

Random dots on the page

By

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One of the most popular and intriguing puzzles is a simple sheet of paper covered with apparently random dots. The trick is to connect the dots to make logical connections or a picture. Parents often use such puzzles to keep children amused, but connecting the “dots” on a strategic map can teach us – or warn us – about emerging patterns of world dangers. In the following articles, I will examine several major “dots” and then suggest how they might form a pattern that will determine our lives in the coming years. I begin with Iraq.

The American-British invasion of Iraq was based, as we now know, on a series of assertions that were not true: Iraq posed no credible threat to the Western world. It was a small, isolated, weak country, far away from Europe and, of course, much further from the continental United States. It did not have “weapons of mass destruction” and lacked the capacity to make nuclear weapons. It was opposed to Islamic fundamentalism and had no ties with international terrorism.

Iraq certainly had a brutal, undemocratic government but so had many close allies of the United States and Britain. Moreover, while it had that brutal, undemocratic government, America, Britain and other countries had maintained close and supportive relationships with it, helping Saddam Husain’s regime to acquire weapons of mass destruction, giving it financial aid, diplomatic support and even providing the sophisticated battlefield intelligence that enabled it to defeat Iran. Clearly, Iraq’s tyranny was not a major issue to the Western powers.

But the Bush and Blair governments thought it was the issue for Iraqis. They thought that the Iraqis would be out in the streets to welcome the incoming troops as liberators. Some did, but most stood aside. In the “shock and awe,” as the Americans referred to their massive aerial bombardment, the people were at first simply stunned. Then the American proconsul, L. Paul Bremer III, made the first of series of mistakes: he dismissed the remaining troops of the shattered Iraqi army, sending them home without food, money or adequate clothing but allowing them to keep their arms. When they got home, many found their families hungry, living in bombed-out buildings and without any way to earn a living. In desperation, many turned to crime. Looting became a form of shopping.

Then, driven by the ideology of a free market, Bremer and his team promulgated a series of edicts that opened what remained of the Iraqi economy to free imports, denied contracts to the remaining Iraqi state enterprises and created conditions in which local entrepreneurs and merchants could not compete. As a result about 7 in each 10 Iraqi workers were without jobs and without hope of getting them.

Discontent rapidly grew. A public opinion poll commissioned by the Occupation Authority found only about 2% of Iraqis favored it. This should have come as no surprise: nowhere in the world do people willingly accept being ruled by foreigners. Worse was to follow. As the American Revolution taught us, soldiers always make poor neighbors to civilians, and, when they have no common language, misunderstandings are usually following by gunshots. Fear fed violence. On the Iraqi side, what had been little more than street gangs grew into armed national movements and, on the American side, troops began to employ urban control tactics that violated social conventions, destroyed property and killed thousands of Iraqis. During September 2004, Iraqis carried out nearly 3,000 attacks on Americans and those Iraqis cooperating with them, and Americans killed hundreds of Iraqis.

In addition to those actually killed or wounded, the American forces have arrested and imprisoned an estimated 10,000 Iraqis. Some are women and children. The conditions of their incarceration, including being held incommunicado, without charge or counsel, often humiliated or even tortured – some to death – have long been widely known in Iraq and now have been substantiated by American official investigations.

Few are the Iraqi families who have not had relatives abused, imprisoned, wounded or killed. In this spiral of anger and fear, the Americans attempted to satisfy nationalism by appointing an Iraqi government. It has not worked. The American appointed leader is apparently himself hated and feared by Iraqis. Even if he were not, he is identified as an American puppet and is known to have been a paid agent of the CIA. He can hardly move outside of the heavily fortified American compound within the center of Baghdad, the “Green Zone,” except escorted by American troops or armed foreign mercenaries. At all levels, officials of the government are in fact under siege. The comparison is often drawn between Iraq and Vietnam, but actually Iraq is far less “secure” than Vietnam was. The huge section of Baghdad known as Sadr City, with roughly one in each ten Iraqis resident, is a combat zone which only American forces attempt to penetrate and many other cities are totally out from under American and certainly Iraq Interim Government control. In South Vietnam, America at least in the early 1960s had a local ally in command of a large army. In Iraq does not.

The American response has been two fold: first, it has begun to recreate an Iraqi army. This may turn out to be the worst blunder so far. As one looks back over Iraqi history, it was always the army that stifled moves toward representative government because the balancing institutions of the society -- the judiciary, the press and local representative bodies -- are weak. And the current government has moved even further to weaken them. A reconstituted Iraqi army could be precisely the tool needed to create a new Saddam Husain in the not-too-distant future.

The second response of the American Occupation force has been to intensify attacks on dissidents. Large areas of the country are subjected to aerial bombardment, armored strikes and infantry assault. The damage has already been almost on the scale of the “shock and awe” invasion. What has happened so far is said to be only the prelude. Massive attacks have been planned to take place by the end of the year on virtually every

city in the country. As in Vietnam, when faced with a losing campaign, the military answer has been to do more of the same, to “stay the course,” to escalate. Two thirds of America’s fighting men are there and so far over a thousand Americans have been killed and more than 10,000 seriously wounded. Iraq is not yet Vietnam: there we had half a million troops and lost about 80,000 soldiers, but Iraq is clearly on the way.

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