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Think Strategy, Not Numbers

By David Ignatius

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Looking back on America's military defeat in Vietnam, the late CIA director William Colby concluded that the United States had fought the wrong kind of war.

Rather than using special forces and intelligence operations to combat a shadowy enemy, Colby argued, the United States decided to wage "an American-style military war" with more than 500,000 troops whose job, as the conflict dragged on, increasingly was protecting themselves rather than securing the Vietnamese.

"American troops only rarely could find the enemy; since it proved almost impossible to fix him, fighting him generally consisted of fighting off attacks, not finishing him according to the best military tradition," Colby wrote in his book, "Lost Victory," published in 1989, seven years before his death. A far better strategy, he argued, would have concentrated on providing security to Vietnamese villages through aggressive "pacification" operations such as the controversial Phoenix program, which Colby ran from 1968 to 1971.

Colby's critique of "overmilitarization" in Vietnam is worth reviewing now, at a time when many analysts are urging President Bush to send more troops to Iraq. The latest call came over the weekend from Sen. John McCain. "We need a lot more military, and I'm convinced we need to spend a lot more money," said the Arizona Republican after visiting Baghdad.

Sending more troops always sounds like the right answer when the going gets tough on the battlefield. But as Vietnam showed, deploying a bigger, heavier force isn't necessarily a wise choice. The large U.S. garrison, with all its attendant logistical needs, might simply reinforce the impression that it's America's war -- making the enemy more aggressive, our local allies more passive and U.S. troops more vulnerable.

One former senior Pentagon official from the Vietnam era offers a pithy, five-word response to the argument that sending more troops would solve America's problems in Iraq. The "Cam Ranh Bay Umpires Association." The U.S. troop presence in Vietnam grew so large, he recalls, that there was a demand for sports at the huge U.S. base at Cam Ranh Bay; with so many players, they needed umpires, and with so many umpires, they needed an umpires' association. But none of that translated into victory.

So far Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has resisted the calls for sending more troops to Iraq. Instead, with typical Rumsfeldian enthusiasm for "transforming" the Pentagon establishment, he is reportedly seeking new ways to boost military power without hiring more soldiers. Rumsfeld's theme is that "overwhelming force" isn't necessary if the United States uses new technology to achieve

"overmatching power, " according to an article in Sunday's New York Times.

But for all his skepticism about conventional military answers, Rumsfeld may be guilty of his own version of overmilitarization in Iraq. He failed to anticipate the postwar challenges -- especially the need to rebuild the country's infrastructure and police. He focused instead on the American military occupation, which increasingly became a target for a small but ruthless resistance.

Robert Andrews, a Green Beret in Vietnam who served as head of special operations in Rumsfeld's Pentagon until last year, argues that the Afghanistan war demonstrated that light, fast-moving special forces working with local allies can be far more effective against a terrorist enemy than conventional troops.

"We may be able to provide better security to Iraqis with a mobile strike force of several brigades of conventional forces based in garrisons away from the population centers," Andrews says. "These brigades would work with Special Forces teams and their Iraqi allies in the cities."

Andrews argues that if Iraq is becoming a war of counterinsurgency, the United States must make sensible decisions about strategy and troop levels. Bad news shouldn't stampede America into pulling out. But it shouldn't mean an automatic decision to send more troops to implement a flawed strategy.

Pentagon sources report one hopeful sign that the military is thinking creatively and unconventionally about Iraq. The Pentagon's special operations chiefs have scheduled a showing tomorrow in the Army auditorium of "The Battle of Algiers," a classic film that examines how the French, despite overwhelming military superiority, were defeated by Algerian resistance fighters.

A Pentagon flier announcing the film puts it in eerie perspective: "How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. . . . Children shoot soldiers at point blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film."

The Iraq debate should be about strategy, not a numbers game. America's job is to give Iraqis the tools to create a modern, secure country -- and then get out. The right force is the one that will accomplish this mission.

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