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On the Issues

In Iraq with the Coalition of the Willing

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Although the American media seems to focus exclusively on American—and occasionally British—troops in Iraq, the coalition does include soldiers from Central and Eastern European nations, among others. The difficulties of forming ad hoc international coalitions for military operations, however, may lead the United States to rely in the future upon associations like NATO, which are already experienced in coordinating military operations.

"Please fasten your seatbelts and point your machine guns out of the plane," requested the stewardess matter of factly. She was charged with the safety of our Kuwait-bound Boeing 757, which was taking off from snowbound Wroclaw. This was the city, once known by its German name of Breslau, that famously stood up to the Red Army almost as long as Berlin did. You can still see a swath of destruction in the middle of town, where an airport was carved out so that the Nazi *Gauleiter* could flee in time. The night before, I had stayed in a hotel that Hitler once patronized; from a balcony under my window, he saluted adoring crowds.

Poland has produced more history than can be consumed locally—so now we were going outside our borders to make it. I had joined 147 soldiers in fresh uniforms, on their way to relieve the first echelon of a 2,600-man Polish brigade in an international division of 9,500 troops, operating under Polish command, in the Central South sector of Iraq. The unit is perhaps as pure a manifestation of a "coalition of the willing" as we are ever likely to see: a group of countries that backed their words with action, without waiting for another UN resolution.

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The morning after we arrived, the distant chant of the muezzin woke me at the gates of ancient Babylon—or, to be precise, on top of ancient Babylon, at the gates of Nebuchadnezzar's palace, where Belshazzar's biblical feast took place. Mud splashing under my feet on the way to a makeshift toilet, I took a freezing morning shower not a hundred yards from the throne room where Alexander was supposed to have died on his way back from conquering Afghanistan and India. Our encampment has, in fact, saved the site from the comprehensive looting that has ravaged other places: Indeed, there may be a connection between antiquities thieves and terrorism. Archeologists on the divisional staff I was to meet speculated that it was no coincidence that the Italian carabinieri attacked in the horrific explosion at Nasiriyah in November had arrested a group of looters the week before.

At the commanders' morning update, in a building that previously belonged to Saddam's security detail, U.S. Army jargon mixed with a cacophony of languages. We were on Alert C, Dress Code J that morning: "Intelligence and incidents indicate that coalition forces will [be] or already are being attacked," and weapons should be fully loaded outside the base. "EPWs have indicated likely VBIEDs along MSR but CAPs say NSTR." Translation: Enemy Prisoners of War indicate possible car bombs (Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Devices) along the road

from Baghdad (Main Supply Route) but our helicopters (Combat Air Patrols) have seen nothing yet (Nothing Significant To Report). Try following that when spoken in a thick Latvian accent. Somehow, within sight of the remains of the Tower of Babel, the language barriers seem appropriate.

Following the U.S. media, you might think that only American forces are stationed in Iraq, with perhaps a sprinkling of Brits in Basra. It is therefore something of a shock to find oneself among a multiethnic crowd, reminiscent more of a UN general assembly than what is supposed to be an exercise in unilateralism. Immaculately groomed Spaniards rub shoulders with compact Thais in Rambo-like bandannas. Brisk Bangladeshis serve perfectly decent food at the canteen. Squat Mongols seem to strike primal fear in the locals. And everybody stares after the tall Lithuanian girls, who look particularly fetching in tight desert uniforms. Altogether, twenty-five nations make up the division, and new recruits from Georgia and South Korea are on their way. Among them are Iraqis too, invariably friendly, performing mostly clerical tasks. Still, one cannot help wondering whether they are simply glad to be rid of Saddam and to have jobs, or whether the disarming smiles are a veil behind which enemies conduct surveillance.

Poles and Shias

Poles have proven a lucky choice for manning the command, quite apart from their contribution of troops. Most senior Polish officers speak Russian from Soviet days and therefore get by with former Warsaw Pact nations. At the same time, they already know enough English to talk to the Westerners. One such multilingual officer is the new division commander, Maj. Gen. Mieczyslaw Bieniek. He is wiry and decisive, a soldier's soldier, with 2,700 parachute jumps to his name.

