

What does the Bush administration really want in Iraq?

By William R. Polk

Among Middle Easterners, the Egyptians are reputed to have the most incisive political wit. A story they tell about their own politics may cast light on what is now happening in Iraq. In the story, shortly after the death of Egyptian president Nasser, his successor, Anwar Sadat, got in Nasser's car to take a drive. Coming to a fork in the road, the driver asked whether he should turn right or left. Undecided, Sadat asked what Nasser always did. The driver replied that Nasser always turned left. (At this point, the Egyptians laugh because they regarded Nasser as a leftist since he engaged in land reform, bought arms from Czechoslovakia and encouraged state industry.) With his usual cunning, Sadat thought a moment and told the driver to put on his left turning signal and turn right.

The Bush administration has put on its signal by announcing that its aim is to get out of Iraq as rapidly as possible. But what has it actually done has led it in quite a different direction.

The primary emphasis is on "security" which is to be provided by a massive military force that is expected to remain in Iraq not just until some form of political system has been installed but for years afterwards. That this force is not just temporary is shown by, among other things, the fact that a series of evidently semi-permanent bases have been constructed and large amounts of equipment have been imported. The military clearly expects to stay for the indefinite future.

More important than physical presence is the psychological and political fallout of the emphasis on "security." The presence of large foreign military forces in any country promote hostility. Americans should know this from their own history. One of the "triggers" that fired the American revolution in 1775 was the presence of British troops. Everywhere throughout history where foreigners evince great power, natives cower in anger.

Cower, that is, until they strike out at the foreigners. Then the foreigners usually react with a further emphasis on "security." Remnants of a shattered regime or harbingers of a new

movement, it makes little difference, the local enemies are terrorists, guerrillas or bandits. They must be hunted down and imprisoned or killed.

Looking back over history and everywhere around the world, we can see what appears almost a mechanical process. The quest for security is the first phase. In that phase, the native opposition seeks to make the foreigners so uncomfortable that they will leave. This happened to Americans in Vietnam, Frenchmen in Algeria and the British in colony after colony around the world. The common feature of all these experiences is that natives do not regard foreigners as legitimate.

Without a consensus on their right to be in the country they occupy, the foreigners cannot achieve “security” and in the final phase of the process, they find it too expensive politically, militarily and even economically to stay. So, like the Americans in Vietnam, the French in Algeria and the British in most of their empire, they get out.

Where the Egyptian story points up the current dilemma is that at least some American policy planners recognize their dilemma and seek to stay by proclaiming their intent to get out. But Iraqis, who went through a long period of British direct rule (from the end of the First World War to 1932) and British indirect control from 1932 to 1958, are acutely aware of the contrast between signals and actions. Thus, at least a significant number of them, a number that evidently is growing, will continue to strike out at the “coalition” forces until they actually leave.

Given this prognosis, why don't the Americans just leave? The answers to this question raise the most complex issues affecting Iraq today and have not been clearly understood.

The first reason is simply that a precipitate American withdrawal would be taken by the American public as a major failure of the Bush administration. This is what happened in the aftermath of the American withdrawal from Vietnam. For years, disgruntled Americans blamed their domestic enemies for having lost the war and accepted ignominious defeat. A whole

generation of Americans grew up under that shadow. No American administration will risk evident failure. Each will claim to “win” or at least seek to postpone defeat as long as possible.

The second reason is that either deliberately or inadvertently, American actions since the first Gulf war in 1991, and particularly since invasion in 2003, have led not only to “regime change” but also to the disintegration of Iraq as a state. For a decade, Kurdistan was cut off from Iraq and lived as virtually a separate state. While the south of Iraq, whose inhabitants are predominantly Shi’is, was not so cleanly separated from Iraq, it was partially treated as distinct under the umbrella of the “no fly” controls and by increasing economic dependence on smuggling from Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

Thus, today, Americans must either attempt to knit the country back together or further divide it. They are now realizing that neither course of action is attractive.

Putting the pieces back together again will certainly antagonize the Kurds. They have enjoyed their autonomy. Amalgamating the Shi’a Arab majority with the Sunni Arab minority, whatever is done about the Kurds, will infuriate either the one or the other group. If some form of proportional representation is enforced, the Sunnis, who have long run the country, will be estranged; if the current attempt to appoint consultative assemblies allows the Sunnis to regain power, the Shi’is will be infuriated.

But even worse can be predicted if the country is Balkanized. Each piece will be small and weak, but also oil-rich and surrounded by stronger neighbors who will undoubtedly seek to dominate it.

Consider first Kurdistan. It will not be left in isolation by either Turkey or Iran, both of whom believe controlling it is essential to their security. Turkey, particularly, fears that even a quasi-autonomous Kurdistan will serve as a base for anti-Turkish Kurdish guerrillas. And both Turkey and Iran will eye greedily the oil resources of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Southern Iraq is not so clearly defined geographically or socially as Kurdistan. In much of it Sunnis and Shi’is live in close proximity. But, culturally as well as religiously, the Shi’a

majority of the population has close ties with fellow Shi'a Iran. Iran will seek and will be encouraged by the Iraqi Shi'is to play a dominant role there. That will frighten Kuwait and other Gulf states because, throughout its history, Iran has sought to dominate that area. And, beyond culture and religion or even strategy, there are strong economic incentives for it to do so: the south of Iraq sits atop vast oil reserves while its own are declining.

Finally, President Bush has emphasized time after time that the central thrust of his administration is to combat terrorism. And a Balkanized Iraq of petty, fearful and mutually hostile but potentially rich states could provide both a perfect seedbed and also operational bases for terrorism.

Beyond these political, cultural and "security" factors there are powerful economic incentives for America to remain in Iraq. While the rebuilding of the shattered infrastructure will cost American tax payers perhaps half a trillion dollars, it will funnel billions of dollars into the coffers of American businesses. It is no secret that these enterprises are closely tied to the Bush administration.

Further out on the economic horizon is the issue of petroleum. Iraq, as Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz has emphasized, floats on a sea of oil. The reserves, while the figures have never been admitted, are probably greater than those of Saudi Arabia and certainly greater than those of Kuwait or Iran. Producing oil there is also much cheaper than elsewhere in the world. And, as fields elsewhere are depleted, Iraq is the only identified source to meet the enormous growth of demand expected in the coming decades. While the extent of the need is not generally known, it will probably be for 30 to 40 million barrels a day of new oil. Since Saudi Arabia now produces 10 million barrels a day, the need for new sources of production is the equivalent of three or four new Saudi Arabias. Thus, from bases in Iraq, America would be in a position to determine Iraqi oil production and control the Gulf and so to dominate world energy.

Thus, while the "turning signal" on the vehicle of state policy points toward getting out, actions and objectives point in quite a different direction.

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