Inventing Iraq

The governing districts and major towns in Iraq during the Mandate

Inventing Iraq

The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied
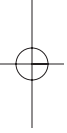
Toby Dodge
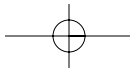
For Clare

CONTENTS

Preface: Iraq and the Ordering of the Postcolonial World

FROM WOODROW WILSON TO GEORGE W. BUSH

In Iraq today, the United States is presiding over a country about which it has a limited understanding. The United States is attempting to rebuild Iraqi state institutions and reform their interaction with society. Post–Cold War military interventions into failed or rogue states with the overt aim of reforming their political systems are becoming increasingly common but, to date, these interventions have been uniformly unsuccessful. It is not surprising therefore, that attention is increasingly being focused on Britain's own inadequate attempts to build a modern democratic state in Iraq during the eighteen-year period between 1914 and 1932.

At the beginning of a very hot Iraqi summer I interviewed a senior British diplomat in the garden of what had been the British High Commission on the banks of the Tigris River in Baghdad. He was optimistic, even bullish. The lawlessness that had been the focus of much media coverage over the previous month was, he said, overstated. Order would soon return to the capital's streets and the country beyond. Criticism, both Iraqi and international, of the nascent representative structures being fostered by the occupying powers was inaccurate. They were not, as detractors argued, dominated by an irrelevant minority of carpetbaggers, but were instead the foundations of a democratic process that would slowly evolve into a vibrant and sustainable polyarchy—a stable coordinated rule of multiple institutions representing diverse social forces and interests.

The interview took place at the end of May 2003 as British and American forces, having unseated Saddam Hussein, struggled to impose order on Iraq and wondered how to reform its political structures. However, the conversation could well have taken place at the end of May 1920. Instead of Christopher Segar, Head of the British Office in Baghdad, answering the questions, it would, in 1920, have been Arnold Wilson, the

acting Civil Commissioner, responsible for building a state in Iraq in the aftermath of the First World War. Wilson was a confident and bullish colonial official who was wrestling with a serious dilemma. How, under intense international scrutiny, could he control a well-armed society that had become increasingly resentful about the occupation of their country? Wilson himself never found satisfactory answers to this question. On July 2, 1920, a revolt, or *thawra*, broke out along the lower Euphrates. Fueled by a population resentful at the heavy-handed approach of the occupying forces, the rebellion quickly spread across the south and center of the country. Faced with as many as 131,000 armed opponents, the British army did not regain full control until six months later in February 1921. The cost in lives and money of the revolt made the continued occupation of Iraq very unpopular with British public opinion. It also cost Wilson his job. From 1921 onward the British continually strove to cut the costs of their presence in Iraq. Ultimately the decision was made to extricate themselves from the country as quickly as possible. The result was a failure to build a liberal or even a stable state in Iraq.

The similarity between the British occupation of the 1920s and the role of the United States's Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in 2003 becomes more striking at the CPA's headquarters in downtown Baghdad. In the 1920s, deep divisions amongst British civil servants undermined their attempt to build a functioning state. Arguments concerned not only the type of state to be built, but which Iraqis should staff the government and how state institutions should interact with the wider population. The CPA, resident in what used to be Saddam's most important palace, is not a well-organized or harmonious organization. The ideological disputes wracking the Republican administration in Washington have been transplanted, even exacerbated, in Baghdad. A senior American official I interviewed in Iraq marveled at the speed with which decisions, collectively agreed to at the CPA, were then undermined once the representatives of the different factions had called Washington to find out what their masters wanted them to do. For the squabbling factions in Washington, the heart of the dispute about Iraq is the depth of U.S. commitment to reforming the country's political structures. Paul Wolfowitz, the neoconservative Deputy Secretary of Defense, personifies one group. His approach is macrotransformationalist. Under U.S. supervision Iraq can be totally transformed, becoming a beacon of liberal democracy for the

Middle East and wider developing world. The other approach, associated with Secretary of State Colin Powell and the CIA, is minimalist. Worried about the costs—political and economic—of a long term U.S. commitment to Iraq, this approach is concerned with establishing order and stability by changing the highest echelons of the governing elite but conserving the existing governing structures.

