

[PRINT WINDOW](#) [CLOSE WINDOW](#)

AT WAR

The Real Story of Fallujah

Why isn't the administration getting it out?

BY ROBERT D. KAPLAN

Monday, May 31, 2004 12:01 a.m.

When Bravo Company of the First Battalion of the Fifth Marine Regiment led U.S. forces into the heart of Fallujah in the predawn hours of April 6, I was the only journalist present. It had been Bravo Company of the "First of the Fifth" that had been first inside the citadel of Hue in Vietnam in February 1968. Hue City, the sight of one of the most glorious chapters in Marine history--in which the Marines killed 5,113 enemy troops while suffering 147 dead and 857 wounded--was foremost in the minds of the Marine commanders at Fallujah.

The Marines never got proper credit for Hue, for it was ultimately overshadowed by My Lai, in which an Army platoon killed 347 civilians a month later in 1968. This was despite the fact that the Marines' liberation of Hue led to the uncovering of thousands of mass graves there: the victims of an indiscriminate communist slaughter. Thus, Hue became a metaphor for the military's frustration with the media: a frustration revisited in Fallujah.

Whenever the Marines with whom I was attached crossed the path of a mosque, we were fired upon. Mosques in Fallujah were used by snipers and other gunmen, and to store weapons and explosives. Time and again the insurgents forfeited the protective status granted these religious structures as stipulated by Geneva Conventions. Snipers were a particular concern. In early April in nearby Ramadi, an enemy sniper wiped out a squad of Marines using a Soviet-designed Draganov rifle: "12 shots, 12 kills," a Marine officer told me. The marksmanship indicated either imported jihadist talent or a member of the old regime's military elite.

By the standards of most wars, some mosques in Fallujah deserved to be leveled. But only after repeated aggressions was any mosque targeted, and then sometimes for hits so small in scope that they often had little effect. The news photos of holes in mosque domes did not indicate the callousness of the American military; rather the reverse.

As for the close-quarters urban combat, I was in the city the first days of the battle. The overwhelming percentage of the small arms fire--not-to-mention mortars, rockets and rocket-propelled grenades--represented indiscriminate automatic bursts of the insurgents. Marines responded with far fewer, more precise shots. It was inspiring to observe high-testosterone 19-year-old lance corporals turn into calm and calculating 30-year-olds every time a firefight started.

There was nothing fancy about the Marine advance into Fallujah. Marines slugged it out three steps forward, two steps backward: the classic, immemorial labor of infantry, little changed since Hue, or since antiquity for that matter. As their own casualties mounted, the only time I saw angry or depressed Marines was when an Iraqi civilian was accidentally hit in the crossfire--usually perpetrated by the enemy. I was not surprised. I had seen Army Special Forces react similarly to civilian casualties the year before in Afghanistan. The humanity of the

troops is something to behold: Contrary to the op-ed page of the New York Times (May 21), the word *haji* in both Iraq and Afghanistan, at least among Marines and Special Forces, is more often used as an endearment than a slur. To wit, "let's drink tea and hang out with the hajis," "haji food is so much better than what they feed us," "a haji designed real nice vests for our rifle plates," and so on. Thus, it has been so appallingly depressing to read about Abu Ghraib prison day after day, after day.



By April 7, two sleep-deprived Marine battalions had taken nearly 20% of Fallujah. The following day a third battalion arrived to join the fight, allowing the first two to rest and recover their battle rhythm. Just as the three well-rested battalions were about to start boxing in the insurgents against the Euphrates River at the western edge of the city, a cease-fire was announced.

As disappointing as the cease-fire was, the Marines managed to wrest positive consequences from it. It would free them up to resume mortar mitigation, a critical defense task today in Iraq. Mortars and rockets rain down continually on American bases. If left unchallenged, it may be only a matter of time before a crowded chow hall or MWR (morale, welfare, recreation) facility is hit; recalling the 1983 attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut that killed 241 servicemen.



Furthermore, as soon as the First of the Fifth Marines departed Fallujah they headed for Al-Karmah, a town about half the size of Fallujah, strategically located between Fallujah and Baghdad. Al-Karmah was no less hostile than Fallujah. I went there several times in March with the Marines. The streets always emptied upon our arrival, and we were periodically fired upon. After the Fallujah operation, the Marines didn't just visit Al-Karmah; they moved inside, patrolling regularly, talking to people on the streets, collecting intelligence and going a long way toward reclaiming that city. As

one company captain told me, "it's easily the most productive stuff we've done in Iraq."

