



Be Careful What You Wish For

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

The Bush administration has joined those calling for more international troops in Iraq as a consensus-building approach to stabilizing the region. It is unlikely, however, that Iraqis will easily accept the authority of foreign troops—especially foreign Muslim troops.

In the Democratic and Republican stampede to find foreign troops to join American GIs in Iraq, virtually no regard has been paid to whether the deployment of these soldiers is wise given the history, culture, and prejudices of the Iraqi people. Both Secretary of State Colin Powell and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld seem to believe that the United States and Iraq would be much better off if a wide array of foreign soldiers—especially Muslims from such countries as Turkey, Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—backed up American GIs. Secretary Powell's views, of course, have been quite constant. He has essentially mirrored the opinion of the Democratic foreign-policy elite, which shares, on most issues, the preferences and reflexes of the Foreign Service.

This professional foreign-policy crowd wants to internationalize the conflict because liberal internationalists define success first and foremost through an institutionalized multilateral process. Consensus-building for them is in itself a moral good. Their generally Eurocentric liberal-left disposition also makes it difficult for them to see success in any undertaking that seriously distances the western Europeans from Americans, as have both of America's Iraq wars. The truths that Osama bin Laden articulated in his manifestos—that America under President Bill Clinton had

been, in the holy warriors' eyes, afraid and in retreat—understandably do not sit happily with Democrats. They would much rather believe that American assertiveness and unilateralism provoke ill will. Most of the Democratic foreign-policy elite would have instinctively inclined toward the Brazilian U.N. diplomat Sergio Vieira de Mello when he remarked, a few days before he was slain by a suicide bomber, that the Iraqi people viewed the United Nations positively, but not the Americans.

Foreign troops in Iraq will, the Democrats fervently hope, give us "cover" from increasing Iraqi violence and discontent. They will make an American occupation of Iraq seem more legitimate to the world and, ipso facto, more legitimate to Iraqis. International cooperation is thus pragmatically and spiritually the only way out for America in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Sophisticated Arab-Sunni Insurgency

What the Right believes about Iraq and foreign troops is much less intellectually consistent and generated more by panic. The recent bombings in Baghdad and Najaf have convulsed the Defense Department and the White House. Slowly but surely, the U.S. military and its civilian leadership have begun to contemplate an ugly possible truth: that most Iraqi Arab Sunnis, who were the power base for Saddam Hussein's rule, do not want to let go of Sunni domination of Iraqi society. It had

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been hoped in Washington that Arab Sunnis, who, after all, had also suffered under Saddam's totalitarianism, would not actively support former Baathists and other potentially violent anti-American forces.

However, it appears that Arab Sunnis in Iraq have not collectively and in decisive numbers rejected the past and embraced a nonviolent path to some kind of democratic order—as have the vast majority of Kurds and Shiites. An increasingly sophisticated insurgency by these anti-American Sunni forces seems to be under way. This insurgency may prove short-lived; it certainly will if an overwhelming majority of Iraqi Sunnis reject the violence of the Baathists, the native jihadists, and the foreign holy warriors crossing the Syrian and Iranian borders. Hundreds of foreign holy warriors could not clandestinely live for long in Iraq's Sunni belt without a significant number of the surrounding population acquiescing to their presence. One of the main reasons why these same foreign holy warriors have not been crossing the Iran-Iraq border in the Shiite regions of the country is surely that the Shiites are hostile to their intentions.

The next few months will tell us whether the Sunnis have decisively separated themselves from the Shiites and Kurds. If they have, we will have no choice but to begin serious counterinsurgency operations throughout the troublesome Arab-Sunni zones. Counterinsurgency actions always require lots of low-tech manpower. The American military should have swept through the "Sunni triangle" immediately after the fall of Baghdad, when the ex-Baathists and Sunni fundamentalists were more disorganized than they are now. Hundreds, if not thousands, of ex-Baathists and virulently anti-American Sunni fundamentalists should have been put in detention camps. (Iraq's Kurds and Shiites, about 80 percent of the country's population, would have cheered.) The military brass in Iraq, like many of the State Department civilians first sent to retired Lt. General Jay M. Garner's Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, favored retaining the services of senior Baathists and so failed to move decisively against the remnants of Saddam's regime, believing they were no longer a serious threat. Diehard Baathist military and internal-security officers were allowed to live unharassed. The Pentagon and the State Department must now compensate for past mistakes.

Rumsfeld and the White House hope to do so, it seems, by introducing more foreign troops. Rumsfeld, a forceful advocate of doing a lot with a small, up-to-date army, probably realizes that counterinsurgency operations may threaten the transformation of his forces. It is difficult

to emphasize high-tech, high-impact, and mobility—all worthwhile goals for America's military—when the battlefield at hand demands old-fashioned, labor-intensive, and very personal combat. More foreign troops deployed to low-danger police operations in theory would free up American soldiers for conflict in the Sunni triangle. It also might, in theory, allow more U.S. soldiers to go on R&R. Also, Rumsfeld, who has probably juxtaposed the word "democracy" with "Iraq" less often than any other senior U.S. official, may well see the future of his transformed U.S. military as strategically more important than the future composition of the Iraqi government.