Another pertinent similarity between the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003 and that of the British in the 1920s is how both interact with society. British colonial rule had traditionally been heavily dependent of scientific quantification to understand the societies they sought to dominate. Colonial officials were used to taking a great deal of time compiling censuses and cadastral surveys, or records of property boundaries, subdivisions, buildings, and related details. The British in Iraq, because of restrictions on money and troops, could not do this. Instead they interacted with Iraqi society on the basis of what they thought it *should* look like. In lieu of detailed investigations and engagement with actual conditions and practices, Iraq was understood through the distorted shorthand supplied by the dominant cultural stereotypes of the day.

The sense of incoherence and political division at the heart of American attempts to rebuild Iraq has been seriously exacerbated by the CPA's inability to establish meaningful communications with Iraqi society. Short of Arabic speakers and devoid of any Iraqi expertise themselves, the coalition has been forced to rely on the Iraqi political parties formed in exile to act as their intermediaries. In fact, the nature of these organizations has increased the divide between U.S. forces and Iraqis. Despite setting up numerous offices around Baghdad, publishing party newspapers, and spending large sums of money, the two main exiled groups, the Iraqi National Congress and Iraqi National Accord, have failed to mobilize significant support. All the Iraqis I met—rich or poor, religious or secular—showed at best indifference and more often outright hostility to the returned exiles. This was especially the case with the INC and INA, whose avowed secular outlook identifies them with external manipulation.

If one were able to pick up Iraq like a good piece of china and turn it over, it would bear the legend: "Made in Whitehall, 1920." Britain's failed attempt, during the 1920s and 1930s, to build a liberal state in Iraq forms the historical backdrop against which the removal of Saddam Hussein in

2003 and its aftermath should be understood. This book does not focus on Iraqis in Iraq in the 1920s. It is an examination of British colonialism's dying days. This is not to detract from the decisive role played by Iraqis, whether as members of political elites or as ordinary people. Rather, my book emphasizes the critical impact upon events exercised by how key colonial civil servants, caught up in a rapidly changing international system, understood the society they were interacting with. How the British understood Iraq made it impossible for them to accomplish what they had initially set out to do: build a liberal, modern, sustainable state capable of reshaping the lives of the Iraqi people. The British did not mean to undermine the nascent Iraqi state. But, hobbled by an ideologically distorted view of Iraqi society and facing financial and political limits, they did. The United States in Iraq today must understand that it is both living with the consequences of that failure and is in danger of repeating it.

Ordering the Postcolonial World

Woodrow Wilson, in the aftermath of the First World War, and George W. Bush, in the aftermath of the Cold War, were faced with a similar conundrum: how to protect the United States by imposing order on an international system they perceived to be both fractured and dangerously unstable. For both, the dangers of instability came from the periphery of the system. The dilemma that both presidents faced was the extent to which radical reform was needed in order to secure long-term stability. Radical reform, by its very nature, would threaten the interests of the United States and her allies. Both presidents sought instead to reimpose stability by reworking the Westphalian notion of state sovereignty and then reapplying it to the states of the developing world. This was done to guarantee international order whilst forwarding what Wilson believed—and Bush now believes—to be the interests of the United States. In 1920, and once again in 2003, this quest for international order has had a profound impact on the domestic politics of Iraq. In 1920, it forced the British to build a self-determining state; in 2003 it has led the United States to undertake regime change and George W. Bush to publicly commit the United States to building a liberal government in its aftermath.

During the twentieth century and now in the twenty-first century, order is predicated on the universal unit of the state. The system operates by granting rights exclusively to states. The shared goal of the majority of states in the system is the defense of individual state sovereignty but also the safeguarding of systemic stability by limiting the extent and nature of violence.[1]

The crucial defining aspect of all rights bearing actors in the system is sovereignty. The Westphalian system of states was founded on the principle of sovereign nonintervention. But until the end of the First World War, sovereignty had to be earned. To gain legal personality a state had to prove positive sovereignty, an ability to control a delineated and stable geographic territory, provide political goods for its citizens, and interact internationally on the basis of equality and reciprocity with other states.[2]

At the end of the First World War, Wilson and the briefly assertive United States strove to rework the Westphalian system on a global, extra-European basis. At the heart of this project was the mandate ideal, based on the universal application of the sovereign state even to those regions and peoples whose histories had been lived outside its framework. Open markets and politically independent governments would bring about a world without empire and would prevent another cataclysm like the one just endured.

