

## American Options in Iraq

By

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Official inquiries have verified what independent observers have long said: the invasion of Iraq was not justified; a small, remote and poor country, Iraq posed no threat to the United States. As in the Tonkin Gulf issue during the Vietnam war, the Congress and public were misled. Those of us who said so from the beginning are tempted now to say "I told you so" but that indulgence doesn't lead anywhere. When I was the member of the U.S. State Department's Policy Planning Council responsible for the Middle East, I had the duty not to lament past mistakes but to identify what could be done to pick up the pieces where they then lay. With the elections behind us and the Bush administration in office for the next four years, an intelligent choice among current options in Iraq becomes even more urgent. Now as a private citizen, I ask what can be done with the current reality?

Iraq is in a terrible condition, its society has been torn apart, scores of thousands have been killed and even more wounded, its infrastructure has been shattered, dreadful hatreds have been generated. Today, there are no good options -- only better or worse -- alternatives. Three appear possible:

The first option has been called "staying the course." In practice that means continued fighting. France "stayed the course" in Algeria in the 1950s as America did in Vietnam in the 1960s and as the Israelis are now doing in occupied Palestine. It has never worked anywhere. In Algeria, the French employed over three times as many troops, nearly half a million, to fight roughly the same number of insurgents as America is now

fighting in Iraq. They lost. America had half a million soldiers in Vietnam and gave up. After forty years of warfare against the Palestinians, the Israelis have achieved neither peace nor security.

Wars of national “self-determination,” to use President Woodrow Wilson’s evocative phrase, can last for generations or even centuries. Britain tried to beat down (or even exterminate) the Irish for nearly 900 years, from shortly after the Eleventh century Norman invasion until 1921; the French fought the Algerians from 1831 until 1962; both Imperial and Communist Russia have been fighting the Chechens since about 1731. Putin’s Russia is still at it. There was no light at the end of those “tunnels.”

At best, “staying the course” in Iraq can be only a temporary measure as eventually America will have to leave. But during the period it stays, say the next five years, my guess is that another 30 or 40 thousand Iraqis will die or be killed while the U.S. armed forces will lose perhaps 5,000 dead and 20,000 seriously wounded. The monetary cost will be hundreds of billions. Consider what the figures mean. Americans were horrified when about 3,300 people were killed in the attack by al-Qaida terrorists on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Iraq has already (at the time of this writing) lost about 100,000 during the American invasion and occupation.\*<sup>1</sup> In absolute terms that means that virtually every Iraqi has a parent, child, spouse, cousin, friend, colleague or neighbor – or perhaps all of these -- among the dead. More than half of the dead were women and children. In relative terms, this figure equates in the very much larger American society to a loss of over a million people.

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\* As reported by Dr. Les Roberts and a research team from Johns Hopkins University’s Center for International Emergency, Disaster, and Refugee Studies, published in medical journal *The Lancet* in November 2004 and summarized by *The New York Times* on October 29, 2004.

It is not only the actual casualties that count. What wars of “national liberation” have taught us is that they brutalize the participants who survive. Inevitably such wars are vicious. Both sides commit atrocities. In their campaigns to drive away those they regard as their oppressors, terrorists/freedom fighters seek to make their opponents conclude that staying is unacceptably expensive and, since they do not have the means to fight conventional wars, they often pick targets that will produce dramatic and painful results. Irish, Jewish, Vietnamese, Tamil, Chechen, Basque and others blew up hotels, cinemas, bus stations and/or apartment houses. The more spectacular, the better for their campaigns. So, the Irgun blew up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946; the IRA a Brighton (England) hotel in 1984; an Iraqi group the UN headquarters in Baghdad in 2003. Chechens blew up an apartment house in Moscow in 2003 while a Palestinian group blew up an Israeli frequented hotel in Taba (in Egypt) in 2004.

Faced with such challenges, the occupying power often reacts with massive attacks aimed at terrorists but inevitably also killing many civilians. To get information from those it manages to capture, it also frequently engages in torture. Torture did not begin at the Abu Ghuraib prison; it is endemic in guerrilla warfare. Two phrases from the Franco-Algerian war of the 1950s-1960s tell it all and ring true today: “torture is to guerrilla war what the machine gun was to trench warfare in the First World War” and “torture is the cancer of democracy.” Guerrilla warfare and counter insurgency inexorably corrupt the very causes for which soldiers and insurgents fight. Almost worse, even in exhausted “defeat” for the one and heady “victory” for the other, they leave behind a chaos that spawns warlords, gangsters and thugs as is today so evident in Chechnya and Afghanistan. After half a century, Algeria has still not recovered from the

trauma of its war of liberation against France. The longer the war in Iraq continues the more it will resemble the statement the Roman historian Tacitus attributed to the contemporary guerrilla leader of the Britons. The Romans, he said, “create a desolation and call it peace.”

