

Ramadi 2015 vs. Burma 1942: Spin vs. Grit

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The blame game appears so blatant that one might even conclude the administration is intent on throwing in the towel against ISIS.

Top Administration officials' reaction to the fall of the Iraqi provincial capital Ramadi last weekend recalls another defeat of a U.S. "trained, advised and equipped" force, the Chinese Nationalist Army sent into Burma in a vain attempt to stem the Japanese advance after Pearl Harbor and the fall of Singapore in early 1942. The leader of the U.S. advisory team, Lieutenant General "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell, barely escaped with his American advisory team. His pithy answer to media queries on what had happened stands in contrast to, and reproach of, the Obama Administration's line on Ramadi.

As recounted by Barbara Tuchman in *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-45*, the general burst out, "I claim we got a hell of a beating. We got run out of Burma and it's humiliating as hell. I think we ought to find out what caused it, go back and retake it."

Vinegar Joe's words differ from the Administration's rhetoric in three decisive ways relevant to how we could and should go forward in this struggle with ISIS.

First, no spin control. The Administration, after denying that Ramadi had any strategic significance (just as seemingly with any objective anywhere without Americans), finally settled on "tactical setback" (President Obama this weekend). Well, Stilwell's words ring true for Ramadi as well: "hell of a beating," "humiliating as hell." Enough said on this.

Second, solidarity with our allies. It's hard to imagine that Chiang Kai-shek's ragtag troops had more battle motivation than the Iraqi troops at Ramadi, elements of which had after all held off ISIS literally for 18 months there. But rather than talk about how "they" (in this case his Chinese comrades) had failed, with Stilwell it was all about

"we": "we got a hell of a beating"; "we got run out of Burma." This is how you earn trust with your allies, however imperfect. The Administration's take sounds almost as if the U.S. is a benevolent observer, expressing dismay that people don't pull up their socks.

Third, learn from your defeats. Imagine if the Administration had not only owned up to a potentially serious reverse, in a campaign where we have declared our vital national interest to defeat the enemy, but had echoed Stilwell's concluding vow: "find out what caused it, go back and retake it." Instead, we are assured not only no changes in our courses of action, but at times assurance that we are not even thinking about changing anything.

Again, many of the Ramadi Iraqi troops fought well against ISIS there for months, and both media reports and Administration briefs point to a mix of unclear command lines, logistics failures, poor communications and possibly insufficient air support as contributing factors. But these are all "skill sets" U.S. advisors, on the ground since June, should be able to help rectify. Even more germane, less than a thousand miles away from Iraq, in Afghanistan, an American force three times the size of the one in Iraq has personnel fighting in all but name alongside Afghan units, with airpower and rules of engagement seemingly more liberal than in Iraq. Couldn't the Administration at least explain, given incessant outside calls for more robust engagement, some from people with downrange experience like Chairman McCain, why that model wouldn't work in Iraq?

Rather, the blame game appears so blatant that one might even conclude that the Administration is intent on throwing in the towel, saddened that we have such weak allies but confident we had no part in their failings. Of course, since Stilwell's time, in June 1950 in Korea, Tet in 1968 in Vietnam, Afghanistan in the 1980s, Sadr City in 2008, we also had weak allies. But we worked with them, made them a bit better, and made up the difference with American technology or fighting power and, at times, American lives.

Absent either honesty about battlefield developments or perceptible enthusiasm to fight this thing, we actually might all be better off if the Obama Administration shifted its strategic goal to containment of ISIS. As the President pointed out in his *Atlantic* interview, Kurdish and Shia areas of Iraq have been able to fend off ISIS attack. But this would require an explanation of how we will deal with an ISIS controlling upwards to 8 million souls in the middle of the Middle East, intent on overthrowing the entire regional order.

In 1944, Stilwell and his ragtag Chinese comrades-in-arms did go back to Burma, supporting the forces of General William Slim, and, Tuchman writes, scored limited victories over the Japanese. It was a messy, imperfect, in some respects unsuccessful effort, but we won that war on the basis of enough such efforts.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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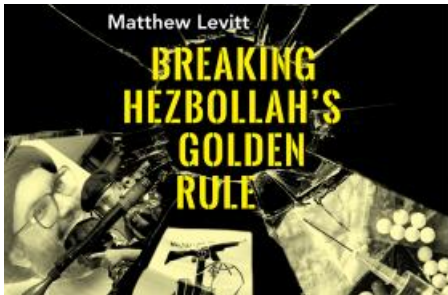
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