

# Deploying the US War Machine in Iraq. “Boots on the Ground” against the Islamic State: Here Come the Marines

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*Who, President Barack Obama might well be asking, will rid me of this turbulent, loquacious general? Gen. Martin Dempsey of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is certainly one of those characters who may well have given the game away. The United States, he is suggesting, may well find its soldiers on the ground fighting the Islamic State. Caliphate pretenders will do war against freedom loving Marines on holy desert fields.*

The Senate Armed Services Committee were the first ones to receive the cheeky scoop, though it was hardly a remarkable one: everyone knows that any mission that begins in a noble, humanitarian way, with distantly directed missile strikes, has a habit of turning into a heavily laden ground mission. Video game trigger pulling becomes mission hugging very quickly.

“My view at this point is that his coalition is the appropriate way forward. I believe that will prove true.” For Dempsey, the juicy details followed with ominous promise. The lacing of boots might well have to be tied against the emissaries of Allah, and US personnel readied. “But if it fails to be true, and if there are threats to the United States, then I, of course, would go back to the president and make a recommendation that may include the use of US military ground forces.”

In speaking in such a manner, the General realised that he might have been getting ahead of himself. Both he and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel are suggesting the training of some 5,000 Syrian fighters, and the involvement of up to 40 coalition states, though this is very much chatter before batter. Both also spoke about the moment when Iraqi and Kurdish forces rally to push the militants out, notably in urban areas such as Mosul.

Such moves may hardly count in the broader calculations – Senator John McCain of Arizona did suggest that 5,000 Syrian fighters might come up a bit short against 30,000 Islamic State fighters. Then there was the issue of time and skill – how long would the training sessions last? “To many of us that seems like an inadequate response.”

Obama, Dempsey claimed, “has told me as well to come back to him on a case-by-case basis.” Such forensic, petri dish tactics might well work in a laboratory (case by case), but are impossible in the changing circumstances of bombing campaigns and faux state building and deconstruction. The Islamic State, ISIS, ISIL and whatever sexy acronym they happen to kill under, are proving to be a formidable migraine for the Obama administration. Missiles and locally backed forces are not working quite the same magic it was hoped for.

Obama finds himself with unenviable strategic lockjaw, the sort any Roman emperor must have felt when unsettled Germanic tribes, or the sniping Parthians were mentioned in meetings. Do you pay them off, incorporate or annihilate them? Empires are, after all, fuelled on blood and gore, and the American imperium is characterised by celluloid cant and the recently ineffectual allure of gold – the Islamic State is proving a different proposition.

The president has spoken too much about the unpredictable, getting ahead of the realpolitik game before reading the smoke signals. This is particularly so on the matter of Iraq, which has had a tendency to lure American troops in like an insufferably wooing siren. Since 1991, those occupying the Oval Office have had a habit of sending troops and weapons against Iraq, and it is with some irony that the only president to resist releasing troops into the Iraqi vice was the often unzipped Bill Clinton.

On September 10, Obama claimed in a televised address that “we will not get dragged into another ground war in Iraq.” His cunning plan would “not involve American combat troops fighting on foreign soil.” Such assertions are proving dangerously frivolous.

He wants to take a genteel broom and do some dusting and sprucing on matters political; he wants to target a few naughties in the Middle East who have gotten out of hand in the hope that some order will be restored. He is also aware that the American electorate is not exactly enthusiastic to purr at suggestions that more US service personnel will be slaughtered in the Middle East. (Slaughter non-American civilians, yes, but certainly not the sacred of the stars and stripes.) He has, by some miracle, agitated carrion seeking hawks who see a meek reaction and the vegan pacifist doves who fear a corruption of US principles.

Representative Tom Rooney, for instance, wants destruction and mayhem if ISIS is what they purport to be. “And anybody you talk to who knows what they’re talking about believes that arming the rebels is insufficient.” Certainly, if Rooney is reading the fictitious scrawls of such commentators as Tod Robberson of the *Dallas News* (Sep 16), he may be convinced. “The world has not witnessed a deadly, violent, coercive religious sweep of this magnitude since the Third Reich in Germany”. History has well and truly taken an enduring holiday.

The technological imperative of the US war machine can only go so far, what with its excitable, drooling drone controllers and its Tomahawk missile fetishists. Eventually, something on the ground will have to give. The Marines will get busy by executive mandate, adding to existing ground forces (as if others did not know). Distances will be closed, and US hands will get caked and muddy. This, a response to what independent senator Angus King of Maine has termed a “whack-a-mole” approach.

During the address by Dempsey, anti-war voices were heard. They, and the president, see the same writing on the wall, though the interpreters are busy with what exactly that writing says. The most obvious, single word is: defeat.

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