



The Perfect Debacle

On present evidence, barring a miraculous turnabout, the odds are strong that America's Iraqi war will be remembered as one of those rare episodes in military history: a perfect debacle. Even the war's oft-touted successes—the swift fall of Baghdad, the promise of free elections, and the projected war crimes trial of Saddam Hussein—possess, on closer scrutiny, a punishing downside. President George W. Bush's repeated claim that the world is safer thanks to Operation Iraqi Freedom is mocked by the dismal daily toll within Iraq, by the ever-gathering threat of Islamic terrorism, and the emergence of Iran with its nuclear ambitions as the conflict's unintended regional winner. Or, in the words of George F. Will, a respected voice on the right: "Who believes there are now fewer terrorists in the world than there were three years ago?"

The conflict's paradoxes were mirrored in the strange American visit of Iraq's interim prime minister Ayad Allawi, a former Baathist, ex-neurologist, and erstwhile partner of the Central Intelligence Agency. He arrived in late September, the same day an American hostage was beheaded, the same week 14 U.S. Marines were killed, and the same month that the hundredth foreign contract worker had been abducted. City after Iraqi city had become a no-go zone for U.S. military personnel, including the central areas of Faluja, Ramadi, and Samarra, and the sacred cities of Karbala and Najaf. In Baghdad, Americans inhabiting the fortress-like Green Zone could venture only at their peril into the densely populated eastern neighborhood known as Sadr City.

Consider the symbolic import of the Green Zone, with its 14-foot concrete barrier, its barbed wire fences and its guard towers manned by snipers. An estimated 12,000 unfortunate Iraqis live within its walls, meaning they are searched whenever they leave or enter, and are allowed but one Iraqi visitor at a time. The mayor of Baghdad, along with Washington's handpicked interim regime, have pleaded for a reduction in the size and scope of this humiliating enclave, but so far in vain. Nevertheless Dr. Allawi assured the United Nations and the U.S. Congress that Iraqi insurgents were on the defensive and that calm has prevailed in all but four or five of Iraq's eighteen provinces. As to the violence, he insisted that it merely confirmed the desperation of the diehard resistance, or, in the tart paraphrase of the *New York Times's* Maureen Dowd, "The worse things got over there, the better they really were."

A judgment different than Dr. Allawi's is offered by Richard Beeston, diplomatic editor of the Murdoch-owned London *Times*. As he reported in the *Spectator*, a Conservative weekly: "The brutality of this struggle, which seems likely to intensify as the date approaches for the first elections in January, completely dominates working life. Correspondents no longer bother writing about the failure of reconstruction, electricity cuts or even attacks on American troops.... In the chaos of post-Saddam Iraq, there are few certainties. But now, on my sixth visit to Baghdad since the war, one simple rule seems valid: things only get worse."

Wresting defeat from the jaws of victory has been the hallmark of this war-of-choice. The American-led coalition demonstrated its high-tech supremacy in its swift, triumphant

conquest of Baghdad in April 2003. From the start, there were warning omens. Because Saddam's armies, including the elite Republican Guard, all but melted away, there was no final battle or formal surrender to seal the outcome. In earlier U.S. victories, losers traditionally handed over their swords—an exception being the Allied failure in World War I to compel the Kaiser's generals to thus acknowledge defeat. It was a lapse that fathered the legend that civilians lost the war, a myth that Hitler lethally exploited.

After Baghdad's fall, and following the oft-broadcast toppling of Saddam Hussein's effigy, the looting began. It developed that the Pentagon had no real plan for occupying Iraq, much less an exit strategy. Baghdad's bewildered inhabitants could not understand why U.S. Marines simply looked on as their national museum was sacked, their university library vandalized, and government offices stripped of everything portable. Power failed, faucets went dry, hospitals lacked rudimentary supplies. Since in Iraqi eyes, America had shown its omnipotence, this could not be an accident. It had to be deliberate punishment. Thus the very a lopsided scale of the victory had its backlash. As hard for Iraqis to fathom was the ensuing demobilization of Iraq's armed forces, thereby dispersing demoralized and jobless conscripts, trained in using weapons, along with an officer corps eager to claim it had never been defeated.

