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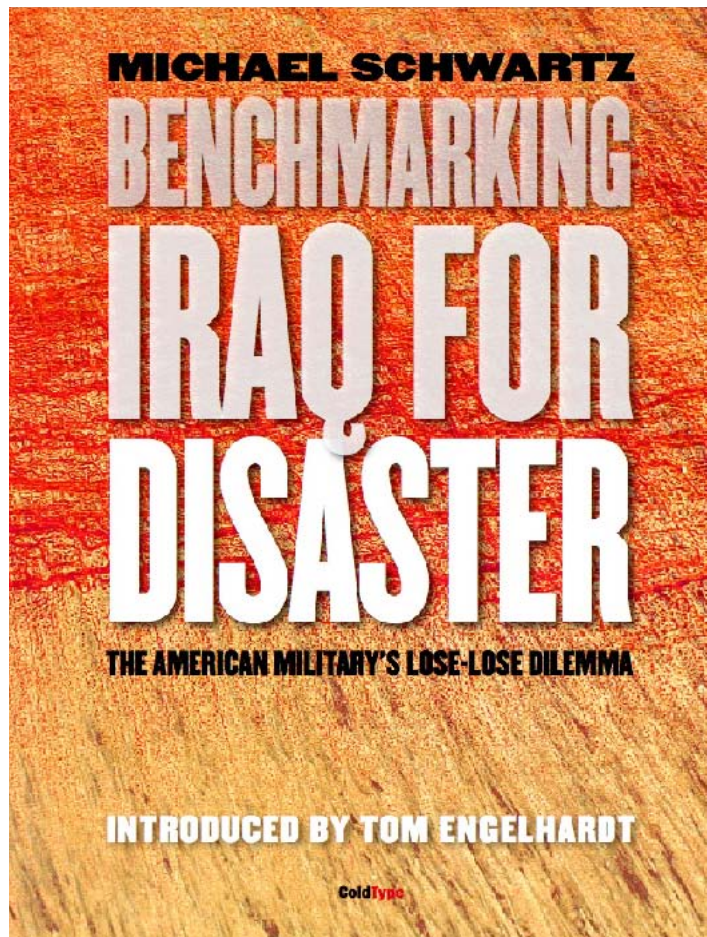
IRAQ FOR

DISASTER

THE AMERICAN MILITARY'S LOSE-LOSE DILEMMA

INTRODUCED BY TOM ENGELHARDT

ColdType



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This essay originally appeared on the TomDispatch.com web site

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INTRODUCTION

Tom Engelhardt



Under the headline, "A War We Just Might Win," the New York Times published an op-ed on July 30 by Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution and Kenneth Pollack, both referred to as critics of the way the Bush administration has "handled" the war in Iraq. (Pollack had, in fact, been a major cheerleader for the Bush administration's invasion in 2003.) After eight days in Iraq "meeting with American and Iraqi military and civilian personnel," the two claimed that "the debate in Washington was surreal," and that "[w]e are finally getting somewhere in Iraq, at least in military terms." The President's surge plan, as carried out by General David Petraeus, was, they added, working. Their carefully cobbled together formula for where it might take American forces went like this: It had "the potential to produce not necessarily 'victory' but a sustainable stability that both we and the Iraqis could live with." They concluded: "[T]here is enough good happening on the battlefields of Iraq today that Congress should plan on sustaining the effort at least into 2008." Of course, O'Hanlon's and Pollack's ideas about what "Iraqis could live with" and Iraqi ideas on the subject may turn out to differ somewhat.

Be that as it may, the Bush administration – even though characterized in the piece as having "lost essentially all credibility" – was desperate enough to treat the event as a glowing ray of sunlight in the gloom of night. According to Martha Raddatz of ABC News,

"The White House was thrilled with the op-ed piece because it concentrated on military progress and didn't say very much about the lack of political progress. This is what the President has been trying to push. The White House sent this op-ed piece out to the press corps, anybody that would read it today. They are hoping this buys them more time on the Hill for the surge to continue, but they've been hoping that for a long time."

