

Down, Down, Down in The Iraqi Quicksand

By

William R. Polk

Adding to the existing despair and danger of the American position in Iraq, the country now seems to be on the brink of a religiously-driven civil war. The explosion in front of the shrine of the Imam Ali (cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and patron “saint” of the Shia sect of Islam) in the Shia religious center of Najaf on August 29 killed the most moderate and cooperative leader of Iraq’s largest community. It not only galvanized anti-American activity but appears to have stunned the American authorities. It may later be seen to have been the first event of a civil/guerrilla/anti-foreign war, a veritable political “black hole.”

Bad as the situation now is, it should come as no surprise: it was both predictable and predicted before the American invasion. Despite repeated warnings by knowledgeable scholars -- and by government experts -- the ideologically-driven “neoconservatives” then (and now) setting American policy convinced themselves that their “war of liberation” would be met by a smiling population bearing flowers and waving American flags. What actually happened is a litany of miscalculations and blunders.

The assumption of the Bush administration was that the Iraqi people hated Saddam Husain. It then lacked (and still lacks) any way to gauge how accurate that assumption was. What we do know is that, however much any people may hate or fear native despots, they rarely and then only temporarily welcome foreign meddlers. Nationalism is so strong an idea that it unites even bitter enemies against outsiders. The United States has been given many lessons to prove the truth of this statement. One particularly vivid lesson was in Somalia where the Americans ended up fighting almost the whole population of Mogadishu while trying to liberate them.

Also in Mogadishu, America should have learned that while acting solely on its own appeared to solve “command and control” military problems, it enormously increased political problems. The United States did not inform the UN of its planned attempt to kidnap the Mogadishu warlord, but when its troops failed in their attempt and were in mortal danger, it turned to the UN for support. In Iraq today, the lesson of Mogadishu is being relearned. The Bush administration, having repeatedly heaped scorn on the UN and disdained “multilateralism,” is now inviting UN cover and begging for troops from countries it hardly recognized a few months ago.

Meanwhile in Iraq, blunder has followed blunder. First was the confusion of “battle” with “war.” It was always obvious that the US could overpower the Iraqi army. On the eve of the invasion, Iraq had only a rag-tag military force of dubious loyalty, poorly armed and disorganized. Some of the troops lacked even shoes. Iraq had no sophisticated air defense systems to defend its troops or cities. America’s “shock and awe” military machine, created at a yearly cost equal to the combined military budgets of the rest of the world and thousands of times more than Iraq’s pitiful little army, could have overwhelmed the army of any of the world’s states with the possible exceptions of Russia and China. It literally obliterated the Iraqi army.

But, at a cost. Or rather at several costs, some of which are still to be calculated. Consider first the material cost. Estimates of what it will take to rebuild what was destroyed range to more than half a trillion dollars and to take years to accomplish. Less easy to calculate is the resentment of almost the whole population who had relatives among the tens of thousands wounded or killed. Virtually every independent observer has reported that even many of those who overtly cooperate with the occupation authorities covertly hate them.

These two facts – material costs and private fury – form the basis of a third problem: the standard of living of virtually all Iraqis has not just declined but even crashed. Clean drinking water is a luxury beyond the means of almost everyone; in the searing Iraqi summer where temperatures range above 45 degrees (115-130 degrees Fahrenheit), people who had become

accustomed to air-conditioning now cannot even run fans. Garbage piles up and sewage clogs the waterways. Food is often hard to get and of poor quality.

In this environment, the American authorities, spurred on by the leading neoconservative and the architect of the Iraq war, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, his proconsul, L. Paul Bremer III, and their principal Iraqi agent, Ahmad Chalabi, have mounted a sweeping campaign against those they identify as collaborators in the defunct Baath Party regime. In this campaign, thousands of Iraqis, not just policemen or soldiers but even medical practitioners, school teachers and university professors have lost their jobs and incomes.

Not surprisingly, nostalgia for the Baath regime is growing. From many sources, I hear words like these, “I didn’t like Saddam, but I kept out of his way.” “Then it was safe to walk on the streets.” “I had clean drinking water.” “I had a job.” “Money was tight so I couldn’t afford everything, of course, but that was the fault of the Americans. They kept us all locked up for ten years with their sanctions.” “Oh, yes, it was much better then. Now look around. We live in the ruins.”

Voices like these are apparently not heard even by the Americans in Baghdad. In truth, there is little contact between the Americans and the Iraqis. Fear has driven them apart.