Military brass such as Colin Powell did not want to fight this war. They are probably thinking more about an exit strategy for U.S. troops than they are about internal Iraqi politics. Getting more foreign troops in—handing security for Najaf, the seat of the Iraqi Shiite clergy, to the Spaniards—may cause them little anxiety. Ditto for Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Moroccan troops. For the Pentagon and the White House (unlike the State Department and the Democratic party elite), the use of foreign troops in Iraq is just a pragmatic question. Calling up more National Guard units seems to be out of the question; calling up foreigners is not.

Damaging Pragmatism

It is just this type of pragmatism, however, that could irretrievably damage the Bush administration in Iraq and reverse the enormous progress it has made against terrorism. It has been possible—up until now—to find many Pentagon officials who realized, for example, that deploying French or Russian troops to Iraq would probably be highly counterproductive given the pro-Saddam reputation both have among the Shiites. Neither Frenchmen nor Russians are viewed in Iraq or anywhere else in the Middle East as harbingers of democracy.

Neither is the United Nations at all liked in Iraq. Indeed, many Arab Sunnis, Arab Shiites, and Kurds, for a variety of reasons, hate the institution with intensity. Once upon a time, the "right wing" of the Bush administration appeared to be sufficiently attuned to internal Iraqi dynamics to know that having the United Nations on its side was not necessarily beneficial. Many Pentagon and White House officials used to be keenly aware of the need to repair the image of American power in the Muslim Middle East. The war in Iraq was for them never just about finding weapons of mass destruction. Confronting the central tenet of bin Ladenism—that America is weak

and cannot hold its ground against true believers willing to die for the cause—helped animate the administration’s fighting spirit after victory in Afghanistan. There is good reason to believe that here, too, the “right wing” of the administration is going wobbly. Negotiating with the French, Germans, and Russians at the United Nations immediately after the bombings in Baghdad and Najaf, as the administration did, clearly sends a signal to all but the blind and deaf that the United States cannot take the heat. In the Middle East for the first time since Saddam’s fall in April, you can hear the intelligentsia loudly (and hopefully) speculate about the United States’ abandoning Iraq.

Why Seek Muslim Troops?

The Bush administration’s embrace of odd, counterproductive notions is nowhere more evident than in its energetic pursuit of foreign Muslim troops for Iraq. The reasoning for these deployments—which probably will not happen unless the United States gets the consent of the French, Germans, and Russians at the U.N.—apparently is that Iraqi Muslims would respect foreign Muslim troops more than they respect American soldiers. Leaving aside why in the world the Bush administration would want to deploy Muslim soldiers from nondemocratic countries to Iraq, the Muslim-likes-Muslim sentiment behind this argument is a myth. Middle Eastern history teaches the opposite. Since the dawn of the nineteenth-century, Muslim states have shown much greater confidence in the professionalism of Western soldiers than of fellow Muslims. Rulers and intellectuals may say nasty things about Westerners publicly, but privately they have consistently shown that they feel safer with infidels than they do with their own. After the first Gulf War, the Persian Gulf states made a big show of wanting the Egyptians and the Syrians, not the Americans, to assume the responsibility for their security. No Egyptian or Syrian soldier ever landed. The sheikhs and the intellectuals may hate us in their hearts; but they absolutely do not want to

entrust their property, wives, and daughters to foreign Arab Muslims.

Shiite Iraqis are particularly conscious that their Arab and Muslim brethren did not support the war against Saddam. Indeed, Iraqis watched on Arab satellite television with bitter enmity and black humor the antiwar demonstrations throughout the Middle East (and in Europe).

It beggars the imagination to suggest that an Iraqi truck driver on the Amman-Baghdad highway will feel more secure with Moroccans or Bangladeshis doing road checks. It also beggars the imagination to believe that Shiite clerics will feel better knowing that Sunni Pakistanis—who are just a bit below Saudis in the Shi-ite pantheon of anti-Shiite Sunni fundamentalists—are patrolling their country. And nobody in Iraq is going to feel good about the Turks arriving in force. There is an argument for having the Turks assume certain security tasks in the Arab Sunni belt—Arab Sunnis would probably fear Turkish soldiers far more than they do Americans—but the negatives with the Kurds, who are not fond of the Turks, and the Shiite clergy, who strongly reject Turkish secularism, easily outweigh the positives with the Arab Sunnis.

None of what the Bush administration is planning to do with foreign soldiers in Iraq makes much sense. Of course, the administration may luck out. The Sunni Arab insurrection in the central lands may blow over without ever testing the mettle and wisdom of the foreign troops spread throughout the country. Maybe no poorly trained, vodka-fond Ukrainian soldier will take liberties with a Shiite lass. Perhaps the foreign soldiers will follow American orders well and interact with the natives in the exemplary way that most American soldiers have done. It is possible. However, if you do not believe in luck in the Middle East, it might be wise to back the French. France’s great-gaming and obduracy may just block a U.N. mandate that would unleash more foreign soldiers on Iraqi soil. It would be a delightful irony if Jacques Chirac prevented President Bush from putting the wrong foot forward.