On that very day, the Iraqi parliament adjourned for a more than month-long vacation with-

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out having passed a single major "benchmark" urged on its legislators by either the Bush administration or Congress ("We do not have anything to discuss in the parliament, no laws or constitutional amendments, nothing from the government. Differences between the political factions have delayed the laws," Kurdish lawmaker Mahmoud Othman told Reuters."); the major Sunni faction in Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's government was threatening to withdraw; and the Prime Minister himself was reportedly under challenge and in some danger of being ousted by members of his own party.

And that was just the accompanying political news. On the day of the O'Hanlon/Pollack op-ed, a summary report on the humanitarian situation in Iraq by the international aid group Oxfam and about 80 other aid agencies, gave the concept of "sustainable stability" some grim meaning. In fact, the report – which the administration did not rush to pass out to a single reporter – added up to a functional definition of Iraq as a land in a state of unsustainable instability, a "nation" in which an estimated one million families are now headed by widows. From child malnutrition to "absolute poverty," large-scale unemployment to an almost blanket lack of effective sanitation, the Iraqis O'Hanlon and Pollack didn't meet with are in a hell on Earth. The Oxfam report estimates that almost one-third of the Iraqi population is "in need of emergency aid."

In fact, while Pollack and O'Hanlon met with the "known knowns" in the equivalent of Green Zone Iraq, a brave French reporter, Anne Nivat, spent two weeks living as an Iraqi in a Shiite neighborhood in "Red Zone" Baghdad. ("Only my contacts knew that I was a foreigner and a reporter.") She even went from Red Zone to Green Zone Iraq once to – like Pollack and O'Hanlon – have a meeting with General Petraeus. ("He met me in full combat gear. Between the first checkpoint and the parking lot of the U.S. Embassy, still based in Saddam Hussein's Republican Palace, a distance of about a mile, I was checked six times. I had come from the "red zone.")

From Nivat, you get a very different picture of "sustainable" Iraq, a place, it turns out, where you're lucky to get 1-2 hours of electricity delivered a day, while the temperatures soar to 130 degrees and those with small generators that can make electricity are "the most powerful people in every district." In one of the more upbeat aspects of her tale, Nivat describes the rise of a new job category, a "new breed of real-estate agents." They broker house or apartment exchanges between Sunnis and Shiites being ethnically cleansed from their present neighborhoods. The parties agree to exchange abodes "until the situation improves." The Shiite man, who took Nivat around for her two weeks in Baghdad, in one of the more devastating quotes to come out of the capital in recent times, told her: "My uncles and cousins were murdered by Saddam's regime. I wanted desperately to get rid of him. But today, if Saddam's feet appeared in front of me, I would fall to my knees and kiss them!"

In the meantime, of course, the Bush administration – with a helping hand from O'Hanlon

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and Pollack – continues along a path guaranteed not to create a newly sustainable Iraq, but to prolong Iraq's unsustainable instability for endless months, or years, or even decades to come. General Petraeus is now publicly talking about "a large contingent of [U.S.] troops in Iraq until the middle of 2009" with no end to the American occupation in sight. For all of them, from the President down to the pundits, the thing that must be – and can't be – sustained is what, in the Vietnam period, was known as "American credibility" and now might be thought of as an American position of dominance in the Iraqi heartland of the energy heartlands of the planet. This is a terrible imperial farce in support of a "surge" plan that, as Michael Schwartz explains, has already surged in directions too predictable and horrible for sustenance. Tom

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resident Bush has called upon Congress, the American public, the Iraqi people, and the world to suspend judgment – until at least September – on the success of his escalation of the war, euphemistically designated a "surge." But the fact is: It has already failed and it's obvious enough why.

Much attention has been paid to the recent White House report that recorded "satisfactory performance" on eight Congressional benchmarks and "unsatisfactory performance" on six others (with an additional four receiving mixed evaluations). Fred Kaplan of Slate and Patrick Cockburn of the Independent, among others, have demonstrated the fraudulence of this assessment. Cockburn summarized his savaging of the document thusly: "In reality, the six failures are on issues critical to the survival of Iraq while the eight successes are on largely trivial matters."

