

Opinion

The Fuhkarthey insurgents

By Larry Beinhart

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Insurgents Assert Control Over Town Near Syrian Border (Washington Post, September 6, 2005)

TAL AFAR, Iraq—U.S. and Iraqi forces have encircled the insurgent stronghold . . . (MSNBC, September 8, 2005)

Insurgents Attack Polling Stations in Iraq (ABC News, October 15, 2005)

BAGHDAD, Iraq—Insurgents using suicide and roadside bombs killed . . . (AP, October 6, 2005)

October 22, 2005—Sometimes they're called "rebels." Sometimes they're called "the resistance." Who are they rebelling against? What are they resisting? What motivates them? What are their goals? In short, who the Fuhkarthey?*

After "mission accomplished," and major military operations ceased, when the chaos, the resistance, the new war, the real war began, the resistance was supposed to be diehard Saddam loyalists. A deck of cards was issued. When all the faces that matched the deck were collected, it was really going to be over. Over 40 of them were caught. But it wasn't over.

The theory that it was all a clever plot—Saddam planned to lose the regular war quickly and then unleash a guerrilla war while he himself hid in a hole in the ground—has recently resurfaced. It was one of the cover stories in the 9/26/05 issue of Time Magazine.

But even if that's true, it doesn't explain what Saddam loyalists might actually hope to achieve. He's not coming back.

So maybe they're Ba'thists. What's a Ba'thist and what do Ba'thists want? Does anybody know? Is it something we don't like? How much of it don't we like? Whatever it is, do they really think they can get it?

Another theory was that the rebels were foreign fighters. While some of them are, nobody believes that the resistance would exist with just foreign fighters or, more significantly, that the resistance would disappear if they all went to their respective homes.

According to George Bush, speaking on the radio on October 15, they are al Qaeda or they have enlisted in al Qaeda's "violent political vision: the establishment of a totalitarian empire that denies political and religious freedom" and "that al Qaeda intends to make Iraq a terrorist haven and a staging ground for attacks against other nations, including the United States."

That may tell us why we're not supposed to like them, but it's doesn't tell us why they think they're fighting. I'm willing to bet they don't sit around the tea service at night and say, "Let's drink to establishing a totalitarian empire that denies political and religious freedom!"

Also when all this started on 9/11, al Qaeda membership was in the hundreds, perhaps the thousands. Clearly the insurrection is a lot bigger than that. So either they're not just al Qaeda, indeed mostly not al Qaeda, or we've managed to have al Qaeda grow into the tens of thousands, perhaps the hundreds of thousands.

If we don't know who they are and why they're fighting, how can we figure out a strategy? How can we know if what we're doing is moving toward a solution or making the situation worse?

According to the president's plan, we just have to hang on until the Iraqis have a government. How can we know if an Iraqi government, that we're willing to let stand, can solve the problem? If we don't know who the insurgents are, we don't even know what the problem is.

The administration—and the military and the intelligence services—have apparently failed to figure out who they're at war with.

The media have failed, and continues to fail, to ask.

The media just go ahead and covers it as if it's a macabre video game in which the generic insurgents have no motivation, no goals, no politics. All they want to do is pop up and shoot at our guys. Which gives our guys the opportunity to shoot at them. Over and around the pop up civilians. And, as with Grand Theft Auto, there's no particular penalty for killing civilians and bystanders. Our guys have lots of weapons, including tanks and armored vehicles, jets and missiles, bombs and artillery. They have AK-47s and IEDs (improvised explosive devices). We hole up in compounds; they disappear into the population.

But they are not generic pop-ups. The insurgents are real people with real lives, ready to die for a cause. And kill for it, too. Actually for multiple causes, because they are a multitude of individuals, and, there are a variety of groups with different causes involved in the fight.

If we don't know what they're fighting for, then, our only available response is to keep on killing, and getting killed, until one side or the other gets just plain tired of it. General Westmoreland called his official strategy in Vietnam the "meat-grinder." He believed that if we kept grinding them up they would quit. They didn't. There is nothing to indicate that our plan in Iraq is anymore sophisticated than that.

This is the fog of ignorance.

The administration—with the professionals, the military and the intelligence services—has created this fog for themselves because they put theology—their belief systems—ahead of practical reality. They created a picture in which there was no room for inconvenient facts. Basic questions were not asked.

The media joined in with them. The president and the military spokespeople said this is the picture and they uncritically transmitted that picture.

In Journalism 101 they teach the five Ws: who, what, when, where and why. Sometimes six, adding how. What remains to be examined and what we must continue to examine, is the inability of journalists to ask basic questions like "The insurgents, who the Fuhkarthey?"

Larry Beinhart is the author of "Wag the Dog," "The Librarian," and "Fog Facts: Searching for Truth in the Land of Spin."