General Bienek's first operational order was to get tough with the insurgents: Soldiers will not only respond when fired upon, but will pursue until those firing are apprehended or killed. Such an order is tougher to implement than it seems when it involves twenty-five militaries with twenty-five subcultures and twenty-five capitals to coordinate with. (For example, one contingent serves in Iraq on the condition that its soldiers do not have to leave fortified bases.) General Bienek has to remember a matrix of political considerations and remain constantly aware that many of the nations signed up for a peacekeeping operation, not a guerrilla war. A casualty here can cause a government to fall on the other side of the globe.

With the Shias in the international division's zone generally friendly to the ousting of Saddam, the sector has been relatively quiet thus far. But it is no exaggeration to say that, with new political developments, the fate of the U.S. effort in Iraq may well be decided here. It is not just that the area covers vital supply lines between Kuwait and Baghdad and includes the Shia shrines of Najaf and Kerbala. Its political significance lies in the numbers: it is home to over five million Shias, including the man who has emerged as the voice of Iraq's largest community, the grand ayatollah Ali al Sistani. When he called for demonstrations—peaceful, so far—all over central and southern Iraq, the international division was responsible for monitoring the situation. The Shia pilgrimage in March, which—with a few million expected to participate—will be the largest public gathering of the year, is also the international coalition's responsibility. If the Shia were to stir up anything like the level of violence that continues to plague the coalition in some Sunni areas, the operation would become unsustainable.

The Shias have rather cleverly interpreted President Bush's call for democratic institutions, and are now demanding one-man, one-vote elections. But this is a tougher decision than it seems, as the international division well knows. There is a psychological-operations unit on the divisional staff, which monitors local media, conducts propaganda campaigns, and carries out opinion polls. If an election were held today, they told me, fundamentalist parties would win hands down. With religious parties well motivated and well financed on one hand, Baathist old boys still sticking together on the other, and moderate new parties fragmented, one thing seems certain: there will be plenty of conflict and strife to go around. Will the allies cope? It is hard for a Solidarity man like me to say so, but the division should probably be preemptively strengthened with riot police. Soldiers are notoriously inept at dealing with civil disturbances: after all, they can only shoot, either in the air or at people. If civil disobedience is to come into vogue and casualties are to be kept to a minimum, authorities will need forces that can respond at intermediate levels of force.

Nevertheless, the division seems to have accumulated a store of goodwill. I went on midday patrol outside the base. Afternoons are safer than mornings because rebels set their bombs at night and detonate them early. All it takes is an artillery shell or two strapped to the back of a road barrier or buried in the sand. The latest device is said

to be a false section of curbside, hollowed and stuffed with explosives, impossible to detect. What is remarkable, however, is that most IEDs (improvised explosive devices) in fact get disarmed. Whether out of sympathy or self-interest, Iraqis themselves usually point them out to the coalition soldiers.

Iraqis seem to accept the foreign presence. I saw a brigadier general negotiate with the acting governor over the time of the curfew, and the placement of one of the bases. They were mutually respectful, professional. Perhaps the biggest success is the twenty-eight thousand Iraqi policemen whom the division has so far managed to train, since it is the Iraqi policemen—under-equipped, sometimes with barely a blue shirt to distinguish them from civilians—who man the most exposed roadblocks and who die in greatest numbers when terrorists strike.

Relations should improve thanks to the flood of American money as well, money that is being channeled into reconstruction projects, earmarked exclusively for Iraqi companies. A few good decisions, such as live television filming of coalition commanders giving Iraqi contractors wads of cash to improve amenities—are also helping to spread goodwill. It would be even better if the deliberations of transitional Iraqi bodies, and their meetings with coalition officials, were also transmitted live. In societies that have only recently emerged from dictatorship, more transparency would provide a lesson in the decision-making process, and curtail some of the wilder conspiracy theories that inevitably circulate in the absence of reliable information.

Socialism in One Country?

Here, as in other parts of the country, it would also help if the Bush administration stopped upholding socialism. We have all heard about the famous electricity outages and about how the failure to restore the power supply has undercut Iraqis' faith in the U.S. effort. Indeed, it is true that almost a year into the occupation, power goes on and off all the time, even in Baghdad. This will be felt more acutely again in the spring and summer when heat, power consumption, and tempers rise. It is something of a shock to discover the real reason for the crisis: electricity is free in Iraq. Rather wonderfully, people have meters in their houses, but bills just do not come. Whether it was a piece of Saddam's welfare state, or part of the UN oil-for-food program, is lost in the mists of time. But the upshot is that—surprise, surprise—when the electricity is working, all lights and appliances blaze, which only leads to more power shortages. This pattern is hardly novel: in Communist times, Poles used to open windows when the apartment became too hot, instead of turning down the heat. But when the Marxist nirvana fell apart, and energy prices became real, consumption dropped by a third—and shortages have since turned into overabundance. Iraqi reconstruction would be better off if someone in the Green Zone took a seminar on pricing mechanisms or thought about the Polish example.

