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Why it Isn't Over, Over There

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Like every other business, the business of war has changed.

Centuries ago, a war ended when one army defeated another on the battlefield. But in the modern world of total war, a war isn't over when one army defeats the other. A war is over when the population of the country whose army has lost abandons all hope; when the people have been crushed so thoroughly – when the daily business of staying alive is so god-awful – that they wish only to clean up the mess and re-start their lives.

This is why no Nazi official was able to stand in the rubble of Dresden or Berlin in April 1945, and urge his fellow Germans to “stay the course.” And it's why not even the most fanatical Japanese warlord journeyed from Tokyo to Hiroshima or Nagasaki in August of that year to tell survivors that “despite the recent setbacks,” Japan's chances for victory remained good. It was over, and in both these countries everyone who wasn't clinically insane knew it. And the business of daily living had become so miserable that what the people wanted more than anything else was for the fighting to stop. However terrifying the post-war future might prove to be, it couldn't possibly be worse than the present. They would continue to honor their troops, but no longer would support them.

We haven't won the war in Iraq because too many Sunnis still think they can win, and because the conditions of their daily lives are improving rather than deteriorating. They think they can win because, with the help of al Qaeda, Iran and Syria they are still able to launch attacks throughout Iraq. And because each day they see growing evidence that the United States is tiring of the war and talking more and more about pulling out its troops. And because Saddam Hussein is still alive in Baghdad. And because – thanks to the generosity of the U.S. and a government in Baghdad that is doing everything it can to win over the Sunnis before the upcoming elections – each day the availability grows of food, electric power, clean drinking water, gasoline and heating fuel.

Hope among the Sunnis

Unfortunately, all this is having the opposite effect of what's intended. It is enabling the Sunni population – or at least a large enough portion of it to make a difference – to keep on believing

that a return to the *status quo ante* remains possible. And as long as they believe this – it doesn't matter whether it's true, only that they believe it to be true – the war in Iraq won't end. Lenin, who was a vicious bastard but also a *smart* vicious bastard, understood this psychology perfectly. He didn't order the Czar and his entire family to be shot out of revenge; he did it to convince the White Russians who were still fighting the Bolsheviks that a return to the old regime wasn't possible.

We are making the same mistake further west, in the Israel-Palestinian war. After all these years there still is no settlement because too many Palestinians – and the Arab governments that support them – continue to believe they can destroy Israel and seize the land for themselves. It doesn't matter that you and I may believe this to be preposterous; it matters only that they believe it to be possible. (And why shouldn't they continue to hope, when the president of Iran – which unless the West stops dithering will have nuclear weapons sooner rather than later – pledges to wipe Israel off the map?)

This is why every dollar we and the Europeans give to improve conditions in the West Bank and Gaza is actually prolonging the conflict; it gives the Palestinians enough strength to keep fighting, or supporting the fighters, rather than turning against them because the business of daily living is so ghastly they simply cannot stand it any more. And it's why Secretary of State Rice's recent "brokering" of the PLO-Israel dispute over a border crossing actually made things worse rather than better; it will markedly improve the Palestinians' living conditions by enabling them to export their produce abroad and travel more easily.

You needn't take my word for this. One of history's greatest generals, William Tecumseh Sherman, put it this way:

“We are not fighting armies but a hostile people, and must make young and old, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war... I would make this war as severe as possible, and show no symptom of tiring till the South begs for mercy.”

This is precisely what Sherman was talking about when he famously said that “War is hell.” He was a decent, honorable man and he hated doing what he knew must be done to end the war and stop the killing. Here's one Sherman quote about waging war you won't see in a *New York Times* editorial: “The crueler it is, the sooner it will be over.” In other words, to end a war you must crush not only the opposing army but also the population in whose name it fights; that sometimes you must act inhumanely to save humanity.

Is Sherman Wrong – or Right?

Of course, it's possible that Sherman is wrong or that his wisdom isn't relevant to our times. Perhaps we really can win the war in Iraq without mercilessly crushing that part of Iraq's population that continues to support the insurgency. I hope so, because this is precisely what we are attempting to do.

On the other hand, what if Sherman is right? Are we not following his advice because we no longer have the stomach to fight as he did? In an age of photos, of videotapes, of embedded

reporters and 24/7 television coverage, has it become politically impossible to impose the level of pain and hardship on an enemy population that is necessary to end a war?

Or are we not following Sherman's advice because our current military leaders have forgotten it, or never learned it in the first place? Certainly this is the impression they give, with their endless talk of spreadsheets and matrices and statistics that "prove" we're making progress. From what I can see, a high percentage of our generals hold advanced degrees. That's nice, but in the real world there is such a thing as being too sophisticated. Perhaps our generals should spend less time learning the intricacies of *Excel* and *PowerPoint*, and more time studying how Sherman's brutal march through the South helped end the Civil War.

And perhaps our political leaders, in both parties, should shut up long enough to read Sherman's memoirs. They just might learn something about how to end a war.

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