This was the seedbed of Iraq's armed insurgency. That the rebellion's leadership is dispersed became apparent after the hunting-down of Saddam Hussein in December of last year. Despite his capture, the number of daily attacks on coalition personnel did not diminish, as U.S. officials expected, but doubled. And both the interim government and its jittery U.S. patrons now cope with a lose-lose dilemma in preparing the trials of Saddam and his senior lieutenants. If the trials are truly open and defendants permitted to make their case, they can disclose shaming details of Washington's cold-blooded tilt to Baghdad during the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq war. Saddam was a monster we once petted. On the other hand, if the defense is muzzled and public access limited, the proceedings will be discredited as victor's justice.

The same no-win choices confront occupation authorities in holding the promised national elections in January. Should persistent turbulence compel the cancellation of the vote, it would be a humiliating confession of impotence. But if the voting takes place in only part of the country (as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld suggests will happen), then the results will be tainted. In any case, the vote is likely to be plebiscite on the U.S. occupation that moderates are unlikely to win.

A discouraging portent is the mass exodus of Iraq's long-established Christian community—the largest outflow since Iraq's once-flourishing Jewish community took flight in the 1950s. The Christians have long been a mainstay of Iraq's moderate-minded professional class, which as a whole has been stunned by the deepening chaos. According to a *Wall Street Journal* account, as many as 30,000 Christians have fled Iraq since a rash of church bombings in August. Iraq's 1987 census recorded 1.4 million Christians, and the present estimate is that 850,000 remain, with the total steadily falling. "With elections just months away," the *Journal* reports (September 27), "the diminution of the Christian community raises the risk that Iraq's next government will be dominated by fundamentalist political parties that support policies—from the imposition of Islamic law to the continued existence of well-armed sectarian militias—that could be a recipe for further violence and political instability."

Still, of all the unforeseen consequences in Operation Iraqi Freedom, the most worrying is the war's unbidden gainer: Iran. With its 180 million people and its all-but-open border with Iraq, Iran is now the region's likely major power. The spread of jihadist turbulence

through much of the Islamic world, from Indonesia to Bangladesh, from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia, has given the ayatollahs of Iran a strong strategic hand. Their authoritarian rule has prevailed at home, as their erstwhile challengers have lost control of Parliament and the reform-minded president Mohammad Khatami is nearing the end of his constitutional second term. Abroad, as the spiritual homeland of the Shiite wing of Islam, Iran can speak for minority Shiites throughout the region, and in Iraq can plausibly expect a Shiite majority finally to attain power. American neoconservatives who foresaw the emergence of a stable, secular democracy in Iraq now face the likely reality of an elected Iraqi theocracy, tied by faith to that other charter member of the “axis of evil,” Iran.

In an in-depth report (September 4), the *Economist*, a pro-war British weekly finds that Tehran’s bravado has been heightened by the windfall of soaring oil prices (another byproduct of Operation Iraqi Freedom): “As the second-biggest exporter in OPEC, Iran has benefited hugely from the high oil prices of the past five years, with GDP growing at about 6 percent a year. The boom could hardly have been better timed. Every year since 2000, the labour market has had to accommodate some 1 million first-time job seekers. The government’s response has been to prop up loss-making factories, launch infrastructure projects and dole out cash to private companies that hire workers. In this way, much oil wealth has been frittered away, but the spectre of mass unemployment has receded.”

By the same token, Iran now has ample resources to support its progress toward acquiring nuclear weapons. According to Henry Sokolski, director of the Non-Proliferation Policy Education Center, it is almost too late to stop Iran. The ayatollahs, including the reputedly moderate President Khatami, are demanding recognition of Iran’s right to pursue uranium enrichment, thereby exploiting a loophole in the Non-Proliferation Treaty to which Iran is a party. Because of this, Sokolski writes in the *Wall Street Journal* (September 27), America and Europe must challenge Iran’s arguments: “If we don’t, even worse awaits us. The Saudis are interested in importing nuclear arms from China or Pakistan. Syria has begun serious nuclear research. Iraq retains most of its nuclear scientists. Egypt is planning to build reactors...and Algeria has just upgraded a very large research reactor in a remote location, surrounding it with air defenses. If we don’t want them to follow in Iran’s footsteps, we’ll have to tackle what we’ve avoided for decades—clarifying which activities are protected under the NPT and which ones are too close to bomb-making to be regarded as being peaceful.”

In sum, no matter who wins America’s election, the next president will need to address the credible contention of nonnuclear states that possessing an atom bomb is the surest protection against the next war-of-choice by the American Behemoth. Worst of all, I can see no honorable or sensible exodus from this perfect debacle. Having broken Iraq, using Secretary of State Colin Powell’s Pottery Barn phrase, we own it. ●

—Karl E. Meyer
October 7, 2004