

Rep. Woolsey Sept. 15, 2005 Iraq Hearing Testimony of Ambassador David L. Mack

Leaving Iraq without Making a Bad Situation Worse

Introduction

The U.S. has stumbled into a quagmire in Iraq. National security based arguments were persuasive with many honorable American leaders. In retrospect, these arguments failed the test of careful intelligence analysis, but the arguments seemed plausible to many American political leaders and foreign policy experts. Less honorably, ideologues intoxicated by delusions of imperial grandeur manipulated claims by self interested émigré politicians and their US publicists. They hyped the alleged need for urgent action, oversold the benefits of forcible regime change and minimized the requirements for resources and planning.

Without excusing the shortcomings of strategic thinking and policy implementation that led to this situation, responsible statecraft requires critics of the Bush Administration to acknowledge that the way we leave Iraq could make matters worse. Worse for Iraqis and laden with future threats to vital US interests and with even greater demands on US resources. In short, a quagmire could become a sinkhole for a battered nation struggling to regain its footing and for US efforts to defend itself against international terrorism and proliferation of really bad weapons.

There are no silver bullets or fail safe parachutes. We only mislead Iraqis and ourselves by placing too much weight on timetables and individual events. The political leaders of the Bush Administration may be slowly learning this reality, long argued by career experts in the military services, intelligence agencies and State Department. Critics of the Administration should also avoid the trap of easy answers.

An End to Illusions

The dreams that of four years ago were intoxicating — a democracy embracing free markets, human rights and the rapid expansion of oil production to help fuel a global economic boom; a different kind of Arab country, one which would embrace western values and peace close to Israeli terms. In fact, it never had much to do with Iraq. As Dorothy might have said, this is not Kansas.

But many U.S. government and opinion leaders, relying more on ideological fantasy than hard facts, bought the seductive notion that the conquest of Iraq offered huge potential benefits for modest inputs of force and money. Believing that such achievements were close at hand, the Bush administration reached for a quick and easy victory over the twin threats of terrorism and proliferation of really nasty weapons. The long-term payoff promised to be great, and a decisive president, a vice-president of unprecedented influence and a forceful Secretary of Defense overrode the warnings of

many experts in the CIA, the State Department and the uniformed military. After all, if Washington was the new Rome, it had only to lead and the rest of the world would follow or be crushed. It was visionary. It was also more than imprudent.

The architects of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and of the subsequent occupation were not evil men. In key respects, however, they were dead wrong. They sincerely believed that the American commitment would rapidly transform the Middle East for the better, and make Iraq a positive element in global security and the war against terrorism. They imagined that Iraq would readily become a model of democratic governance and free market economics — the Norway of the Middle East. Moreover, they thought this could be accomplished with a modest application of U.S. military force and a commitment to post-war stabilization and progress that would largely be financed by Iraqi oil revenues.

The promoters of Operation Iraqi Freedom were blinded by illusions based on an excess of ideological zeal and minimal regard for the hard realities of Iraq's troubled history and damaged social structure. They also minimized the importance of cultural differences between Americans and Iraqis in an atmosphere of intense nationalism. Just as remarkably, they overestimated the tolerance of the American public for sustained imperial adventurism. In short, the architects of U.S. strategy over-reached and underestimated the resources required for their ambitious objectives.

Getting Real

The U.S. should embrace modest but achievable expectations for Iraq. It is still possible to help Iraqis make their country a better place for their children and a much safer place for Iraq's neighbors, and it is imperative that we prevent Iraq from becoming the imminent danger to the U.S. that some argued it was at the beginning of the Bush administration. In fact, the continued heavy involvement of the U.S. armed forces in Iraq, however necessary for the transitional phase, is certainly increasing the motivation for anti-US terrorism and widening the pool for future terrorist recruits. An abrupt end to the U.S. military presence would probably lead to an upsurge of violence among Iraqis and offer new opportunities for terrorists, but this does not excuse the absence of a new strategy for orderly disengagement.

Viewed another way, a realistic policy needs redlines for really dangerous Iraqi behavior, as distinct from Iraqi behavior that is merely disappointing and annoying. Although the rhetorical exuberance of the president and vice president has remained stuck in the time-warp of the immediate post-war euphoria, evidence on the ground has been leading to a more realistic assessment of the price for failure in Iraq, as well as the scanty prospects for anything which will appear to be a plausible victory. The time has come for damage control and a gradual, painful reduction of the overextended and under resourced U.S. adventure into the politics of Iraq.

