

Grano Series – America in the Middle East

The 2nd annual speakers series, held in Toronto at Grano Restaurant, explores the potential and limits of the use of American power in the Middle East and the prospects of democratization for the region.

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The American Military as NGO

Robert Kaplan

The following is an edited transcript of the talk American journalist Robert Kaplan gave (without notes) at the Grano lecture series.

ON ANY GIVEN WEEK, U.S. Special Operations Command is active in about 67 countries. There is almost no country in the Third World where the U.S. Air Force doesn't have medical teams. Iraq and Afghanistan are just the tips of the iceberg. For the most part, the U.S. military conducts bare-bones, cheap, effective operations, with little fanfare, where the U.S. taxpayer gets a lot of bang for the buck. Iraq, of course, is the stellar exception to that rule. But in the majority of cases, the U.S. military is not involved in combat at all. It's more involved in humanitarian and disaster relief, or training emergency first responders. Whether it's Africa, the Philippines, Columbia, in most of Iraq and Afghanistan, I would say the United States Marines are the world's greatest NGO or relief agency. After the Asian tsunami, Marines provided about 70 per cent of the relief. They had the air assets, the sea assets, and it was their fighting experience in Iraq and Afghanistan that allowed them to be the best humanitarian relief workers, because there is very little operational difference between combat and humanitarian relief. It's about quick insertion. It's about access. It's about digging water wells, getting water and electricity started very fast. It's about presence, security patrols.

The 19th Special Forces Group, based out of Utah, with whom I was embedded in Afghanistan, are now patrolling the streets of New Orleans using the same tactics they did in Afghanistan. The more combat deployments the U.S. military gets, the better relief workers they are, and the more they are surging ahead of every other army in the world in that regard.

I spent the first half of the summer in Algeria embedded with a U.S. Army Special Forces team of 12 Green Berets - one captain, one warrant officer, 10 sergeants. It was a typical mission. It was 12 men in a country, to be followed up by another 12 or 24. Algeria was the most radical Arab state in the Middle East for many years - the head of the non-aligned movement, the father of

the "Zionism is Racism" resolution of the mid 1970s. It is now one of the firmest U.S. allies. Let me go across the region. Morocco, big danger. You look at any European terrorist activity, you find Moroccans behind it. Why is that? Morocco has gone through a very messy democratization process over the last 10 years, with very difficult demographics, lots of big, poor cities.

Morocco is an example of how, while democracy is good in the middle and the long run, you have to face facts that in the short run democracy leads to big security problems. What the U.S. military is thinking about the Middle East right now is that an era of democratization from Morocco to Indonesia means an era of more terrorism for the next 10 years, an era of more instability, more Islamic regimes, and also an era of more governments that will be less and less able to cope with environmental emergency disasters.

Remember, it's not just New Orleans. Cairo, too, is on a sea-level floodplain. Most of the Egyptian population lives in the Nile delta, a very environmentally fragile area. One of the biggest consumers of scholarly studies of environmental fragility is the U.S. military. Let me go on to Libya. Libya has kind of come over. It has gone away from radicalism. Already the U.S. military is thinking of training missions there, because you cannot consolidate a country as a stable, moderate country without professionalization of the armed forces. Democratization means military professionalization. One of the hidden hands behind the success of Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Bulgaria in the last 15 years is U.S. military training programs, which got their militaries up to snuff and kept them out of trouble by powering them down, training them.

I spent a long time in Iraq with the 1st Battalion of the 5th Marine Regiment. I was in the first battle of Fallujah, the first journalist on the scene. I experienced close-quarters urban combat for several days. When you're fighting in close-quarters combat, in a very crowded urban environment, no matter how clean you fight you will get a certain number of civilian casualties. And the Marine generals warned the Bush administration about this beforehand, and that, in the global media environment we live in, those civilian casualties would be emphasized by the media, and that this would exert political pressure all around.

So the first battle of Fallujah was the Bush administration at its worst moment in the first term. Nothing happened that was surprising. You could justify invading the city. You could justify doing nothing and continuing with surgical strikes. What you could not justify was invading the city and calling off the invasion a week later because of political pressures that were all predicted and in fact briefed to the administration beforehand. That's impulsive behaviour. That's unforgivable.

Here is the surprise in Iraq: For the most part, in terms of combat active duty forces, morale has never been better. According to all studies, 70 to 80 per cent of the military voted for Bush in the last election. I would guess about 95 per cent of people in the combat arms infantry community did. What the Ivy League professorate is to the Democratic Party, the fighting units of the U.S. military are to the Republicans, and that's statistically provable. Morale is very high. The basic structural problem of Iraq is that the U.S. military, which really means the U.S. Army, which is running the show, is deployed for a mass infantry World War II scenario, with large numbers of troops as a heavy support tail around Baghdad and other major cities. There are too few fighting units out in the field where the action is, so to speak.

The only way to defeat a counterinsurgency cleanly and in a reasonable period of time, in an age of mass global media, is not to have one start in the first place. And so it will be very, very long and drawn out. At the same time, I cannot think of anything more irresponsible than pulling out or setting a public timetable for withdrawal.

We had an election the other day in Egypt. It was probably the least fixed election in Egyptian history, because of the Internet and independent bloggers. A friend of mine in Israeli intelligence said that, to find out what's going on in Syria these days, check out the independent Syrian bloggers. You get more information from them than you get from the whole Israeli intelligence establishment.

So you see a real opening across the Middle East that isn't being sufficiently reported. Tunisia is starting to open up. When did the Egyptians decide to hold their least fixed elections in Egyptian history?

When did the Syrians decide to open up the Internet? Pin down those dates and you will find those were during news cycles when the U.S. was seen to be strong, seen to be sticking it out. And when the U.S. has bad days in Iraq or a string of bad days, then you see retrenchment throughout the region. So one can make a cogent argument that it was the worst mistake for the U.S. to get involved in Iraq in the first place. But it's also a reasonable argument that, even if it was a great mistake, it would be an even greater mistake to pull out too precipitously now.

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