As it happens, though, these benchmarks are almost completely beside the point. They don't represent the key goals of the surge at all, which were laid out clearly by the President in his January speech announcing the operation:

"Our troops will have a well-defined mission: to help Iraqis clear and secure neighborhoods, to help them protect the local population, and to help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind are capable of providing the security that Baghdad needs."

The success of such "benchmarks" can be judged relatively easily. As President Bush himself put the matter: "We can expect to see Iraqi troops chasing down murderers, fewer brazen acts of terror, and growing trust and cooperation from Baghdad's residents."

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This was supposed to be accomplished through two major initiatives. Most visibly, the U.S. military was to adopt a more aggressive strategy for pacifying Baghdad neighborhoods considered strongholds for the Sunni insurgency. Occupation officials blame them for the bulk of the vehicle bombs and other suicide attacks that have devastated mainly Shiite neighborhoods. The second, less visible (but no less important) initiative involved subduing the Mahdi army of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr – the largest and most ferocious of the Shia militias – which occupation officials blame for the bulk of death-squad murders in and around the capital.

These changes should have been observable as early as this July. By then, as a "senior American military officer" told the New York Times, it would already be time to refocus attention on "restoring services and rebuilding the neighborhoods.""

To judge the surge right now – by the President's real "benchmarks" – we need only look for a dramatic drop in vehicle and other "multiple fatality bombings" in populated areas, and for a dramatic drop in the number of tortured and executed bodies found each morning in various dumping spots around Baghdad.

By these measures, the surge has already been a miserable failure, something that began to be documented as early as April when Nancy Youssef of the McClatchy newspapers reported that there had been no decline in suicide-bombing deaths; and that, after an initial decline in the bodies discarded by death-squads around the capital, the numbers were rising again. (These trends have been substantiated by the Brookings Institution, which has long collected the latest statistics from Iraq.)

A more vivid way to appreciate the nature of the almost instantaneous failure of the overall surge operation is anecdotally by reading news reports of specific campaigns – like the report Julian Barnes and Ned Parker of the Los Angeles Times sent in from Baghdad's Sunni-majority Ubaidi neighborhood, which was headlined: "U.S. troop buildup in Iraq falling short"). It concluded ominously, "U.S. forces so far have been unable to establish security, even for themselves."

Or we might note that, instead of ebbing, violence in Iraq was flooding into new areas, just beyond the reach of the U.S. combat brigades engaged in the surge. Or perhaps it's worth pointing out that, by July, the highly fortified "Green Zone" in the very heart of Baghdad – designed as the invulnerable safe haven for American and Iraqi officials – had become a regular target for increasingly destructive mortar and rocket attacks launched from unpacified neighborhoods elsewhere in the capital. According to New York Times reporters Alissa J. Rubin and Stephen Farrell, the Zone has been "attacked almost daily for weeks."

Or we could focus on the fact that the long supply lines needed to support the surge – massive convoys of trucks moving weapons, ammunition, and supplies heading north from

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Kuwait into Baghdad – have become a regular target for insurgents. Embedded reporter Michael Yon, for instance, recently reported that, for convoys on this route, "it's not unusual to be diverted or delayed a half-dozen times or more due to real or suspected bombs."

In the end, though, perhaps the best indicator is the surging strength of the surge's primary target in Shia areas. Since the surge plan was officially launched in mid-February, according to the Times' Rubin, the Mahdi Army "has effectively taken over vast swaths of the capital."

Twenty thousand more American combat troops are now in and around the capital. (The rest of the 28,500 troops the President sent surging into Iraq have been dispatched to other provinces outside the capital.) This has meant a tripling of American troops on patrol at any given time, but it has failed to produce either significantly "fewer brazen acts of terror" or progress in "restoring services and rebuilding the neighborhoods." So it can be no surprise that the surge has failed to generate "growing trust and cooperation from Baghdad's residents."

WHY DON'T U.S. TROOPS TRY TO PROTECT SHIA MARKETS AND MOSQUES?

