

## The Expensive School of Iraq

By William R. Polk

To the strong, the use of force often seems logical. For the short term, it sometimes is, but it has three major disadvantages: first, it usually does not work, second it destroys much that it was to protect and, third, it damages those who employ it. These lessons are not theoretical: they have been written in blood in crisis after crisis throughout history. In our own times, we have many examples. We are now being taught them in a new “school” in Iraq.

Yesterday, a huge bomb, apparently concealed in a cement truck, destroyed the hotel in which the UN mission was staying with tragic loss of life. I lost at least one good friend there. The attack was a horrible example of terrorism. After paying such a price, we should, at least, attempt to analyze what caused the attack, what it was meant to demonstrate and what we can do to ward off future blows.

When the United States and Great Britain invaded Iraq 6 months ago to “replace” the regime of Saddam Husain, the Bush administration and the Blair government said they acted because Saddam Husain posed a threat to the United States and Britain. He was developing, or even had, weapons of mass destruction. One after another, these charges proved false. At least some of them were obviously false when they were made. Finally, both President Bush and Prime Minister Blair justified their action by the charge, certainly true, that Saddam Husain was a brutal dictator who oppressed and even murdered his own people.

Like all large groups of people, the Iraqis split into factions over these charges. Many, certainly, hated the Baathist regime. By the time of the invasion, the Kurdish population in the north had lived for a decade in virtually autonomous “states” formed around their traditional leaders. The Shiis in the south, drawn culturally to Iran, had suffered grievously from the Baath regime and were assumed to be anxious to get free. In the Sunni Muslim, Arab center, no one really knew what the people wanted. But, both the Bush and Blair governments wanted to

believe that their soldiers would be greeted by smiling people, waving American or British flags and carrying flowers. There were never many flowers, and now there are bombs. What went wrong?

Many excuses have been advanced. The reason that I believe makes the most sense is that the various parties to the conflict saw it from quite different perspectives and so reacted in predictably different ways. What are they?

While the Anglo-American forces thought they were destroying an evil regime and liberating a suppressed people, they inevitably killed a great many Iraqis. Most of the survivors had relatives among the tens of thousands who were wounded or killed. As they looked around them, they saw the works they had proudly built over a generation in ruins. Even those who did not have these emotional causes for regret found their lives overturned. Money became worthless; jobs, non-existent; security, gone. Even clean drinking water became a luxury in the searing heat of summer. Many concluded that getting rid of Saddam Husain had come at too high a price.

Underlying these reactions is one that is more fundamental. Like people almost everywhere in our age, the Iraqis are nationalists. No matter how benign, how kind or how helpful British and American soldiers may have been, the Iraqis saw them as foreign invaders. Dressed in armor, loaded with weapons and esoteric equipment, they seemed unhuman. Since they could not speak the local language, each word they said became a challenge or a threat. Stories spread of even children being shot when they did not know what was being said to them. Worse, the foreigners did not understand, or did not care, about the rules of Iraqi family and religious life so, often for “security” reasons, they intruded into houses and even shrines.

After six months, as difficult as it is for us to believe, at least some Iraqis feel nostalgic for the former regime. They are now asking, “was it really so terrible?” After all, some are now saying, most of them were then relatively secure, with jobs, drinking water, sewage disposal, houses intact, fans and air conditioners working, and them alive.

And now also, Iraqis are beginning to doubt that the British and Americans came to Iraq just to rid them of an evil regime. Even long before the invasion, many believed that our real motive was quite different. We have helped them to reach that conclusion. American officials talk openly about Iraq “swimming in oil.” Was our concern with their freedom just a new cloak to cover the old imperialism? Would we ever leave? Or would we use Iraq as a base for control of the whole Middle East or even the whole Islamic world?

And what role would Israel play in all this? All Iraqis have been brought up to believe that Israel intends not only to take all of Palestine from the Arabs but to fulfil the Biblical prophecy (*Genesis* 15:18) of ruling from the Nile to the Euphrates. Many see the American soldiers as virtual Israelis – in fact, many know that American Special Forces trained with Israelis on how to fight Arabs.

So, oil and Israel have been added to the grievances many Iraqis, rightly or wrongly, feel. If these fuel hostility to the British and Americans, why was the hotel housing the UN attacked? At first sight, that seemed illogical, even incomprehensible. What could have been the motive for the bombing?

I think there are three probable motives: first, “the value of spectacle.” All underground resistance movements seek to dishearten their enemies by dramatic action. The Israeli underground Irgun thus blew up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1947; years later, the IRA attacked an English hotel where the Conservative Party was holding its annual conference; in 2001, the al-Qaida Muslim Fundamentalists destroyed the World Trade Center in New York, and so on. Each group wanted to show that fighting them was just too expensive; by disheartening the enemy, they could win.

Second, the Iraqis know that the British and Americans have been trying to augment their force by bringing in troops from countries that are members of the UN. The attack on the UN headquarters was a warning that, even though they had not taken part in the invasion, other foreigners would be vulnerable to attack. This is the third major attack on the UN: Zionist

terrorists murdered the UN mediator Folke Bernadotte in 1948; Belgium mercenary airmen, having achieved air superiority over the Congo with a single jet trainer in 1961, forced UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold to fly at night in circumstances that led to the crash of his aircraft and his death. Terrorists have found the UN a “high profile” target.

And, third, what is beginning to emerge is that the Iraqi opposition, fragile though its internal ties now may be, is being forced into a strategy in which violence is a significant part. Those who favor violence want to show that it works because in this way they gain influence over the whole opposition movement. So it has always been among underground fighters: the militants of the IRA always favored attack and the Irgun regarded itself as the armed conscience of the Zionist movement.

So, at this point what can be done?

Emotionally satisfying though it may be, hunting down and killing the members of nationalist underground movements has never worked. No matter how many Palestinians the Israelis imprisoned or killed, they did not stop the Palestine resistance; the Germans in the Second World War could never subdue the Greeks or Yugoslavs; the French similarly could not overcome the Algerians; and the Russians have unsuccessfully fought the Chechens for about 300 years. It is unlikely that Britain and America will be more successful.

If not force, what?

The most obvious first step is to set a time for withdrawal. Were Britain and America to say that they promise to withdraw by a given date, some of the opposition to them would decline.

Coordinate with this timetable is devolution of power. Some moves have been made in this direction, but the effect has been lost as local elections were postponed or cancelled and some candidates arrested. As much as possible and as soon as possible, not just Americans and British but all foreign troops need to become less in evidence.

Third, Iraqi ownership of its one significant national asset, oil, must be clearly and emphatically affirmed. This is mainly a matter of form since any future government of Iraq will

share the goal of the Western powers: oil does not benefit Iraq unless it is sold and the only market is the West. But in nationalist terms, form is the essence. It must be an Iraqi flag that flies over the fields.

Fourth, the western “war” on Islam must be stopped. When President Bush spoke of a “crusade,” he opened a deep well of memory for Middle Easterners. The scurrilous attacks by American Christian fundamentalists on Islam and its prophet have done immense damage to the hopes for peace.

Last, most difficult and most crucial, is that the central issue of the Middle East, the relationship of Israel and the Arabs in general and the Israelis and the Palestinians in particular must be effectively addressed. As long as the Palestinian desire for self determination is thwarted, no peace can be achieved. And, unless or until serious moves are made toward the creation of a nuclear-free Middle East, the temptation of Arab and Persian governments to match Israel’s nuclear, chemical and biological arsenal will be irresistible.

Only if the Western powers seriously (and as justly as is now possible) address these issues can we hope for an acceptable degree of peace.

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