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IRAQI HISTORY VS. AMERICAN IDEALISM*

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In his State of the Union Address on the eve of the 1991 Gulf War, President George Bush declared: "We are a nation of rock-solid realism and clear-eyed idealism ..." Twelve years on, President George W. Bush is attempting to combine realism with idealism in his approach to the unfinished business of that war.

One of the Administration's major goals in the current war is to bring about a fundamental change in the nature of Iraqi political life. And those who recommend the occupation of Iraq in order to create a stable democratic regime base their prescription on the Douglas MacArthur model of post-World War II Japan. However neither the Japanese nor the German model can serve as a reliable guide for the Iraqi case, if only because of Iraq's lengthy history of resisting foreign rule.

400 years of Ottoman Turkish rule did not endear the Sunni Muslim Ottoman overlords to the land's inhabitants, especially the Shi'is, who were nearly always in a state of rebellion. The 80-year Mamluke interregnum at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th Century was no better in the eyes of the populace. As for the British, who occupied Baghdad in 1917, they declared that they had

come as liberators but within three years, they were facing "the Great Iraqi Revolution," which cost them \$40 million and over 2,000 casualties to suppress. During their 40-year period of direct and indirect rule, the British attempted to build the facade of a democratic regime, including political parties, elections and two houses of parliament. But democracy failed dismally to take root in Iraq. Nor were the "foreign" royal family of Faysal and his descendants acceptable to Iraqis; they met a bitter fate in the bloody coup of 1958.

If the history of Iraq is relevant for our times, then the prospects for successfully imposing the Japanese model on Baghdad seem remote. Though it might entail house-to-house fighting and even exposure to non-conventional weapons, the military conquest of Baghdad will be the "easy" part. Controlling this huge city afterward will be an even more daunting challenge. For though the population might intensely hate Saddam Hussein and may initially welcome the Americans, a prolonged occupation is likely to turn the "liberators" into objects of hatred.

Democracy will be even more elusive than passive acceptance of foreign presence. The successful promotion of democratic regimes

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around the world has nearly always been a long process that depended on socioeconomic transformation and changes in political culture. Not only has this process not yet begun in Iraq, but more than three decades of Ba'ath rule have wiped out any forms of civil society that had previously existed. Promoting democratization and pluralism in Iraq entails not only regime change -- ousting the Ba'ath from power -- but also a change in the political culture, a product of at least 500 years of history during which the Shi'is were all but excluded from power. Giving Iraq's Shi'is (55% of the population) their proper due is a commendable objective, but the Shi'is lack any of the socio-political, military, and religious organizations that would enable them to mobilize their resources and become a significant force in Baghdad. Nor are the Americans capable of endowing the Shi'is with powers they do not currently have. And the idea of federative rule, while it may suit the Kurds, is by no means applicable to the Shi'is, who constitute a majority not only in the south but in Baghdad, as well.

Clearly, then, the overriding challenge for the US is to conduct the conflict in a way which both ensures a relatively speedy victory and lays the groundwork for a manageable post-war order.

- Claims that the US has come to "liberate the Iraqi people" will be more credible if large-scale casualties can be avoided. Conversely, scenes of large-scale urban devastation will provide fertile ground for opponents of America's post-war plans.
- The prolonged presence of coalition troops in populated areas will make them vulnerable to urban guerrilla warfare and reinforce their image as occupiers. Promoting stability from outside the populated areas would thus seem to be a preferred recipe. Of course, this depends on the speed and degree of cooperation which can be generated from the

Iraqi side.

- Notwithstanding the Iraqi opposition's fears and the inherent contradiction between democratic principles and military rule, the US will need to work with the Iraqi army (but not Saddam's private forces) to engineer a coup and/or help control the country after the war. The army is still considered a national symbol and its ability to bloody the coalition forces in the fighting so far has probably reinforced that image. Moreover, it is relatively less corrupt than are other organizations and it is the only body that can keep the country together after Saddam's downfall. Sustained contacts with the military may also help prevent coups by disgruntled officers in the future and give the US the leverage to convince the army to share power with civilians.
 - Iraqis are likely to be disappointed if the US raises unreasonable expectations of a quick transition to democracy. Focusing instead on massive aid and investment to improve the economic lot of the people is a prerequisite for building the foundations for civil society and is likely to bear greater dividends down the road.
 - Similarly, American credibility will be enhanced if the US guarantees the existing autonomy (but not independence) of the Kurds in the north and the safety and well being of the Shi'is in the south. Failure to do so is likely to open up a Pandora's Box of problems, both within Iraq and with its neighbors.
- American goals will be best served if the Administration avoids being swept away by its own idealism. But even if full-fledged democracy remains a remote prospect, there are many intermediate kinds of regime change which are feasible for Iraq, almost any of which would constitute a marked improvement over the totalitarianism of the past 35 years.

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