If Al-Karmah is reclaimed, if Fallujah itself remains relatively calm, if the Marines can patrol there at some point, and if mortar attacks abate measurably--all distinct possibilities--the decision not to launch an all-out assault on Fallujah could look like the right one.

But none of the above matters if it is not competently explained to the American public--for the home front is more critical in a counterinsurgency than in any other kind of war. Yet the meticulous planning process undertaken by the Marines at the tactical level for assaulting Fallujah was not augmented with a similarly meticulous process by the Bush administration at the strategic level for counteracting the easily foreseen media fallout from fighting in civilian areas near Muslim religious sites. The public was never made to feel just how much of a military threat the mosques in Fallujah represented, just how far Marines went to avoid damage to them and to civilians, and just how much those same Marine battalions accomplished after departing Fallujah.



We live in a world of burning visual images: As Marines assaulted Fallujah, the administration should have been holding dramatic slide shows for the public, of the kind that battalion and company commanders were giving their troops, explaining how this or that particular mosque was being militarily used, and how much was being done to avoid destroying them, at great risk to Marine lives. Complaining about the slanted coverage of Al-Jazeera--as administration officials did--was as pathetic as Jimmy Carter complaining that Soviet Communist Party boss Leonid Brezhnev had lied to him. Given its long-standing track record, how else could Al-Jazeera have been expected to report the story? You had the feeling that the Pentagon was reacting; not anticipating.

And had the administration adequately explained to the public about what the Marines were doing after Fallujah, there might have been less disappointment and mystification about quitting the fight there. But instead of a gripping storyline to compete with that of the global media's, spokesmen for the White House, Pentagon, Coalition Provisional Authority and the Baghdad-based military coalition, in their regular briefings about events in Iraq, continue to feed the public insipid summaries, with little visual context, that have all the pungency of watery gruel.

This is not to say that the Abu Ghraib prison scandal should be forgotten, that our government should deceive the public, or that the overall direction of events in Iraq is positive: far from it. I have been to towns and villages in the Sunni triangle where the CPA has no demonstrable presence, where the inhabitants have no functioning utilities, where crime is rampant, where the newly constituted police are powerless and only sheikhs have the power to haul in criminals, and where it is only the social glue of tribe and clan that keeps these places from descending into Middle Eastern Liberias.

But I also found that there are many different Iraqs and different levels of reality to each of them. Presently, the administration lacks the public relations talent and the organizational structure for conveying even the positive elements of the Iraqi panorama in all their drama and texture.

Because the battles in a counterinsurgency are small scale and often clandestine, the story line is rarely obvious. It becomes a matter of perceptions, and victory is awarded to those who weave the most compelling narrative. Truly, in the world of postmodern, 21st century conflict, civilian and military public-affairs officers must become war fighters by another name. They must control and anticipate a whole new storm system represented by a global media, which too often exposes embarrassing facts out of historical or philosophical context.



Without a communications strategy that gives the public the same sense of mission that a company captain imparts to his noncommissioned officers, victory in warfare nowadays is impossible. Looking beyond Iraq, the American military needs battlefield doctrine for influencing the public in the same way that the Army and the Marines already have doctrine for individual infantry tasks and squad-level operations (the Ranger Handbook, the Fleet Marine Force Manual, etc.).

The centerpiece of that doctrine must be the flattening out of bureaucratic hierarchies within the Defense Department, so that spokesmen can tap directly into the experiences of company and battalion commanders and entwine their smell-of-the-ground experiences into daily briefings. Nothing is more destructive for the public-relations side of warfare than field reports that have to make their way up antiquated, Industrial Age layers of command, diluting riveting stories of useful content in the process. Journalists with little knowledge of military history or tactics and with various agendas to peddle can go directly to lieutenants and sergeants, yet the very spokesmen of these soldiers and Marines themselves--even through their aides--seem unable to do so.

The American public can accept 50 casualties per week if the path to some sort of success is convincingly laid out. If it isn't, the public won't accept even two casualties per week. It could not be helped that the shame of My Lai, as awful as it was, should have been allowed to blot out American heroism at places like Hue: The phenomenon of the media as we know it was new back then. But if the stain of Abu Ghraib, for example, is not placed in its rightful perspective against everything else that soldiers and Marines are doing in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Colombia and many other places in the War on Terrorism, then it won't be the media's fault alone.

Mr. Kaplan is a correspondent for The Atlantic Monthly. His complete, firsthand account of the planning and execution of the Marines' entry into Fallujah will appear in that magazine's July/August issue.

[PRINT WINDOW](#) [CLOSE WINDOW](#)