

Lessons of Iraq
By William R. Polk

Are there any lessons to be learned by the American venture into Iraq? The great German philosopher of history Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel doubted our capacity to find out. “Peoples and governments,” he wrote, “never have learned anything from history or acted on principles deduced from it.” Writing about the Vietnam War, the neo-conservative American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington suggested that it would be best if policy makers “simply blot out of their mind any recollection of this one.” It seems to me that they did. So, in at least some ways, the Iraq war has been proof of George Santayana’s admonition that, having done so, we were doomed to repeat it. The urgent question today is, will the Iraq war itself be similarly blotted out and similarly repeated? The odds are with Professor Hegel.

Mr. Huntington’s argument was based on the notion that Vietnam was unique since, as he saw it, imperialism and colonialism have “just about disappeared from world politics.” That is, they were fading memories of a now irrelevant past. But is this true? Foreign domination has faded from our memory but not from the memories of many of the peoples of Asia and Africa. Focus on Iraq. Iraq became “independent” by treaty with Britain in 1922. Then it became “independent” by recognition of the League of Nations in 1932. But few Iraqis believe that it became really independent by either of these acts. Britain controlled the economy and maintained its military presence while it continued to rule Iraq behind a façade of governments it had appointed. It then reoccupied the country during World War II. After the war it ruled through a proxy until he was overthrown in 1958. So was 1958 the date of independence? On the surface yes, but below the surface American and British intelligence manipulated internal forces and neighboring states to influence or dominate governments; they helped to overthrow the revolutionary government of Abdul Karim Qasim and to install the Baath party which ultimately brought Saddam Husain to power. Knowing what they had done and fearing that they would do so again shaped much of the policy even of Saddam Husain.

By giving or withholding money, arms and vital battlefield intelligence, Britain and America influenced what Saddam thought he could do. So worried was he about his American connection that, before he decided to invade Kuwait, he called in the U.S. ambassador to ask, in effect, if the invasion was ok with Washington. Only when he was assured in 1990 that the US had no policy on the frontiers with Kuwait by official testimony before Congress, by government press releases and by a face-to-face meeting with our ambassador in Baghdad did he act. Either he misread the omens or we changed them. Our ambassador later said, incredibly, that we had not anticipated that he would take *all* of Kuwait. When he did, we invaded, destroyed much of his army and the Iraqi economy and imposed upon the country UN-authorized sanctions and unauthorized “no-fly” zones. Finally, in 2003 we invaded again, occupied the country and imposed upon it a government of our choice. Whatever the justification for any or all of these actions, they do not add up to independence. So even Iraqis who hated and feared Saddam always felt that they were living under a form of Western control. The simple fact is that the “memories” had not faded because they were based on current reality.

There are many things to be said about the American invasion and occupation of Iraq. I have written about most of them in my book, *Understanding Iraq*, which

HarperCollins is publishing this month. But one thing stands out above all to me as a historian: we were (and I believe still are) ignorant of Iraqi history and culture. More pointedly, we had (and still have) no sense of how Iraqis saw their own past and their relationships with us. This ignorance has caused us, often inadvertently, to take actions that many or perhaps most Iraqis have read as imperialist. This has been true even of actions that we felt were generous, far-sighted and constructive. Take the provision of a constitution as an example.

Constitutions are surely “good.” We treasure ours even when we do not always abide by it. We believe that other countries should have them because they are the bedrock of democracy. That sentiment was so widely held at the end of the First World War that the British made giving the Iraqis one a high priority. Experts were called in, phrases were debated, studies were made of the best then in operation, and finally, in 1924, a wonderful document emerged. It was greeted with great satisfaction but mainly by those who had given it, the British. Iraqis paid it little heed because it was not grounded in the realities of Iraqi society, practices or even hopes. Time after time, governments came into power that overturned or simply neglected every paragraph it contained.

So what did the American occupation government do? Was it aware of this history? Apparently not. It set about writing a new constitution. The emphasis was, of course, on “it,” that is, the occupation authorities. They wrote the constitution without any Iraqi input and just handed it to their appointed interim government. That, to my mind, amounted to astonishing insensitivity. What was even more astonishing was that it somehow never occurred to the American lawyers who wrote it that it would become worthless, that is, illegal, when the interim administration was replaced by even a quasi-independent government. It was surely the shortest-lived constitution ever written.

