

## Iraq: The End or The Beginning?

By William R. Polk

Triumphant in his apparent victory, President George Bush appeared on May 3 off the California coast on the U.S. Navy Aircraft Carrier Abraham Lincoln before television cameras. It was a carefully crafted “photo opportunity” to enable the president to declare the Iraq campaign a complete success.

But is it? With shock and awe, the American forces smashed the army of Saddam Husain. This was certain before the first shot was fired. There was no way Iraq – or any other country in the world with the possible exception of China and Russia – could have endured the onslaught of the American campaign. Western news reporters, most of whom were well “embedded” with the advancing troops or safely ensconced in Kuwait and Qatar, kept asking where the Iraqi divisions were. The answer was simple. Most of them were dead. Before the land forces arrived at the scene of battle, the Iraqi divisions had been pounded into oblivion. No one knows how many thousands were killed.

That Baghdad did not copy Stalingrad should not have surprised any visitor on the eve of the war. While I walked its streets, I found few preparations for defense. Almost no sandbags, little attempt to form partisan groups, no practice for guerrilla warfare. I concluded that Baghdad and other Iraqi cities would crumble under the ferocious air assault and that people would, initially, seek just to save their lives.

But did this ferocious onslaught end the war?

Having known Iraq for decades and have immersed myself in its history, I warned that it did not. In these pages, I predicted that there would be a period of apparent calm

while people tended their wounded, dug out their shattered houses, buried their dead and scraped together the means to feed themselves.

Then, I predicted, as Iraqis looked back upon the war, reflected on their pains and losses, lamented their dead and began to feel more secure of their own lives, at least some of them would vent their feelings in attacks on the occupying forces. I suggested we could expect urban guerrilla warfare within about six months.

I was optimistic. It has already started.

When General Jay Garner, the man appointed to oversee Iraqi reconstruction, finally arrived in Baghdad on April 21 he was able to move only in a heavily guarded armored caravan to inspect damaged buildings. Sobered by his visit, Garner predicted that “repair” would last far longer and be far harder than he had been led to expect.

He was certainly right. Baghdad’s streets are still choked with uncollected garbage, electricity and running water come only sporadically, graveyards are literally overflowing. Food is short since merchants fear looters while hired guards are in danger of being shot by American soldiers.

Meanwhile, confusion is growing. The entire Iraqi administration, tainted by its Ba’ath affiliation, has disappeared. No policemen, no mailmen, no garbage collectors, no organization of any kind. In the vacuum, individuals and groups are proclaiming themselves authorities and setting up little governments. The Americans have just arrested a self-proclaimed new “mayor” of Baghdad and chased away his followers. Bands of Shi’is are asserting even in predominantly Sunni areas the power they have lacked for years. They are doing so, to the anger of the Americans, on the model inspired by the Muslim theocracy of Iran. Kurds are consolidating their control of parts of

northern Iraq previously predominantly Arab. An arms bazaar does a brisk business in central Baghdad and throughout the Iraq's villages and towns. People are frightened – and angry.

Meanwhile also, confusion reigns among the Americans. The returned exile and “anointed of the Pentagon,” Ahmad Chalabi, who has appointed his own “mayor” of Baghdad, has been at least partially disavowed by the American appointee, General Jay Garner. Garner's own authority has been challenged by the military commander, General David McKiernan, who proclaimed publicly that he, not Garner, was the “head authority in Iraq.” And Garner, who apparently tried to prevent publication of McKiernan's statement, was told a few days later that he will shortly be replaced by a new man.

As described by one American official, who refused to be named, “what we have done is import mafias into Baghdad.” In an echo of Afghanistan, these, often-armed groups who claim American patronage, are seizing public buildings and private houses. There they traffic in bogus permits, peddle non-existent jobs or extort protection money.

Fearful of such groups, at least some Iraqis are anxious that the Americans not leave. But, as in Afghanistan, attacks on American troops have already begun. In the Sunni town of Falluja the last week of April, American troops shot dead 18 or more anti-American protesters.

In Afghanistan there has been no serious attempt, and little money, to rebuild and repair. Many believe that a major reason is that Afghanistan has nothing to contribute. Iraq can contribute oil. At least that part of Iraq, the oil infrastructure, will quickly be rebuilt and the scramble to profit from it began even before the shooting war.

Getting the oil flowing again will provide jobs and income for some Iraqis, but for a far larger group it will bring memories of the decades of British “oil imperialism” and Iraqi humiliation. Thus, as the daily requirements of food, water, shelter, and decent respect for the dead are assuaged, nationalism will reassert itself. Iraqis are more likely to feel anger than gratitude to the foreigners among them. The more efficient the rebuilding, the sooner the anger will come. History teaches us that people rebel not when they are starving but when their basic needs are met.

Alas, history is little read. One note from the past warns of what might be America’s future. After he returned to England, Colonel T.E. Lawrence (“Lawrence of Arabia”) wrote in 1920 when Britain was trying to consolidate its own conquest of Iraq, that “The people of England have been led in Mesopotamia into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity and honour. They have been tricked into it by a steady withholding of information. The Baghdad communiqués are belated, insincere, incomplete...We are today not far from a disaster...Our government is worse than the old Turkish system. They kept fourteen thousand local conscripts embodied, and killed a yearly average of two hundred Arabs in maintaining order. We keep ninety thousand men, with aeroplanes, armoured cars, gunboats, and armoured trains. We have killed about ten thousand Arabs in this rising this summer. We cannot hope to maintain such an average: it is a poor country, sparsely peopled...”

It should be sobering to learn that Lawrence was describing the first of the three British invasions of Iraq in the century. This could prove a very long war.

© William R. Polk, May 4, 2003

William R. Polk is a director of the W.P. Carey Foundation. A graduate of Harvard (BA and PhD) and Oxford (BA and MA), he taught Middle Eastern politics and history and Arabic literature at Harvard University until 1961 when President Kennedy appointed him a Member of the Policy Planning Council of the U.S. Department of State. There, he was in charge of planning American policy for most of the Islamic world until 1965 when he became professor of history at the University of Chicago and founded its Middle Eastern Studies Center. Later he also became president of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. Among his many books are *The United States and the Arab World*; *The Elusive Peace: The Middle East in the Twentieth Century*; *Neighbors and Strangers: The Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs*; *Polk's Folly, An American Family History* and *The Birth of America*.