The second option is "Vietnamization." In Vietnam, America inherited from the French both a government and a large army. What was needed, the Nixon administration proclaimed, was to train the army, equip it and then turn the war over to it. True, the army did not fight well nor did the government rule well, but they existed. In Iraq, America inherited neither a government nor an army. It is trying to create both. Not surprisingly, the results are disappointing. Most Iraqis regard the government as an American puppet. And the idea that America can fashion a local militia to accomplish what its powerful army cannot do is not policy but fantasy. It is true that in the days of their Iraqi empire, the British used such a force – composed of an ethnic minority, the Assyrians. But the British wisely used them only as auxiliaries to their army and air force. The Iraqi “Interim Government” has similarly used Kurds as auxiliaries to American forces. An Iraqi army is unlikely to fight insurgents with whom soldiers sympathize and among whom they have relatives. The best America might gain from this option is a fig leaf to hide defeat; the worst, in a rapid collapse, would be humiliating evacuation, as in Vietnam.

The third option is to choose to get out rather than being forced. Time is a wasting asset; the longer the choice is put off, the harder it will be to make. The steps required to implement this policy need not be dramatic, but the process needs to be affirmed and made unambiguous. The initial steps could be merely verbal. America would have first

to declare unequivocally that it will give up its lock on the Iraqi economy, will cease to spend Iraqi revenues as it chooses and will allow Iraqi oil production to be governed by market forces rather than by an American monopoly. If President Bush could be as courageous as General Charles de Gaulle was in Algeria when he admitted that the Algerian insurgency had “won” and called for a “peace of the braves,” fighting would quickly die down in Iraq as it did in Algeria and in all other guerrilla wars. Then, and only then, could elections be meaningful. In this period, Iraq would need a police force but not an army. A UN multinational peacekeeping force would be easier, cheaper and safer than creating an Iraqi army which in the past destroyed moves toward civil society and probably would do so again, probably indeed paving the way for the “ghost” of Saddam Husain.

A variety of "service" functions would then have to be organized. Given a chance, Iraq could do them mostly by itself. It would soon again become a rich country and has a talented, well-educated population. Step by step, health care, clean water, sewage, roads, bridges, pipelines, electric grids, housing, etc. could be mainly provided by the Iraqis themselves, as they were in the past. When I visited Baghdad in February 2003 on the eve of the invasion, the Iraqis with whom I talked were proud that they had rebuilt the Tigris bridge that had been destroyed in the 1991 war. They can surely do so again.

In its own best interest, the Iraq government would empower the Iraq National Iraq Oil Company (NIOC) to award concessions by bid to a variety of international companies, each of which and NIOC would sell oil on the world market. Contracts for reconstruction paid for by Iraqi money would be awarded under bidding, as they

traditionally were, but to prevent excessive corruption perhaps initially supervised by the World Bank. Where other countries supplied aid, they could be given preferential treatment in the award of contracts as is common practice elsewhere. The World Bank would follow its regular procedures on its loans. Abrogating current American policies that work against the recovery of Iraqi industry and commerce would spur development since any reasonably intelligent and self-interested government would emphasize getting Iraqi enterprises back into operation and employing Iraqi workers. That process could be speeded up through international loans, commercial agreements and protective measures so that unemployment, now at socially catastrophic levels, would be diminished. Neighborhood participation in running social affairs and providing security are old traditions in Iraqi society and allowing or favoring their reinvigoration would promote the excellent side effect of grass roots political representation. As fighting dies down, reasonable security is achieved and popular institutions revive, the one million Iraqis now living abroad will be encouraged to return home. In the aggregate they are intelligent, highly trained, and well motivated and can make major contributions in all phases of Iraqi life.

In such a program, inevitably, there will be set-backs and shortfalls, but they can be partly filled by international organizations. The steps will not be easy; Iraqis will disagree over timing, personnel and rewards while giving the process a chance will require American political courage. But, and this is the crucial matter, any other course of action would be far worse for both America and Iraq. The safety and health of American society as well as Iraqi society requires that this policy be implemented intelligently, determinedly and soon.

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