Two dangers confront us:

-- **First**, Iraq may become a failed state, comparable to Afghanistan following the withdrawal of Soviet forces. As such, it would offer safe havens to international terrorist groups and a vast pool of embittered and desperate recruits from among the Iraqi population. The key differences from Afghanistan, however, would be Iraq's far more critical geographical location married to its superior resources of potential wealth, educated persons and knowledge of advanced weaponry. The vacuum of an organized government would also have a profound and destabilizing effect on other states in the Middle East, including key U.S. strategic partners.

-- **Second**, the dominant political order in Iraq may be subject to overbearing influence from Iran that would be hostile to the U.S. interests. Iraqis, including the majority Shi'a population, tend to be highly nationalistic. Under circumstances of minimal stability and prosperity, they would strongly resist Iranian hegemony. However, faced with a committed insurgency, the potential secession of Kurdistan and an abrupt withdrawal of U.S. forces, the demands of survival would greatly increase the influence of Tehran. Militia forces trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard working together with vulnerable Iraqi government officials would be under great pressure to accept Iranian support with strings attached. One cannot deny that Iran has understandable concerns regarding Iraq's future. For many Iranians, the memory of an eight year war in which Iraq used chemical weapons and missile attacks on Tehran itself, remains fresh. One goal of U.S. policy must be to structure a political environment in which the security interests of all of Iraq's neighbors would be taken into account in return for the acceptance by Iran and other regional states of the obligation to respect Iraqi sovereignty and independence.

The key U.S. goals of the emerging, non-rhetorical policy are as follows:

First: Iraqi cooperation in the war against terrorists bent on violence against Americans and our *de facto* allies in the governments of the region. Iraq was a theoretical safe haven for such terrorists before we invaded. Now it is much more likely to become one if a working relationship between governments in Washington and Baghdad were to collapse or, worse, if Iraq were to continue its slide into the failed state category.

Second: Strict Iraqi adherence to U.N. resolutions prohibiting future efforts to reconstitute weapons of mass destruction or long range missile programs. This would also be at or near the top of the goals of Iran and Iraq's other neighbors.

If the new Iraqi political order failed to cooperate on those two points, they would have crossed redlines that I believe would be intolerable for the Congress or for any U.S. administration. These are not matters for partisan controversy. They are fundamental objectives for our national security.

There are two other objectives, vitally necessary for Iraqis, which are achievable, as well as necessary to sustain an Iraqi government that could deliver on the two primary American goals related to our national security. Acting unilaterally, rather than as part of a broad international consensus, the U.S. has found that our diplomatic and economic influence is even more limited than our military power.

The first of these second tier objectives is stabilization of Iraq under a constitutionally chosen leadership in order to ensure that it not become a breeding ground for a new generation of terrorist groups and a center for the recruitment of desperate and bitter young people. The results of the upcoming Iraqi vote on the draft constitution will be less important than consensus building and bargaining among Iraqi factions within a framework influenced by the constitution and the subsequent elections but not in isolation from Iraqi political realities. There is a huge danger of Iraqi politics becoming a zero sum game, leading to an eventual civil war as outside forces withdraw. A strict adherence to majority rule leads inevitably in that direction. With time and a modicum of personal security, Iraqis are capable of the skillful compromises that would drain away support for the continued insurgency, leading to an eventual civil war as outside forces withdraw. Hopefully, the elected Iraqi leaders will show restraint and be capable negotiators, but they will need much support from the United States and other members of the international community, including a strong role for the United Nations. Failure of these efforts would lead to Iraq either falling under a new tyranny or becoming a failed state. In the latter case, the potential for an Iraqi civil war, massive bloodshed, ethnic cleansing and regional destabilization introduces the prospect of human suffering far beyond what we have seen to date.