The universalizing ideology of Wilson, combined with America's propagation of unrestricted markets, meant that European powers found it impossible to justify the annexation of territory they had acquired by the end of the war. Sovereign territorial states now became the central means of understanding and organizing the international sphere. Although Wilson's international presence was short-lived, his vision could not be ignored. It articulated a framework for understanding and establishing a workable international political order in the midst of the moral and ideological wreckage of empire.

Iraq, by highlighting the tortured birth of the postcolonial state in international relations, played a groundbreaking role in world politics. Its three provinces were one of the first areas of the Ottoman Empire to be invaded by British troops at the outset of the First World War. In 1932, Iraq became the first mandated state to gain its independence, entering the League of Nations as a full, self-determining member. It had escaped

both the clutches of the Ottoman and total absorption within the British imperial system.

The implications and reorientation represented by Wilson's vision of self-determination and the mandate system fully came into their own with the "revolt against the west" in the aftermath of the Second World War.[3] It was officially codified in the 1960 United Nations General Assembly Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, which stated that "all peoples have the right to self-determination" and the "inadequacy of political, economic, social and educational preparedness should never serve as a pretext for delaying independence."[4] All newly independent states now legally entered the international system officially organized by the norm of sovereign non-interference. Article 2, paragraph 7 of the United Nations Charter ruled out intervention in the internal affairs of any member state.[5]

Iraq, one of the first postcolonial states, exhibited from the beginning the instability that would come to haunt international relations in the aftermath of decolonization. After entry into the League of Nations in 1932, formal state commitments to liberal democracy were quickly dispensed with and the polity was rocked by a series of bloody coups, culminating in the Baath Party's seizure of power in 1968. In the 1970s, oil wealth and the growth of a rentier economy allowed the government of Saddam Hussein to gain unprecedented autonomy from, and power to rule over, Iraqi society.

The internal instability of some postcolonial states similar to that evidenced by Iraq, with its potential to destabilize the international system, has led to the questioning of sovereignty as an unalienable right. Ultimately it has led to the rise of the Bush doctrine of preemptive war. The undermining of postcolonial sovereignty began in the economic sphere with the rise of the "Washington consensus" in the 1980s. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank set about applying the "wisdom of market reliance" to developing countries in economic difficulty. In return for loans, these organizations demanded not only free trade but also the liberalization of capital and financial markets.[6] By the middle of the 1980s, structural adjustment loans accounted for more than 25 percent of World Bank lending and came to be seen by both the World Bank and the IMF as a precondition for further lending.[7] These loans had a large number of policy conditions attached that were designed to reduce

drastically the state's role in the economy. The removal of import quotas, the cutting of tariffs and interest rate controls, the devaluation of currencies, and the privatization of state industries were all imposed on the governments of postcolonial developing countries.

The end of the Cold War, the breaking up of the bipolar division and the increasing complexity of international relations led to an unprecedented scrutiny of postcolonial sovereignty. As early as 1990, international-relations scholars were arguing that decolonization had eclipsed "empirical statehood." That is, they noted that legal state sovereignty need no longer be correlated with measurable political capacity or national unity. The right to sovereignty, they pointed out, could now be based solely on the demands of former colonial territories independent of their governments' ability to adequately embody and exercise any clear national autonomy.[8] The conclusions U.S. policy advisers drew from such observations were that a state's right to sovereignty "is not unconditional or normatively superior to the right to security of the polity."[9] Such conclusions clearly implied that governing elites of errant states could be conceptually separated from the mass of the population. International intervention in formally sovereign states could now be justified in the name of their suffering populations.

