

Countdown in Iraq

by

William R. Polk

Last Wednesday the usually cautious UN Secretary General Kofi Annan proclaimed on the B.B.C. that the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq was illegal. This was not the first time he had spoken out; in March 2003, just before the coalition troops crossed the frontier into Iraq, he had warned that the action would violate the UN charter. But his latest statement came in the midst of a week of greatly escalated fighting in Iraq and clear evidence that the Israeli-inspired military tactics employed by the American armed forces had failed.

In the rush of daily reports, it is easy to miss the pattern of events that have led to today's bloody war. Since those events will tend to set limits on the safety and prosperity of Europeans, Americans and Asians, they should be understood.

Since the invasion, American and British justifications for their military action have each been dropped or discredited: the idea that a small, remote and poor country could pose a serious threat to Britain or America never was plausible; to give it some plausibility, it was backed up by the allegation that Iraq had huge stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. None were found despite intensive, intrusive and long-lasting inspections by international, British and American teams. Now, after 15 months of study, a Bush-administration-appointed official task force has certified that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction and was making no attempt to buy or manufacture them.

One after another claims that Iraq was attempting to buy nuclear materials (known as "yellow cake") in Africa; acquiring equipment to manufacture weapons (centrifuge tubes); preparing to use tons of lethal chemicals and biological weapons; and was actively promoting international terrorism through contacts with Usama bin Ladin's Islamic Fundamentalists have been shown to be imaginary or deliberately misleading.

The idea that Britain and America invaded Iraq to create a democracy never was believable. Both governments are closely allied with dictatorships as brutal as Saddam Husain's. And the man they have promoted to be Iraq's prime minister, Iyad al-Allawi, is anything but a democrat. After an early career in Saddam Husain's repressive secret police as an "enforcer...involved in dirty stuff...with blood on his hands" (according to a well-informed former senior CIA officer), he broke with the *Baath* regime in the late 1970s. Then, operating out of London and Kurdistan, he led a CIA-subsidized group, the "Accord" [Arabic: *al-Wifaq*], in anti-Saddam terrorist attacks of which one was alleged to have blown up a school bus full of children. After being chosen (ostensibly by the UN representative, Algerian former Foreign Minister Lakhtar Brahimi, but actually by the Occupation authority) to lead Iraq, he quickly exhibited his violent and authoritarian character: six days after taking office, with American approval or at least acquiescence, he promulgated laws giving him power to impose curfews, restrict domestic and foreign

travel, ban groups he deemed seditious, order the detention of people he suspected to be risks to security and control the press.

The new edicts also empowered him to override civilian government by appointing “commanders” to administer areas of unrest. (That is, effectively, the whole of Iraq.) Proclaiming that “We will not allow some people to hide behind the slogan of freedom of the press and media,” he ordered his security officers on September 5, 2004 to break into the Baghdad bureau of his most effective media critic, the radio and TV network *al-Jazira*, and closed it down “indefinitely.” When Western reporters tried to cover that event, they were threatened with imprisonment. At the same time, he was reported by an Australian journalist to have personally executed handcuffed and blindfolded prisoners, allegedly to “show his seriousness,” and because of his background the account was widely believed in Iraq. Perhaps as important, he has created a new “supreme council for oil and gas,” of which he is chairman, to approve contracts with foreign companies to exploit the most important sector of the Iraqi economy, oil. In short, his centralization of power is on a Saddam-like scale.

Malawi’s government is propped up by American and British troops and by more than 20,000 foreign mercenaries; yet it is effective only within the heavily fortified “Green zone” in the middle of Baghdad. Elsewhere his authority exists only while tanks and helicopters spearhead American and British infantrymen.

Who is resisting his government and the Anglo-American force, as in most guerrilla wars, is difficult to identify precisely. What we know is that the second American proconsul, L. Paul Bremer, III, dismissed what remained of Saddam Husain’s army and sent them home, hungry, ragged and penniless – but allowed them to keep their arms. Some turned to crime. Others rallied to various leaders and gradually became guerrilla forces. Increasingly, as anger rose over American airstrikes, punitive raids, miserable living conditions and the fear that America was colonizing Iraq, Iraqi nationalists took the lead.

Having no ability to counter tanks and helicopters, the insurgents use the traditional weapons and tactics of guerrillas. Increasingly they are doing so with brutality and effectiveness. During the last week, in clashes with the Anglo-American forces, they wounded more than 200 American soldiers, killed 13 American and 3 Polish soldiers and took a dozen hostages. Although the Iraqis suffered far more heavily, with nearly a thousand killed or wounded, and much property damaged, there is every reason to believe the fighting will continue.

Guerrilla wars are about politics. As months went by and American policies forced local manufacturers out of business by allowing unrestricted cheap imports, closed factories and so put about seven in each ten workers out of jobs, and took over the only major potential source of wealth, oil, virtually the whole Arabic-speaking population began to support the rebellion. The most recent poll, conducted by the Occupation authorities, showed that about 98% of the Arabic-speaking Iraqis opposed the occupation.

The poll also showed that most Iraqis disliked and distrusted Iyad al-Allawi. They would certainly assassinate him if they could; so he rarely ventures outside the American-protected "Green zone." Where they can reach those Iraqis who work for or side with the Americans -- officials, policemen, soldiers and recruits -- they attack them.

Hatred runs very deep in Iraq today. Pictures in the press show part of the reason - - terrible scenes of bombed-out buildings. They cannot, however, document the human dimension -- children, spouses, parents, friends and neighbors killed or maimed. In response, suicide attacks, ambushes, and hostage-taking are now common. While not all Iraqis are guerrillas, guerrillas could not operate without wide-spread popular support.

An overwhelming portion of Iraqis now believe that they must win their war or suffer Anglo-American occupation for decades or generations to come. Their growing desperation can be gauged by the statistics that are approaching the Vietnam War scale. With more than 1,000 Americans killed and more than 10,000 wounded, they believe they can win. They see, as was said about the Vietnam War, "light at the end of the tunnel."

Knowledgeable observers now believe that Americans would be very foolish to imagine light at the end of their tunnel. But some still do. Last Saturday the intensity of air strikes on Falluja, already two weeks old, was increased, and the American military command, with approval of the Bush administration, revealed that it is planning a major offensive against virtually every city in the country before the end of this year. Yet, as the commander of the U.S. First Infantry Division, Major General John Batiste, commented, "This war cannot be won militarily."

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<p>William R. Polk was the Member of the Policy Planning Council responsible for the Middle East during the Kennedy Administration. His book, <i>Understanding Iraq</i>, will be published by HarperCollins in New York in January.</p>
