

“IRAQIZATION” – NOT DEMOCRATIZATION

By Alan Hootnick

Everybody is debating how we should get out of Iraq. But we must first ask ourselves: how did we get in and why? What were the objectives of the invasion of Iraq in 2003? Were those objectives achieved?



The objectives stated by the Americans and the British were to oust Saddam Hussein; replace him with a democratic, pluralistic government representing the Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds; to rebuild the country, and to defeat terrorism. The first objective was achieved rapidly -- Saddam Hussein was ousted by the Coalition and eventually captured alive. The Coalition then occupied and ran the country for two years until finally handing over sovereign control to a democratically-elected Iraqi government which is operating according to a new Constitution. The economy is more or less functioning again, so it could be claimed that Iraq has been rebuilt to a great extent, even if the results are not yet satisfactory for all.

However, in hindsight, the objective of a democratic and pluralistic government being imposed in Iraq by foreign troops was never realistic. In January of 2003, former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, who is Russia's foremost Middle East expert, evaluated the outcome of the probable invasion of Iraq and concluded that there was no viable alternative to Saddam Hussein. "There are not even any organized opposition groups to work with. I don't see any serious opposition either within Iraq or outside the country that could replace Saddam. I simply don't see any such people on the horizon."

The events of the last three years have confirmed Primakov's analysis. Unfortunately, at the time, such pessimistic forecasts were dismissed in Washington, and the Administration chose to believe in the optimism expressed by Iraqi exiles led by a self-appointed "man of consensus" named Ahmed Chalabi. Although it has now been demonstrated that Chalabi's "proof" of his support within Iraq was all blarney (to put it mildly), Vice-President Cheney, Defence Secretary Rumsfeld and Assistant Secretary of Defence Wolfowitz, were all deceived by Chalabi. And also, in great measure, by their own wishful thinking.

In contrast, when the US invaded Panama in December 1989 and ousted Manuel Antonio Noriega, there was already a democratically-elected government ready to take over: Guillermo Endara had won the election but Noriega prevented him from assuming office. Furthermore, Noriega

was a fugitive from justice, having been indicted in the United States for crimes committed within the US. In the case of Iraq under Saddam Hussein, there was no alternative government to support and neither was Saddam a fugitive from justice.

Primakov was right. It was and still is impossible to impose a Western-style democracy upon an Iraq which has had no experience whatsoever with the democratic system. Throughout Iraq's history, all of its governments were either artificially imposed by foreigners, or were military dictatorships. Iraq's first system of government -- a monarchy -- was imposed by the British. In fact, the Iraqi royal family itself was not even Iraqi; the Hashemite King Feisal was from the Hejaz region of Arabia, and he was sent to Iraq when the Hashemites lost control of Arabia to the Saudi family. When the monarchy was overthrown in 1958, a series of military dictators took power, and after a palace coup, Saddam Hussein became the undisputed tyrant of Iraq.

The present Iraqi government, which was imposed by the Coalition invaders in 2003, is seen by the people as being just the latest group of rulers hand-picked by foreign conquerors. Such a government, in spite of its democratic constitution, cannot and will not be perceived by the people of having "legitimacy" until it finally breaks the umbilical cord with Washington. Therefore dependency upon the Coalition troops is counterproductive in the long-term.

There was also a sharp contrast between the objectives of the Gulf War of 1991 and the Iraq War of 2003. In 1991, the "casus belli" was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. This was a naked act of unprovoked aggression against a sovereign state. Practically all of the Arab states were united in opposition to Iraq. World opinion was nearly unanimous in condemnation of the invasion. When the UN-approved deadline for Iraqi withdrawal passed without Iraqi retreat, there was massive world support for the Coalition war to liberate Kuwait. And most significantly, as soon as the last Iraqi soldier was expelled from Kuwait, the war stopped. The Coalition did not enter Iraqi soil in order to provoke "regime change". The Coalition learned the lessons of both Vietnam and the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982. The Administration of George Herbert Bush remembered the dictum of John Quincy Adams: "America does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy."

However, the Iraq War of 2003 was precisely a search for monsters to destroy. It was, in many ways, a way of avenging the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. At the precise moment in history when the US seemed so unquestionably powerful and when the spectre of world war had become a thing of the past, and just when we all thought we would enjoy peace

and prosperity and live happily ever after, came the crude awakening of 9/11.

We must always remember the trauma which 9/11 provoked in the American psyche. During the entire Second World War, not a single bomb fell on the continental United States. The wars in Korea and Vietnam were fought very far from home, and those enemies were never perceived as threats to the security of the US itself.

The sudden shock of 9/11 produced both fear and the urgent need to “do something.” America went into Afghanistan in search of the monster, Osama bin Laden. Afghanistan was invaded and the Taliban regime was ousted. A new government was quickly installed, but Osama bin Laden was not captured. The quest for vengeance was not satisfied, nor had the terrorism problem been solved. America still had the desire for more vengeance, and it had to show all the extremist regimes in the world “who is boss.”

