

Bush adopts British colonial model for Iraq

By Alec Russell in Washington

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The success of British colonial forces against the Malay rebellion in the 1950s is being commended in the United States as a template for victory in Iraq.

Col Andrew Krepinevich, a Vietnam veteran, has been touring congressional offices, the Pentagon and newspapers since autumn espousing an "oil spot strategy".

This week President George W Bush all but formally endorsed a modified version of that approach as official policy.

Rather than focus on hunting down the enemy, the American-led coalition forces should be concentrating on securing specific towns and making life so good there that no one will want to support the insurgents, Col Krepinevich argues.

In time, the success will spread slowly outwards as if from an "expanding oil spot" or ink blot, as happened in Malaya. "You focus on a spot segment by segment, area by area," he said.

With despair becoming the predominant American reaction to events in Iraq, the colonel's argument has been seized on by the White House and the US ambassador in Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad.

It is cited approvingly by liberal and conservative newspapers and some generals have also approved, although the implicit criticism of strategy to date has inevitably had a cool reception.

Col Krepinevich, the executive director of a Washington military think-tank, the Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, described the generals' reaction.

"It has ranged from 'Very interesting, right on, this is just what we should be doing. . .' to 'Don't worry, we are already doing this. No need to fret. We're securing the population. We're defeating the insurgents.' "

He added: "I guess the third reaction is, 'This is too late.' "

Col Krepinevich agreed that there were many differences between Iraq and British-run Malaya. "The British controlled the government in Malaya," he said, "whereas whatever approach we take we have to negotiate with the Iraqis. They have to be full partners in the strategy."

Also it took almost a decade to crush the Malayan insurgency. Generals accept from the US military's experience in the Philippines that rebellions classically take a decade to eliminate but, with more than 2,100 American soldiers killed since the invasion in March 2003, the public is unwilling to tolerate an open-ended commitment. While not acknowledging a shift of strategy, the Bush administration is clearly moving to adopt something close to the oil spot concept.

In his formal enunciation on Wednesday of a strategy for "victory", the president stressed that the focus was to "clear, hold and build": clear an area of insurgents, secure it then win over residents by ensuring that it has a functioning infrastructure.

That was very different from the original strategy after the fall of Baghdad. It focused on raiding an enemy stronghold, killing or capturing insurgents then moving on to the next target.

James Jeffrey, the state department's chief policymaker for Iraq and the senior adviser to Condoleezza Rice, the secretary of state, said the clear, hold and build strategy had had a range of influences. He added that the United States had been following it for a year.

"We have been pursuing this now since the summer of last year," he told The Daily Telegraph. "Fallujah [the former insurgent stronghold recaptured in a bloody battle in November last year] in



An American soldier hands out colouring books to Iraqi children



particular was key, because after it was cleared it was then held in a sophisticated way by Iraqi forces and US marines.

"We brought the population back. . . then went down the list of everything - schools, medical centres, sewerage, water, roads, electricity, the whole gamut of services - to give the population a sense that they had a future."

However, critics of the Pentagon argue that its original approach still predominates.

Sen John McCain, the maverick pro-war Republican, said last month that the Pentagon badly needed to change its strategy. He cited the oil spot idea as an alternative approach.

"In their attempt to secure all of Iraq, coalition forces engage in search and destroy operations to root out insurgent strongholds with the aim of killing as many as possible," he said.

"But our forces cannot hold the ground indefinitely and when they move on to fight other battles the insurgent ranks replenish and the strongholds fill again. Our troops must then re-enter the same area and re-fight the battle."

His solution is unpopular: send more troops, a route taken by the British in Malaya in the early 1950s.

However, the administration's hope is that the fledgling Iraqi forces will do the legwork.

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<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/12/03/wirq03.xml&sheet=/portal/2005/12/03/ixportal.html>