If constitutions are necessary for democracies, elections are even more so. So, naturally, they too are good things. Iraq had to have one. Organizing and controlling it turned out to be a difficult task given what many Iraqis interpreted “our” election to mean: *not* to express a national consensus on democracy but to solidify our control over the country. Because at least some Iraqis were determined to get us out of their country, using guerrilla warfare tactics and terrorism against us and those Iraqis who supported us, we had to use our military forces to set parameters on the issues, the personnel and the form of this expression of freedom. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau long ago advocated, we decided to “force men to be free.” The fact that, however unfree they were, the elections were held was hailed as a great victory for democracy. I remain unconvinced. I suspect that two fatal flaws will soon become evident: a heightening of the divisive tendencies already inherent in Iraqi society and a devaluation of the very concept of representative government.

Our policies on security are similarly subject to different interpretation. Where we have done most of what we have done in the name of security, our critics in Iraq have sought sovereignty. We believed that security had to come first. A close reading of history leads me to believe that the order is usually the reverse. When foreigners get out, insurgencies stop; they do not stop, no matter how massive the force used against them or how costly in blood and treasure the fighting is, until the foreigners leave. This surely is the lesson of Ireland, Çeçneya, Algeria, and even of our own Revolution. I predict it will

be of Iraq too.

Believing that security comes first has led our government to concentrate on rebuilding an Iraqi army since doing so appeared to offer security at a bargain price. But, Iraqis remember the terrible costs to their society of the creation of armies. The one the British created, time after time, subverted or overthrew civil governments. A new army, absent balancing civic institutions, which can grow only slowly and by internal developments, will surely again pave the way for a military dictatorship.

Related to, but to some extent external to, Iraq are other “lessons” we should ponder. What happened to Iraq showed other governments that they live at the sufferance of the United States? Iraq could not defend itself; nor can most other states. Those that can are those that have the ultimate weapon. Acquisition of even a few nuclear weapons provides “security” because the cost of attacking a power armed with them is too costly. I am told that at least some African, Asian and even European observers believe that if Saddam Husain had waited until he had a nuclear weapon before attacking Kuwait, we would not have gone to war. North Korea today reinforces this assessment. There, we react with anger, economic sanctions and propaganda but not with military force.

However, the process of acquiring nuclear weapons is a time of deadly danger. So governments that decide to acquire them naturally try to move with the utmost secrecy and speed. They also usually seek to avoid provocations that might bring down upon them the wrath of the existing nuclear powers. That too is a lesson of Iraq: had Saddam not provided a provocation, we would probably not have gone to war. Indeed, we were supplying him with the components and equipment to make weapons of mass destruction right up to the time of our intervention. Surely, this “lesson” is in the minds of the Persians today as it was in the minds of the Russians, Chinese, Indians, Pakistanis and Israelis. The only alternative to this highly dangerous and ruinously costly drift in international affairs is mutual disarmament, but current American policies are rushing us, and the world, in exactly the opposite direction.

Finally, there is a grab-bag of other lessons again laid before us by Iraq: the first is that war is always unpredictable no matter how powerful the advantages one side seems to have at the beginning; the second is that they are always horrible. Not only are people killed or severely harmed, but whole societies, even of the victors, are brutalized. This was true of the British in Kenya, French in Algeria, Americans in the Philippines, Russians in Central Asia, and Chinese in Tibet. Finally, guerrilla wars are, at best, unwinnable – lasting as in Ireland for centuries and in Algeria for a century and a half. Çeçneya suffered massacre, deportation, rape and massive destruction for nearly four centuries and still is not “pacified.” No one wins a guerrilla war; both sides lose. The only sensible policy is one that aims to stop them rather than to win them. Hegel and Santayana may be right, we may not learn, but certainly, Huntington is wrong in urging that we “blot” the lessons out of our minds.

© William R. Polk, March 26, 2005

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