Therefore Saddam Hussein himself was made into the “casus belli” for the war of 2003. Although his regime had been tolerated by the US after the Gulf War, 9/11 changed everything. Whereas economic sanctions and an occasional bombardment were considered sufficient to control Saddam during the 1990s, the post-9/11 psychology feared his very existence.

Most significantly, the invasion of Afghanistan was supported so wholeheartedly that US public opinion did not realize that they were once again being sucked into another “nation-building” enterprise. And since the consequences of the Afghan quagmire had not yet become evident, Afghanistan became a precedent for Iraq.

We must beware of “nation-building”. History has shown that “nation-building” is an attractively decorated trap-door hiding a maze of blind alleys, dead-end streets, and highways to hell.

Granted, the Bush Administration does not use the term “nation building”; Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice re-named it “Transformational Diplomacy.” In her famous speech at Georgetown University, Condoleezza Rice cited President Bush’s principal foreign policy goal: “It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.” Ms. Rice then proceeded to say: “To achieve this bold mission, America needs equally bold diplomacy, a diplomacy that not only reports about the world as it is, but seeks to change the world itself. I and others have called this mission transformational diplomacy.... And the United States

is working with our many partners, particularly our partners who share our values in Europe and in Asia and in other parts of the world to build a true form of global stability, a balance of power that favors freedom.”

There is an internal contradiction between the preamble which states American principles, and the following paragraph which refers to their application in practice. Do America’s partners share the same goal of intervening in other countries to “support democracy” and “end tyranny”? Do they all share the same common enemies? Is the European and Asian definition of “global stability” and “balance of power” the same as President Bush’s definition?

In Secretary Rice’s speech, she then stated another principle, that “transformational diplomacy is rooted in partnership; not in paternalism. In doing things with people, not for them, we seek to use America’s diplomatic power to help foreign citizens better their own lives and to build their own nations and to transform their own futures.”

This is a platitude, not a working doctrine. All foreign interventionists -- colonialists and imperialists included -- always justify their intervention on the basis that it is for the good of the natives. American policy-planners in the Sixties coined it “nation-building”.

Ms. Rice cited the post-WWII reconstructions of Germany and Japan as being examples of America’s partnerships on behalf of democracy and progress. “Our diplomacy was instrumental in transforming devastated countries into thriving democratic allies, allies who joined with us for decades in the struggle to defend freedom from communism.”

But she overlooked America’s failed “nation-building” endeavors. In an article in Japan Focus, Prof. Walter LaFeber wrote, “the experiences in Germany and Japan are the exceptions...These uniquely favorable circumstances stand in striking contrast to those found in all subsequent U.S. wars down to and including Iraq and Afghanistan. Rice noticeably never mentions Vietnam, that great effort of U.S. nation-building in the half-century after 1951, nor does she note the repeated failures of American attempts to impose stable democracies...in the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico, Cuba, and the Philippines over the past 120 years.”

When dealing with specific countries, US foreign policy is often forced to choose between ideological preferences and strategic necessities. For example, the strategic realities in the Middle East require the US to be allies of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Those two countries are anything but democracies. Saudi Arabia is an archaic monarchy without even the semblance of Western-style democracy and human rights. The military

regime in Pakistan abolished democracy and exiled its only democratically-elected leader, Benazir Bhutto.

In contrast, Palestine and Iran have advanced further toward democracy than any other Muslim nation in the Middle East. But the US has not rewarded them. On the contrary, Iran has been characterized as a member of the Axis of Evil and “a direct threat to American interests,” while the democratically-elected Hamas government in Palestine has been ostracized. It is seen as insincere and hypocritical to support democracy only when "friendly" governments are elected.

Therefore with respect to Rice’s new doctrine, my principal questions are: How will the Administration balance strategic necessities and ideological preferences? Will propaganda support policy, or will it dictate policy? Will the new doctrine only last the duration of the Bush Administration, or is it designed to endure through future presidential terms as a benchmark of permanent policy?

The other war objective – to defeat terrorism in Iraq – has certainly not been achieved yet and is cited as the most glaring proof of President Bush’s “failed Iraq policy.” However, just last year, when al-Qaeda leader Zarqawi was killed in an American bomb attack, there were hopes for victory and stability. The new Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, appointed new ministers of Interior, Defence, and National Security. The new Minister of Defence, Abdul Qadir Muhammed Jasim, was a Sunni. The new Minister of Interior, Jawad al-Bolani, was not aligned with any of the militias, unlike his predecessors. The strategy was to give more power to the secular-nationalists.