Why then has the surge failed? And so quickly at that? This only makes sense when you explore the strategy utilized by the U.S. military to reduce the number of suicide bombers and the "multiple fatality bombings" they perpetrate. Terrorist attacks of this sort need four elements for success: an organization capable of creating such bombs; a pool of individuals willing to risk or sacrifice their lives to deliver the explosives; a host community willing to hide the preparations; and a target community unable to prevent the delivery of these deadly, indiscriminate weapons of massive destruction.

Virtually all of these attacks are organized by Sunni jihadists and, while the Brookings database shows that many of them are aimed at military or government targets, the majority of deaths occur in spectacular bombings of public gathering spots – "soft targets" – in Shia neighborhoods. It might then have seemed logical for U.S. commanders to concentrate their increased troop strength on these obvious delivery areas, setting up checkpoints and guard posts that would scrutinize car and truck traffic entering highly vulnerable areas.

This strategy might indeed have worked if the U.S. were willing to form an alliance with local Shia neighborhood defense forces. As it happens though, the Shia communities in Baghdad are already well patrolled by the Mahdi army, whose street fighters have proven effective in either spotting alien vehicles or responding to reports from local residents about suspicious cars or people. However, enormous public spaces, filled with large numbers of

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non-residents and outside vehicles, require dense patrolling practices. The Mahdis have been able to generate such patrol "density" only in their headquarters community, Sadr City – the vast Shia slum in the eastern part of Baghdad. There, where the Mahdis have a huge presence, there were almost no suicide attacks until late 2006 when the U.S. military began sending patrols into the community aimed at disarming, disrupting, or destroying the Sadrist militia. This forced them off the streets, opening the way for suicide bombers to reach their targets.

If the U.S. had decided to join forces with the Mahdis, augmenting their neighborhood patrols with a strong American presence in public gathering places, they might indeed have choked off all but a few of the most determined, resourceful, or lucky bombers. However, this strategy was not adopted, at least in part because it would have strengthened the Mahdis, a group that the U.S. military and President Bush had – until their recent fixation on al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) – repeatedly designated as their most dangerous enemy.

Instead, the surge has been forced to focus on the suicide-bomber "supply side." Lt. Gen Raymond T. Odierno, the commander of day-to-day U.S. military operations, told Barnes of the Los Angeles Times that the anti-bombing strategy was directed toward al-Qaeda in Iraq because they "are the ones that are creating the truck bombs and car bombs.... So we are going after the safe havens that allow them to build these things without a lot of interference." According to Barnes, the generals charged with implementing the plan endorsed the surge into Sunni neighborhoods because, "for the first time, they have enough forces to root out Al Qaeda fighters by entering havens where U.S. forces have not been for years."

Thus, the American strategy for preventing suicide bombings in Shia communities involved flooding Sunni communities with huge numbers of soldiers.

INVADING THE HOTBEDS OF THE INSURGENCY

Historically, to successfully "root out" groups like the al-Qaeda fighters requires an occupying force capable of enlisting the aid of large numbers of people within a host community. After all, those planning multiple-fatality bombings need a level of toleration, if not outright support or participation, from the surrounding community. If local residents are totally alienated from the effort, someone will either take direct action or contact the occupying authorities, who can then raid key locations, capturing or killing the plotters.

An attack on the "supply side" might therefore have been a viable option for the Americans, if the host community was hostile to the jihadists. In fact, such hostility does exist in many Sunni communities, including among insurgent groups that are the backbone of the fight against the American occupation. This hostility derives partly from a principled

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opposition to attacks on Iraqis – most of the 30 or so key insurgent groups have explicitly stated that they support armed force only against the American-led coalition forces, often exempting even Iraqi police and military units from attack. But the hostility also comes from distaste for the violently enforced demands of the jihadists that local citizens conform to their fundamentalist beliefs – including prohibitions on alcohol and tobacco consumption, as well as an insistence that men grow full beards and women wear headscarves.