The Iraqis fear that they will be taken for guerrillas and shot if they approach the Americans they see most often, the soldiers. The soldiers, naturally, tend to suspect that any Iraqi, even a child or a woman, might be carrying a bomb or a kalashnikov. What are believed to be attacks but of which some may be just misunderstandings occur at least a dozen times a day. Usually many Iraqis are wounded or killed. Some are real attacks in which at least one American is killed every day. So fear feeds on itself.

It isn’t only fear that keeps the Americans and Iraqis apart. In part, it is policy. The American occupation authority has allowed no Iraqi representation in the decision-making councils. True, 25 Iraqis are members of the “Iraq Governing Council,” but, even though they were selected by the Americans, they have been given no authority. When needed, the Council

members are brought to the American headquarters. Their inferior position is thus publicly and symbolically manifested. Local attempts at “grass roots” political organization have generally landed the participants in jail. American policy is to work “on” rather than “with” the Iraqis.

Policy is not the only reason the two groups are apart. Another reason is where and how the Americans live. The soldiers, of course, live in strictly segregated military camps. Everything about them is “extraterritorialized.” Their food, water, soft drinks, tents, uniforms, equipment and entertainment all are brought in from abroad. This is both because that is the way the American army operates and also because it fears that anything acquired locally, even Coca Cola, might be poisoned.

The world the soldiers inhabit is not cozy. One observer, himself a senior military man, wrote that “The US troops here look like hobos, live like pigs and are still conducting combat actions.” Many have expressed their fear that they will be in Iraq for months if not years. They appear to be increasingly depressed and angry and are writing home to tell relatives they feel misled or even betrayed.

The American civilians also live in a world apart. The most senior are accommodated in Baghdad’s best hotel, Al-Rashid, surrounded by barbed wire and protected by tanks and military patrols. Relative to the general population, they live in what Kipling would have called “ more-than-oriental splendor.”

The UN mission was shunned by the Americans; it lived apart as a tolerated poor relation. And, on August 19, it was decimated by a huge car-bomb. Among the casualties were the UN special representative, Sergio Vieira de Mello, one of the most able peace “seekers” the UN had, and the deputy head of mission, Nadia Younes, a brave, spirited and intelligent woman who had just been appointed to be UN assistant secretary general in charge of the General Assembly. It will be difficult to replace people of this quality especially as any replacement will see himself as a target.

Sr. Vieira brought to his position 30 years of experience and was largely credited for the successful transition of East Timor from war to peace. He is known to have come to the conclusion that the problem of Iraq today is essentially sovereignty and that the American emphasis on “security” diverts or postpones achievement of peace and reconstruction. His analysis was not welcome in the office of L. Paul Bremer whom Sr. Vieira described (to Jonathan Steele of *The Guardian*) as “a true neo-con [servative] who does not care about getting international legitimacy.”

Sr. Vieira’s message will now be even harder to deliver. Whatever the long-term effect of his and Nadia Younes’s deaths, they have already had short-term effects. Taking heed of the “message” the bomb signified, the World Bank withdrew its team. Several voluntary groups are pulling out. Among them is the International Red Cross which has long prided itself on its dedication and bravery in other crises.

Now comes the explosion on August 29 in front of the shrine in Najaf. Who did it? Why? What will be the result? These questions must be addressed.

Whoever did it would be foolish to “claim” responsibility. Creating chaos must have been a prime objective and it will be amplified by rumor. Rumors are already flying. Some Iraqis believe the attack is part of the American “war on Islam.” From afar, American religious fundamentalists have given them chapter and verse for this suspicion. On the scene, American Marines have gotten involved in riots and fire fights at another Shia holy shrine in Karbala. Others in Iraq and elsewhere see the hand of the Israeli intelligence organization, Mossad. They point out that the Shiis are among the most formidable and determined of Israel’s enemies. Still others focus on the “remnants” of the Baath regime – “a small group of bitter-enders” as L. Paul Bremer III called those who resist the American rule. After all, the Shia religious establishment regarded Saddam as a *kafir* (infidel) and Saddam regarded them as actual or potential traitors. Finally, in the religiously-charged atmosphere of Iraq, many Shiis will blame the Sunnis. In short, there is enough fuel to feed a number of fires.

Three things seem clear: first, the followers of the chief opponent of the Americans among the clerics, the young and aggressive Muqtada Sadr, who regarded Ayatollah Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim as a virtual American puppet, and who are not strangers to violence, are not probable suspects. For them to have attacked the shrine of their patron saint, Ali, is as unlikely as that the Catholic IRA would blow up St. Peter's at the Vatican.