Interior Minister al-Bolani stated that his first priority will be to stop the Shiite death-squad killings of Sunnis. However, to accomplish that, he will have to enter the internecine fray of rival Shiite groups and try to force all of them to declare a truce against the Sunnis.

But the perennial problem for all Iraqi Ministers is that they do not have the power to defeat the militias. Plain and simple.

Iraq is organized along sectarian lines – the Constitution is an artificial power-sharing formula. The government appointments are allocated according to a quota system, and the Armed Forces are similarly organized along sectarian lines. This is dangerously similar to the failed system in Lebanon which was condemned to failure right from the start because it is inherently unjust and anti-democratic. In Iraq, this system cannot possibly achieve national unity because it was imposed by foreign forces and it reflects no internal consensus on how to unite the country.

National unity is a valid goal, but the structure of Iraqi society will not permit its realization.

Terror has not been defeated and the Iraqi government is totally incapable of defending itself without US help. Nevertheless, we must remember that the internal security of a nation is an internal problem. The US and the British would be totally justified in saying: "if you want to be treated as a sovereign country, you should start acting like one." That is, a sovereign government should try to be self-sufficient and must fight its own battles. If they need outside aid, the government must first demonstrate its desire to defend itself -- then they could call upon allied help.

However, the government of Iraq is in danger of entering into the "welfare bum syndrome" by becoming overly dependent upon American and British troops. The Iraqis will never be self-sufficient while foreign troops continue to shed their blood for Iraq. Granted, the Iraqi police and the civilian population have suffered enormous casualties, but that only goes to prove that if the Americans pulled out, the Iraqi government would collapse. James Baker stated bluntly that an immediate withdrawal from Iraq would lead to "the biggest civil war you've ever seen."

In fact, there is still no consensus yet as to whether Iraq will continue to exist in its present form with a centralized government, or if it will be converted into a regionalist state. In a centralized state, demographics will dictate Shiite control with Kurdish help. In a regionalist state, the Shiites will control southern Iraq, and the Kurds will control Mosul and Kirkuk and with them, the northern oilfields and trade routes. So it is the Sunnis who are insisting on a constitution with guarantees that they will have a veto over Shiite initiatives. And the Sunnis also fear the jihadists who were anti-Baathist during the Saddam regime.

The US has always been opposed to a regionalist formula because they fear that an autonomous Shiite region in southern Iraq would ask for Iranian protection. When US and British troops finally pull out, they fear that Iranian forces will fill the void and place Iranian soldiers along the border with Saudi Arabia -- their worst nightmare.

So when could the US "proclaim victory" and withdraw its troops from Iraq? If the Americans insist on intervening in the internal Iraqi political contest and try to broker every dispute, they will never be able to leave -- unless they were to be forced out militarily.

The only honorable way out would be to apply the "Vietnamization" solution to Iraq. Only through "Iraqization" could the Iraqi government ever earn legitimacy. By being seen as "pawns" of the Americans, the

Iraqi government will never be perceived as being independent. Only through "Iraqization" could the Americans proclaim "mission accomplished" and leave Iraq honorably and not be accused of either washing their hands of Iraq, or of imperialism.

However, we must be careful about making too many comparisons with Vietnam. South Vietnam was at war with North Vietnam and the Viet Cong who were both, in turn, supported by the Soviet Union and China. Iraq is not at war with any country. The only foreign forces fighting in Iraq are the Coalition troops. The Iraqi government is neither at war with Iran nor Syria, but with a plethora of internal enemies. There is a big difference.

In the final analysis, US policy must stop trying to spread democracy under the illusion that democratic societies will always be "peaceful." After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the United States is now the only major country in the world which is embarked on an ideological crusade. Ever since President Woodrow Wilson announced his policy of "making the world safe for democracy", the United States has invoked the moral right to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries in order to "spread democracy." When the Soviet Union tried to do the same thing to advance Marxism, that was called "fomenting revolution" and was resisted by the US and its allies.

However, democracy should never become a crusading ideology. Totalitarian crusades were responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of people in the 20th century. Democracy, on the other hand, preaches tolerance of different cultures, self-determination of nations and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states.

We must rediscover the wisdom of Henry Kissinger and Theodore Roosevelt and declare that US foreign policy is unabashedly based on "the national interest." American policy would be much more credible and sustainable. The rest of the world would certainly understand US policy better, and foreign nations would know where they stand with respect to the United States. At the same time, we would also avoid charges of hypocrisy and double standards.

Modern Christianity recognizes that it was immoral for the Crusaders to have tried to spread Christianity by the sword. The "Christian" Crusaders of a thousand years ago were the equivalent of today's Islamic jihadists. Today, Christians try to lead by example and spread their doctrine by the Word, not by the sword.

Similarly, democracy must lead by example. Democratic nations must have the faith and the patience to await transformations within Islamic societies which will reject jihadist extremism.