Despite these foibles, is this still a model coalition of the willing at work? If nothing else, the partnership has certainly spread the cost of stabilizing Iraq. If, according to the Congressional Budget Office, it costs up to $29 billion per year to keep the U.S. military in Iraq—roughly $223,000 per American soldier—then the 9,500 man international division is saving U.S. taxpayers up to $2.1 billion a year. And beyond the economic benefits lie the military and diplomatic ones: the division's officers uniformly value the experience of working with Americans on the battlefield, and many soldiers—happy to be making good money—want to sign up for another tour of duty.

Yet a serious misunderstanding may be creeping in between the United States and its allies. They did not come to Iraq out of commitment to joint war aims—none of them felt threatened by Saddam Hussein—but because they judged that it was better to curry favor with Americans than to provoke them. NATO candidate countries sent troops as their entry tickets: Ukrainians, to mollify the administration for President Kuchma's past transgressions; Bulgarians, because they expected that their country's huge Iraqi debts would be repaid; others, because they want the United States to maintain bases in their country or to establish new ones. Poles threw their lot in with the United States partly out of gratitude for Ronald Reagan's liberating them from Communism and partly because President Bush made them believe they would be America's new special ally in Europe. They have observed that special allies—such as Israel or Turkey—get a lot out of befriending the United States. It was worth standing up to France and Germany, Poles reckoned, because America would want to show that it pays to be an ally rather than a competitor. The government sold the case for sending troops to Iraq to a skeptical Polish public by hinting that U.S. military assistance would increase, that Polish companies would benefit from reconstruction contracts, and that perhaps even visa requirements to visit the United States (Americans don't need them to travel to most of Central Europe) would be abolished.

So far, they feel shortchanged. Reconstruction contracts and the recovery of Iraqi debts are still mostly a mirage. Poland has had to slow down its own military modernization programs to finance the Iraq operation, to the tune of $200 million per year. President Kwasniewski has just returned from Washington without a deal on visas. The Polish media are full of commentary in which "asymmetry" in the country's relationship with the United States is the favorite catchphrase. "We buy F-16s, and in return we can send troops to Iraq," is a joke making the rounds in parliament. Sometimes, little things provoke the most irritation: Troops in Babylon have noticed that postcards depicting Operation Iraqi Freedom, for sale in the U.S. Army shop, bear the flags of only the United States and the United Kingdom. Adding insult to injury, they learned last month that the next time they go to the United States, they will not only need to have visas, they will be fingerprinted at the airport as well. Clumsily rescinding previous commitments, a high-ranking U.S. official has now told the Poles to expect no reward, as they "sent troops to Iraq in their own national interest." A French diplomat I spoke to could not hide the gleam in his eye when he said, "Now you are learning what it's like when you please the Americans too early."

Nevertheless, the coalition of the willing in Iraq is working, and may yet be crucial in steering Iraq toward a successful transition. It is, however, a somewhat opaque, fragile instrument, whose major advantage—its international character—is also a handicap in military operations. Managing allies—with their competing expectations, cultural attitudes, and egos—is a tricky business, requiring subtlety and infinite patience. The United States must decide whether it is more efficient to put together such coalitions ad hoc, with all the nuisance of organizing afresh, or to turn to associations such as NATO, for which coordinating military coalitions is a daily routine.

America's dilemma may be that it is so powerful that it feels it can do any military job on its own, and that, therefore, paying much attention to allies is not worth the trouble. Many coalition members, however, don't feel like allies: Instead of having been fully informed about the war's true aims up front, and instead of being given meaningful chances to form coalition policy, they are asked to march in lockstep with the United States and follow her military and geopolitical lead. In this regard, they feel more like military subcontractors—in which case, they would at least prefer to be paid as such. Yet the United States is not so wealthy as to be able to pay for their assistance on a subcontracting basis. If Iraq is a lesson in using coalitions of the willing, the lesson may be that they can work—but that America cannot afford them.