I admire the patriotic commitment, hard work and personal sacrifice of ambassadors Bremer, Negroponte and Khalilizad. But we would have been better off from the start of the occupation if the most high profile foreign personality in Iraq had been a non-American who received strong support from the United States. To the diminishing extent that Iraqis will tolerate the role in Iraqi politics of a prominent foreign diplomat, it would be better if that person were of another nationality. U.S. leadership from behind the scenes would be more acceptable to Iraqis

The second objective necessary to sustain the new Iraqi government is economic reconstruction that generates employment, delivers basic services and puts Iraqi oil production on a sound basis for gradual growth. During the first year of the occupation, the U.S. used Iraqi funds for major infrastructure projects, usually awarding contracts to American firms and creating few Iraqi jobs. Now that we are moving the over \$18 billion U.S. aid program into the pipeline, we need to do better. Regrettably, the lack of basic security and a culture of corruption, both on the part of some Iraqi officials and some American contractors diminish what could be a demonstration of U.S. generosity and concern for the basic needs of the Iraqi people. The U.S. has encouraged other countries to form an economic consortium to share the burden of Iraq's economic reconstruction. But we have been unwilling to merge our own aid program with a broad international effort, just as we have unsuccessfully tried to monopolize the foreign role in Iraq's political process.

An Agenda To Put Aside

There are other objectives that range from unattainable to out of reach in the near term. If we are wise, we will keep our focus on what is essential, rather than merely

desirable. The Iraqi government and political establishment are going to do many things that will annoy official Washington and make the American people uncomfortable. The Iraqi government will stay within the Arab consensus on the relations between Israel and the Palestinians, and they may well call for Israeli withdrawal from occupied portions of Syria. A close Iraqi relationship with Iran will be a long term concern for U.S. strategists, at least for as long as relations between Tehran and Washington remain so troubled, but we would be foolish to prefer the risks of a confrontation between those two neighbors. Iraqis are likely to choose a role for Islam in their political and cultural life that will fall short of American preferences, to say nothing of the hopes of secular Iraqis. Militia groups that answer to political parties will often conflict with the constitutional institutions of government, perpetuating the use of violence to settle internal disputes. In the economic sphere, it is improbable that Iraq will opt for the degree of privatization and international participation which might lead to a rapid and sustainable increase in oil production. Success in Iraq over a timeframe meaningful in U.S. strategic terms will be avoidance of disaster, not transformation of the Middle East.

Proposals for a Responsible Disengagement from Iraq

1. Work with either the United Nations or an *ad hoc* international coalition to set up an Iraqi contact group composed of Iraq's neighbors and major outside governments prepared to commit themselves to supporting Iraq's territorial integrity and economic reconstruction. To be truly meaningful, such a group must include Iran and Syria, and the U.S. must be prepared to meet with their representatives in this context on a basis of mutual respect.

2. The contact group should name a respected non-American figure to offer international good offices to Iraqi political leaders. This would support the development of a more inclusive constitutional process and efforts to bring dissident Iraqi groups prepared to renounce the resort to violence into national institutions, including the Iraqi armed forces.

3. At the next conference to encourage donors to Iraq's economic reconstruction, the U.S. should offer to bring its own assistance program into a multilateral planning process as incentive for greater efforts by other donors.

4. The U.S. should enter into urgent discussions with the Iraqi government to establish benchmarks for the gradual disengagement of U.S. and other foreign military units from the policing of Iraqi cities and major lines of transportation, as well as the gradual reduction of overall force levels.

5. The U.S. should enter into urgent discussions with the Iraqi government on arrangements for the period in which residual U.S. forces would be requested by the Iraqis to provide training, logistics, air cover and back up to Iraqi forces attempting to regain control over Iraq's borders and to deal with armed insurgent groups.

6. The U.S. should make clear that the intention of the U.S. is not to maintain forces in Iraq beyond minimal and mutually agreed levels. At the same time, we will not engage in a precipitous withdrawal that would jeopardize Iraq's own efforts to assure their national security. We will not establish artificial deadlines.

7. The U.S. should encourage Iraq to seek the assistance of other governments, especially from the NATO alliance, in providing military training and assistance. To the

extent that sovereign Iraqi decisions are compatible with our own interests, we should encourage governments to respond generously to Iraqi security needs.

Challenge for America

The time has come to reorder our national priorities. But Americans must also accept the reality that flight from a rough international environment is not possible. We must disengage militarily from Iraq. How we do so will determine whether we make a bad situation into a worse one. History will judge us harshly if we continue to allow ideological preconceptions and wishful thinking to determine our course. The answer is to establish achievable goals within both the limits of our national resources and the realities of Iraq in its regional context.