As a result, a tactical alliance of convenience between the occupation and the nationalist Sunni insurgency against the AQI and other fundamentalist jihadists has been an option for the U.S. military since as early as the last months of 2004, when the U.S. refused an offer by insurgent leaders in Falluja to expel the jihadists if the U.S. would refrain from its pending attack on the city. The next year, during a major offensive in Western Anbar province, U.S. military commanders stood idly by – despite explicit calls for help – while local insurgents fought fierce battles with jihadists, telling embedded reporters that they were letting two equally objectionable enemies weaken each other. American commanders have repeatedly enunciated a general principle that they would never form an alliance with, or give aid to, any "Sunni group that had attacked Americans."

Starting in early 2007, this principle was apparently compromised in Anbar Province; by July, under the pressure of the failing surge, it was also being eroded in Baghdad. But these alliances with local militia groups of various sorts involve their own sets of problems. They only create further conundrums for U.S. strategists since, of course, they undermine the larger goals of the occupation. After all, the anti-al-Qaeda insurgents – not the jihadist car-bombers – are, by far, the major force in the insurgency and they are unremitting enemies of the occupation as well as of the Shia and Kurdish-dominated central Iraqi government, which they view as an agent of either the American occupation or Iranian imperial designs.

Major General Rick Lynch, who was involved in negotiations with the Anbar insurgents, quoted them as saying, "We hate you because you are occupiers. But we hate Al Qaeda worse, and we hate the Persians even more." Under these circumstances, any alliance can almost certainly only be temporary, strengthening as it does the chief antagonist to the American presence. The Independent's Cockburn summarized the situation this way:

"The US is caught in [a] quagmire of its own making. Such successes as it does have are usually the result of tenuous alliances with previously hostile tribes, insurgent groups or militias. The British experience in Basra was that these marriages of convenience with local gangs weakened the central government and contributed to anarchy in Iraq. They did not work in the long term."

In Baghdad, the U.S. chose – at least for the opening months of the surge – to hold the line against such an alliance with Shia insurgents. Instead, they used the presence of al-

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Qaeda militants in Sunni communities as an invitation to attack the communities themselves, attempting to "root out" the insurgents, who have been their chief adversary all these years, while also capturing or killing the al-Qaeda activists responsible for the suicide attacks on Shia neighborhoods.

But this dual strategy has no hope of capturing the support of local Sunni communities and, without such support, the U.S. has no choice but to adopt a grim, if straightforward, strategy of brute force in neighborhoods where its sources of information (and so targeting) are, at best, severely limited. The military has, in fact, taken such crude – and, in the end, self-defeating – tactical measures as erecting massive barriers around target Sunni communities to prevent their quarry from escaping; manning check-points at all entrances to capture suspects with weapons and explosives in their vehicles; and erecting outposts within these hostile communities to create a 24-hour quick-response presence. Worse yet, they have conducted knock-the-door-down, house-to-house searches looking for suspicious individuals, weapons, or literature – the sort of approach that, for years, has been known to thoroughly alienate the inhabitants of such neighborhoods.

This strategy insures that the failure of the surge is no passing phenomenon. It leads, first of all, to the brutal treatment of local civilians (of a sort recently documented by Chris Hedges and Laila al-Arian though the testimony of American military personnel in the Nation magazine) – at checkpoints, by patrols, and most strikingly during those home invasions. These assaults only generate further hatred of the occupation, which, of course, rallies support for the local guerrillas. As one soldier, who, earlier in the war, participated in such a midnight home invasion that terrorized a dozen members of an Iraqi family, recalled: "I thought of my family at the time and thought, 'If I was the patriarch of the family, if soldiers came from another country and did this to my family, I would be an insurgent too.'"

These localized applications of "overwhelming" force, when meeting sustained resistance, lead to the calling in of air power or, in some cases, artillery fire. A strategy guaranteed to kill and wound guerrillas and local inhabitants alike, destroy homes, generate more refugees, wreck local economies, and, in the end, create ghostly, uninhabitable former neighborhoods.

Ironically (but logically), while target communities have been crippled by such prolonged operations, both the insurgency and the jihadists have only grown stronger. The attacks swell the ranks of the insurgency, while a small but sufficient supply of embittered individuals become willing to sacrifice their lives to achieve some measure of revenge against the American occupation and/or its Shia allies.