The second is that the death of Ayatollah Muhammad deprives the Iraq Governing Council of its only moderating Shia voice and leaves Shaikh Muqtada Sadr the most important Shia leader. He now appears to have the potential to precipitate an Iraqi religious revolution on a scale similar to the one led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran in 1978.

The third is a further accentuation of the downward trend of America's position in Iraq. Under Saddam Husain, Iraq was a secular state, committed to modernization and posing no immediate (or probably long-term) danger to the United States. As we now know, it had no weapons of mass destruction, no serious capacity to damage its neighbors and no involvement with international terrorism. Such destructive tendencies as it exhibited could easily be and were (for us) painlessly contained. Today, as a consequence of American policy, most of these objectives have been lost.

Iraq is costing American tax payers roughly \$5 billion a month just for "security." Hundreds of billions more will be needed to recreate a state America can afford to leave. There are reports that the anti-American Iraqi underground has now not only itself become a guerrilla (or what we today call a "terrorist") organization but is welcoming like-minded fighters from other lands. Religion, which was contained, admittedly in ugly and repressive ways, under Saddam is now becoming the justification and ideology of what could become a counter-crusade, a *jihad*. There still are no weapons of mass destruction, but as the American army is discovering, car bombs and bullets are no less lethal. If control of oil was a serious American objective, it is less available now than it was before. If chaos was the aim, the terrorists did an outstanding job.

Senator John McCain, who has just visited Iraq, apparently thinks that America should add another 20,000 or so troops. He should remember Vietnam where we added and added until we finally lost the war. The military route will almost certainly lead America into a wider, more complex and even less winnable series of conflicts.

However, no one in Washington seems to have thought of an “exit strategy.” If America simply walks away, as it did in Somalia, the chaos it has created in Iraq seems likely to trigger domino-like crises throughout the area – Turkey will almost certainly invade Kurdistan; Iran will not be able to stand aloof because of its close affinities both with the Kurds in the north and the Shiis in the south; religious tensions -- both Shii-Sunni and fundamentalist-establishment -- which are already evident in the Gulf, will probably explode; the flow of oil will be endangered; moderate governments like Jordan and Lebanon will come under fire domestically and from abroad; in anger, fear or ambition, Israel will probably push further into the Arab world, thus creating new problems with Egypt, Syria and other Arab and Muslim states.

The current policy alternative appears almost as bad. Americans adopted the term “quagmire” to describe Vietnam. The US was never able there to create an southern alternative to Ho Chi Minh. For the mostly desert land of Iraq, quagmire is not the term of choice. But there the US is today similarly sinking into the Iraqi “quicksand.” It is learning, once again – how many times do lessons have to be repeated -- that thwarting nationalism is dangerous, creating governments is not a role for foreigners and rebuilding a shattered country is expensive. But, if the goal of the Bush administration’s neoconservatives was permanent war, they, at least, should be pleased. They have now managed to turn Iraq into a seedbed of terrorism. Even they seemed shocked by what they have created.

As *New York Times* correspondent Dexter Filkins reported from Baghdad following the latest bombing, “There were no speeches calling for calm and few public appearances by anyone in charge. L. Paul Bremer III, the chief American administrator, was on vactation. Nobody

seemed to know when exactly he would return. The American military command here said nothing.” Shock and awe had given way to stunned silence.

Silence is something we cannot afford. Those who plan and execute disastrous policies often try to corner their critics by saying, “in retrospect, that was a mistake, but we are here now. No point in talking about the past. We must start from where we are.” So what to do? As an old policy planner for our government, I think there are several obvious moves:

1. 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.
2. Take realistic steps to engage the Iraqis in planning their own future. Consultation has not been tried. It must be.
3. Stop playing games with the Iraq Governing Council. Genuine local figures, not American puppets, must be given some degree of authority quickly and then as quickly as possible be given more.
4. Decrease the presence of all foreign troops as much as possible and as quickly as possible.
5. Categorically affirm Iraqi ownership of its one significant national asset, oil. The US loses nothing by this 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, symbolism is the essence. It must be an Iraqi flag that flies over the fields.

Away from Iraq, there are two crucial moves; both are difficult. America should stop its “war” on Islam. 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 with the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular must be

effectively addressed. As long as the Palestinian desire for self determination is thwarted, no Middle Eastern 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 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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