Given these developments, the end of the Cold War gave rise to coercive diplomacy by the international community in the name of global governance. Military intervention and economic sanctions were used to promote a liberal global order in the name of protecting human rights and furthering democracy. In 1990, in the aftermath of the invasion of Kuwait, Iraq appeared to offer a suitable target for such action. Not only had it transgressed the rules of the old Westphalian system by invading Kuwait, but it had offended the emerging rules of liberal governance by oppressing the human and democratic rights of its own population. Heavily dependent on oil exports, the Iraqi regime appeared extremely vulnerable to the economic blockade placed on it. But even after ten years of the most comprehensive economic blockade in modern history with its incalculable toll in human suffering, the Iraqi state could not be coerced into reform or internal collapse.

The rise of the Bush doctrine in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 represent the heaviest blow to date against state sovereignty in the developing world. The influence of this

international norm, born of Woodrow Wilson's attempts to universalize the Westphalian system in the aftermath of the First World War, has reached a nadir from which it is now difficult to imagine it recovering. In many respects the Bush doctrine represents a conscious attempt to codify changes to international relations in the post–Cold War era. It recognizes and institutionalizes the political effects of attacks on economic sovereignty under the "Washington Consensus" of the 1980s. Likewise it asserts a basis for the military enforcement of demands for liberal good governance developed in the 1990s. Ultimately the Bush doctrine is an attempt to return to the pre–Woodrow Wilson international system, where the right to sovereignty has to be earned. The question haunting the Bush doctrine is what to do with those states that will not—or more problematically cannot—earn their sovereignty in the ways demanded by the United States.

For the Bush administration, as it set about applying its new doctrine in the aftermath of 9/11, the Baathist regime in Baghdad was a potent symbol of a defiant Third World state. Over the course of the 1990s, despite invasion, continuous bombing, and a decade of the harshest sanctions ever imposed, Iraq continued to reject the demands of the United States and the international community. It was proof, for those states of a rebellious disposition, that autonomy could be indigenously defended in a world dominated by a single hegemon. By engineering regime change in Baghdad, Washington has clearly signaled its commitment to the Bush doctrine as well as the lengths it will go to achieve its core foreign policy goals. To quote Under Secretary of State for Defense Planning Douglas Feith, "one of the principal reasons that we are focused on Iraq as a threat to us and to our interests is because we are focused on this connection between three things: terrorist organizations, state sponsors, and weapons of mass destruction."[10]

It is important to recognize that the strategic goals of the Bush doctrine were not born from the ash and rubble of the twin towers. The geopolitical thinking behind them became apparent as early as 1992. In the dying days of Bush senior's presidency, the then Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney, assembled a team to plan U.S. foreign policy in the aftermath of the Cold War. The result, the forty-six page *Defense Planning Guidance*, was drafted under the supervision of Paul Wolfowitz. It recommended that the United States should strive to lock in its unilateral

dominance of the international system. To do so, it should distance itself from the standing mulilateralism of the UN and rely instead on ad hoc coalitions of the willing. To counter asymmetrical threats from weaker states, it aggressively had to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Over the long-term, the United States was to use its military power to enlarge a zone of democratic peace.[11]

These recommendations, originally considered too harsh and burdensome in the midst of the optimism that greeted the end of the Cold War, have now come to dominate U.S. foreign policy in the aftermath of 9/11. In the perspective of George Bush's foreign policy team, 9/11 "ended the decade of complacency."[12] It allowed them, in their own view, to successfully overcome public hostility to U.S. military action overseas and develop the forward-leaning approach to reordering world politics that key members of the administration had been advocating for more than a decade.[13] The Bush doctrine is the attempt to collapse three distinctly separate problems—terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and the weakness of postcolonial states—into one policy. It was Saddam Hussein's regime that provided the vehicle for this aspiration.