As for the tiny group of jihadist planners and bomb manufacturers, most escape targeted neighborhoods when under pressure, having harvested a new wave of bitterness to fuel a new wave of suicide bombings.

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MEANWHILE, BACK IN SADR CITY...

In the Shia areas, on the other hand, the Americans were providing an unprecedented opportunity for suicide bombers to breach Mahdi Army security. In the second prong of the surge, American patrols were sent into these Shia communities to target local Mahdi Army leaders. While these operations did not add up to the full-scale invasions visited upon Sunni neighborhoods, they nonetheless tended to force Mahdi patrols off the streets, opening up such communities to jihadist suicide attacks.

Having relocated to new quarters (apparently on the outskirts of Baghdad), the jihadi leadership utilized newly recruited suicide volunteers to exploit this sudden vulnerability with a wave of attacks that sent the number of Shia deaths from multiple-fatality bombings recorded in the Brookings database soaring from under 300 before the start of the surge to well over 400 in the months after it began.

And then came the death squads. Originally, they seem to have been organized from Shia militia members by U.S. military and intelligence personnel and housed in the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior. Modeled after the American-organized death squads in Central America in the 1980s, they were designed to murder suspected Sunni resistance leaders and therefore weaken the insurgency.

After the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra on February 22, 2006, they achieved partial or full independence from their American organizers and began targeting Sunni men in indiscriminate campaigns of torture and execution, justified by the argument that they were suspected of involvement in attacks on Shia communities. Just as the car bombers see themselves as retaliating against American and Iraqi government atrocities in Sunni communities, the death squads see themselves as executing the jihadist perpetrators of attacks on their neighbors and their possible supporters.

When the surge began, the number of death-squad murders fell, evidently in part because the death-squad members hoped that American offensives in Sunni communities would significantly reduce suicide attacks. But as this hope was dashed, the number of death-squad killings began to rise again.

THE OCCUPATION FACES A “LOSE-LOSE” DILEMMA

As this latest debacle developed, President Bush and his commanding generals began to argue – to Congress, American public opinion, the Iraqi people, and the world – that we must reschedule the benchmark moment. First, it was from July to September, and then from September to November, and soon after from 2007 to 2008, and lately from 2008 to 2009. Congress (which has temporarily suspended its debate on Iraq policy) and American

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public opinion (where Bush recorded an exceedingly modest uptick in "approval" recently) might well give the President a little more breathing room on the basis of these appeals.

But events on the ground in Iraq do not respond to Presidential appeals or the sunny testimony of generals. In Baghdad and surrounding provinces, the situation has already entered what might be thought of as post-surge reality. In part as a consequence of the surge strategy, ethnic cleansing in major neighborhoods of Baghdad may be nearing completion; meanwhile, in the north, the shaky relationship between the Kurds and Turkey is wavering on the brink of a hot war, while the Kurd-Turkmen-Arab cauldron in the oil-rich city of Kirkuk may erupt any time into a new Baghdad.

While all this goes on, desperate American military leaders have embraced, amplified, and expanded their anti-al-Qaeda-in-Iraq alliance with local guerrillas in al-Anbar Province – so much for dismantling Iraqi militias – and are lurching toward a new set of disasters. These may already be underway, starting with a confrontation between the American commander of the surge plan, General David Petraeus, and the head of an increasingly embattled and shaky Iraqi government, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. According to Juan Cole at his Informed Comment website, Maliki "fears that once the Sunni tribesmen have dispatched 'al-Qaeda,' they will turn on the largely Shiite government with their new American weapons." To prevent this, he "has considered asking Washington to pull the general out of Baghdad." For President Bush, who has visibly put all his eggs in General Petraeus' surge basket, this would be inconceivable, which means that the next crisis in Iraq policy – and probably several after that – is already underway.

As Mahmoud Othman, a veteran Iraqi politician, put it, "The Americans are defeated. They haven't achieved any of their aims."



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