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The Fine Print in the White House War Plan

Last August the president began his air war against the Islamic State which controls two Iraqi provincial capitals and the city of Falluja. Obama declared that his purpose was to “dismantle” the I.S. By April of this year, the Pentagon’s 4,050 missile and bombing strikes against IS in Iraq and Syria had cost over \$2.1 billion, over \$8 million a day, but without any success. Then on May 16, after assuring the country that “I will not allow the US to be dragged into another war in Iraq,” the president sent a group of US commandos on their first raid into Syria. Since Congress has not declared war, this unauthorized attack and intensification would make Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon proud. Can the Nobel Committee withdraw a Peace Prize for cause?

Although the White House has repeatedly said it would not add “boots on the ground” to wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, etc., the assurance is bogus. Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said last November he was studying the use of US ground troops to “accompany” Iraqi soldiers on “complex” raids. “We’re certainly considering it,” Dempsey told the House Armed Services Committee.

Now, having made no progress since its August 2014 escalation, Obama announced his curtsey to Gen. Dempsey on June 9, declaring that he would add 450 US commandos (whom he calls “trainers”) to the 3,000 “advisers” already there. The next day, the president announced that the US would build yet another military base, this time in Anbar Province. The new base will presumably be built on the ground without the use of boots.

About these numbers, Rosa Brooks, a law professor at Georgetown University, wrote in the Washington Post last Sept., “It’s hard to know what publicly reported troop numbers really mean. When the Pentagon issues a Boots on the Ground report, known colloquially as a ‘BOG report,’ it often excludes military personnel on ‘temporary duty,’ in combat areas, even though temporary duty may [last] 5 or 6 months. Special Operations personnel assigned to work under CIA auspices are often left out of the BOG numbers.”

Promises to prohibit boots on the ground are especially unreliable in view of events in Mali in 2013. That Feb., Obama announced that about 100 US troops were in Niger to set up a drone base to support French military attacks across the border into Mali. The Pentagon said this was legit, since senior US officials had said for months that they would not put ‘boots on the ground’ there. Just in case you were born yesterday, the 47 missions flown by the Air Force’s C17 “Globemaster” — that carried 975 French troops and over 1,200 tons of equipment into Mali to battle an Al Qaeda offshoot — were not a part of any combat.

The new Anbar outpost is conspicuously combative. It adds to six US Army bases, a US Marine Corps base, and the five US Joint Operations bases already established permanently in Iraq. The base is officially to be for the 450 new commandoes who are officially on a mission to “train, advise and assist.” The White House’s public reason for this escalation is to reach out to Sunni tribes in Anbar, and to increase the percentage of Sunni fighters in the Iraqi Army — now dominated by Shiites.

Call this “mission impossible,” since it’s been tried for years in Afghanistan and is notorious for producing Green-on-Blue “insider” assassinations — the murder of US trainers by their Afghan trainees. This is a well-known and inevitable result of wars of occupation.

Relentless bombing and combat cannot end well and the effort is crumbling already, just as the CIA said it would. So over-taxed are US fighting forces in the region that in March, US commandoes in Yemen had to cut and run out of Sana, the capital, to a US base in Djibouti, after first blowing up their own heavy equipment — out of fear that the weapons would be captured by Houthi troops. How many citizens even knew the US had Special Forces in Yemen, especially after the president takes every opportunity to promise “no troops on the ground”? The fine print behind the latest White House war plan is that it claims to have authority to make attacks anywhere in the world beyond the Islamic State and battle “any associated persons or forces.”

Not only has Iraq has become “an even more effective training ground for Islamic extremists than Afghanistan was,” as even the CIA predicted in a leaked 2005 report, but, as retired CIA veteran Milt Bearden warned in 2004, “Every nationalist-base insurgency against a foreign occupation ultimately succeeded,” every one. I wonder if anyone on Earth thinks the US can be the first to break this pattern.