An attack at the center of U.S. public life on September 11, 2001, gave the American public a heightened sense of their own collective vulnerability.[14] The Bush administration strove to convince the electorate that the unilateral deployment of America's military dominance was the key to making sure that this new asymmetrical warfare did not come to haunt the world's remaining superpower. In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the administration was divided about how to approach the war against terrorism. Leading hawks, most notably Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, made a strong case for the broadest possible definition of terrorism, going well beyond the immediate hunt for al Qaeda.[15] Although Bush was initially reluctant to do this, by the time of the State of the Union Address on January 29, 2002, terrorism had now been defined in the broadest way. The "axis of evil" facing America had now become Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, "and their terrorist allies." These three rogue states were a grave and growing danger not only because they were "seeking weapons of mass destruction," but also because they "could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred."[16]

In the State of the Union Address and then more clearly in *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, published that September, the issues of rogue states, WMD, and terrorism had been forged into one homogenous threat to the continued security of the American people.[17] This new "grand strategy" mapped out a solution to the threat posed from the weaker creations of decolonization. The "right" to sovereignty was now only to be granted when a state had met its "responsibilities" to the international community.[18] These responsibilities concern the suppression of all terrorist activity on their territory, the transparency of banking and trade arrangements, and the disavowal of weapons of mass destruction.

All means necessary—diplomatic, financial, and military—were to be deployed to convince the ruling elites of errant states that it was in their interests to conform to these new demands. But the doctrine faced two problems: failed or rogue states too weak to impose these new responsibilities on their populations and states that simply refused to be coerced. Even amongst the neoconservatives that dominate the present administration, there appears to be differences concerning the role U.S. troops and American civil servants will play in coercing or reforming the rogue, the weak, and the recalcitrant.

Vice President Richard Cheney and the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's political inclinations can best be described as both realist and unilateralist. In the post–Cold War era, the United States is clearly the unchallenged hegemon whose power cannot and should not be rivaled. However, such unmatched influence brings with it temptations that should be resisted.[19] In clear realist terms, the foreign policy interests of the United States should be precisely and very narrowly defined. There should be no "foreign policy as social work," no extended forays into state building like those that bogged the Clinton administration down in far flung countries that were of little direct interest to the United States. It is this approach that has limited the numbers and role of U.S. troops in post-Taliban Afghanistan.[20]

Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, on the other hand, personifies the other wing of neoconservative thought. In Wolfowitz's philosophical approach, we find strong echoes of nineteenth-century Utilitarian thought. It is both liberal and universal. It is the governing systems of countries that distinguish them as different and problematic. Remove state tyranny from the Middle East and the wider developing world, and

rational individual democrats will spring forth, free to chose liberal political and economic systems within which to order their lives. But "draining the swamp" of Middle East terrorism, even if only in Iraq, would be a long-term and costly business. Ideally the Wolfowitzian model would involve U.S. personnel in root and branch reform of Iraq's governing structures and state-society relations. This could take anything up to a generation.

President Bush's position on this, the defining issue of his foreign policy, appears ambiguous. His views on the use of U.S. troops has in the past appeared to mirror the military's own distaste for state building. In the presidential campaign and again in the run-up to the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, he made it clear on numerous occasions that he did not want U.S. troops to be deeply involved in rebuilding the country.[21] However, in more recent speeches, Bush appears to have shifted to a more liberal approach, committing American military power, by implication at least, to reforming the internal political structures of postcolonial states and thence building a new liberal world order.[22]

The evolution and resolution of this most difficult but most important aspect of the Bush doctrine will take place in Iraq. If successful it could result in the imposition of a coherent model for post–Cold War international relations across the world.[23] If it fails, the result could be a rapid curtailment of America's international ambitions and a drastic scaling back of its commitments. The removal of Saddam Hussein's regime and the growth of a stable and hopefully democratic government in its place would send a message to the rest of the developing world, not only about the lengths Washington would go to achieve its core foreign policy goals, but also the type of international system those goals were aimed at creating. To quote the President himself, "a new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region."[24]

But the removal of Saddam Hussein was the beginning, not the culmination, of a long and very uncertain process of reform. It was also the continuation of a failed effort to create a modern liberal state on the part of the world's leading hegemon as part of a new world order. The nature of and reaction to an American presence in Iraq over the next decade will, to a large degree, determine the type of state that emerges in the aftermath of any future war and the role of the United States in the international system for the next generation.