way in which events evolved in Vietnam. It assumes that the American people can eventually be conditioned to accept a large scale military force in Iraq if it is brought about gradually and indeed almost imperceptibly.

Here’s what a gradual escalation of this kind might look like:

Phase 1: (the current phase)

Goal: increase the forces in Iraq to 10,000-20,000 troops.

Public Rationale: *“Don’t worry, folks, we’re not talking about combat troops. It’s just an increase in the number of some specialized forces like forward air controllers and advisors. We’re not going to let American boys get bogged down fighting in the streets and alleys of Iraq.”*

Phase 2:

Goal: gain support for sending a second deployment of an additional 15,000 – 18,000 troops, primarily composed of complete U.S. attack helicopter squadrons and mobile armored units to support Iraqi infantry.

Public Rationale: *“We’re only talking about supporting Iraqi troops, not letting U.S. troops do the fighting for them. The Iraqis themselves can turn the tide if we just give them the tactical air and armor support that they need.”*

Phase 3:

Goal: send at least two and possibly more fully equipped, front line combat divisions with integrated tactical air, artillery and armor support

Public Rationale: *“Let’s be realistic, we already have the manpower equivalent of two and almost three divisions in Iraq so this really isn’t any fundamental change. And most important, these forces not going to be deployed there forever. If we send them right now we can end the conflict very quickly and bring the boys home instead of letting the war drag on for years and years.”*

Most readers who are old enough to remember the 60's will undoubtedly be experiencing a severe case of déjà-vu at this point because this description of a process of escalation closely mirrors the way the dispatch of a few "advisors" to Vietnam gradually grew to become half a million U.S troops with their "boots on the ground."

In Vietnam, however, the gradual escalation was not planned. The architects of the war honestly thought that each escalation would be sufficient and were genuinely surprised when more and more troops turned out to be needed. The current GOP Neo-Con strategy, on the other hand, is instead a deliberately evasive plan to gradually manipulate America into a long-term deployment and occupation of currently hostile areas of Iraq that is not currently supported by the American people.

Opponents of escalation will argue that in the modern world a British colonial style "imperial garrison" strategy is simply no longer possible. When the British ruled Iraq in the 1920's the country had around 3 million people. Today it has around 25 million. In the 1920's few anti-British insurgents in Iraq even had rifles. Today modern hand-held infantry weapons are widely distributed among the insurgents and can disable main battle tanks and shoot down helicopters and close support combat aircraft. Modern communications allow the sophisticated coordination of insurgent military operations in a way that was never remotely possible in the past. All this makes a successful modern "Pax Americana" imposed by U.S. arms simply unrealistic.

Debate on this subject is reasonable, but should be an honest debate. To describe current proposals to send 10,000 to 20,000 specialized troops to Iraq as if it were a fundamentally alternative military strategy makes no sense. It reflects neither the Powell doctrine nor the "armed social work" strategy of FM-3-24. It is, instead, a temporary stop-gap that will need to be followed by either a full-scale escalation or an eventual withdrawal. The GOP Neo-Cons should not be allowed to conceal their actual goal of creating a new and massive U.S. presence in the Middle East behind the claim that the current limited proposals they endorse actually represent a viable alternative military strategy.