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Death, Misery And Debt: Iraq's Unintended Conquest Of America

By: Doug Bandow – March 25, 2013

Secretary of State John Kerry made a surprise visit to Baghdad to ask the Iraqi government to stop helping Iran support Syria's Bashar Assad. Kerry received an embarrassing rebuff—so much for the Bush administration's celebrated victory over Saddam Hussein.

This time ten years ago the grand Iraqi cakewalk had begun. American military forces were racing toward victory. The world was going to be transformed.

But not in the way President George W. Bush and his top officials imagined. Invading Iraq turned out to be one of Washington's greatest strategic mistakes.

U.S. policy in the Middle East long has been marked by myopic, counter-productive meddling. Six decades ago the U.S. and British governments organized a coup ousting Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh. Left in charge was Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.

The Shah was a corrupt dictator who for 26 years suppressed the democratic opposition and brutalized political opponents. Washington was happy, but the Iranian people felt otherwise, forcing him to flee in 1979.

Islamic fundamentalists led by the Ayatollah Khomeini won control in Tehran. In response, Washington backed Iraq's Hussein in his subsequent aggression against Iran. That experience helped convince him that the U.S. would not block his 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

But the U.S. then attacked Iraq to liberate Kuwait. Washington left American troops in Saudi Arabia, antagonizing the likes of Osama bin Laden, who viewed Washington's presence as desecrating sacred lands.

Although the September 11 atrocities were orchestrated by Afghanistan-based al-Qaeda, neoconservatives and uber-hawks around President George W. Bush used the outrage to advance their objective of removing Hussein. Invading Iraq was presented as a panacea for almost every international ill: terrorism, the Israel-Palestinian conflict, Persian Gulf instability, dictatorship, proliferation, high oil prices. The war would be a cakewalk, the peace a veritable feast.

Administration officials warned of mushroom clouds and suggested Baghdad's complicity with 9/11 while systematically pressuring intelligence officers, distorting

information, and hiding evidence which contradicted their lurid claims. Britain's famed "Downing Street Memo" explained that "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy" decision to attack Iraq.

The war became a weapon in the increasingly partisan red team-blue team political struggle at home. Backing the administration's war was a patriotic test: critics were smeared as traitors and friends of Saddam. David Frum, later purged by the Right for his own ideological heresies, took to the pages of *National Review* to denounce "unpatriotic conservatives" who failed to follow an American variant of the Führerprinzip.

My association with the Right ran back through President Ronald Reagan, whom I served as a Special Assistant, and to college. Yet one conservative publication stopped running my articles against the proposed war—and everything else. A Right-leaning web publication stripped anti-war commentary from my electronic archives. Colleagues became vociferous critics. My email in-box filled with frenzied denunciations: I was a traitor, an idiot, or both.

The post-war planning was as inadequate as the war's justification. The occupation, like the war, turned into an ideological exercise. Those familiar with Iraq were excluded from planning because they lacked the proper political and partisan bona fides.

Top administration officials knew little of the nation they were invading. Iraqi exiles who met with the president reported that he did not know the difference between Shiites and Sunnis. A friend involved in intelligence-gathering for the State Department said policy-makers were not aware of the role played by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most important Shia cleric.

Washington's social engineers expected to make exile and convicted bank fraudster Ahmed Chalabi, who last lived in Iraq in 1956, the new president. Not coincidentally, Chalabi fed U.S. authorities fake intelligence through the operative "Curveball."

Iraqis were treated like a back-drop as Washington's famed Sofa Samurai and Think Tank Warriors magically remade the world. One anonymous Bush aide derided the "reality-based community" and insisted that the administration would make new realities for others to study.

The Bush administration sent 20-somethings vetted for their position on abortion to draft Baghdad's traffic codes and other laws. Washington insisted that the new constitution include protection for Western ideals, such as women's equality. The new Iraqi government was expected to provide America with bases from which it could station troops and attack other Arab nations, such as Iran. Even on leaving the Bush administration treated the locals like puppets to be managed: the new embassy compound was almost as large as Vatican City. American foreign policy was hubris on steroids.

Alas, the "mission accomplished" fantasy didn't last. The administration found that Iraqis were unwilling to allow the U.S. to dictate their new rulers. Liberation loosed intolerance and violence in the divided nation, an artifact of British boundary-drawing. The administration created a new ally of Iran in Baghdad and a new terrorist organization in Iraq. Indeed, observed Jessica Stern of Harvard's School of Public

Health, “Iraq acted as a laboratory for terrorists to hone and perfect their techniques.” Washington strained relations with allies while earning an international reputation for lawlessness and incompetence.

Saddam Hussein, a moral monster, was thankfully gone, but at high cost: 4488 dead Americans, 318 dead allied soldiers, as many as 3,400 dead U.S. contractors, and 35,000 injured Americans, many grievously. Another 200,000 of those who served in Iraq may suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The direct cost of the war was \$1.7 trillion, according to the Cost of War Project at Brown University’s Watson Institute for International Studies, with another \$490 billion owed in veterans’ benefits. But total costs ultimately could run \$3 to \$4 trillion, once all long-term expenses, such as caring for war veterans, which typically peak three to four decades out, are included, according to economists Joe Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes. Toss in interest payments for the debt accumulated to pay for the war and the Watson Institute figures the final total will be \$6 trillion.

Iraqis paid a much higher price. The conflict turned their country into a battlefield subsequently ravaged by looting and civil war. Estimates of the civilian dead ranged upwards to more than a million. The latter, based on respected survey methods, nevertheless has been criticized as excessive. But even the low-end figures are sobering. The Iraq Body Count, which relies on published death accounts, figures between 130,000 and 144,000 killed. However, the website’s exactitude, with numbers “derived from over 31,500 deadly incidents analyzed for information including time and location, perpetrators and weapons used,” undercounts the total. The Watson Institute warned that this estimate “is low, perhaps very low.” Both the Institute and IBC suggest doubling the figures for a more accurate civilian death toll.

While American forces are not directly responsible for most of these deaths, Washington needlessly triggered the Iraqi conflict. Nor are the forgoing the only casualties. The IBC estimates 40,000 combatants of all nationalities also were killed. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians have been injured. IBC lists 135,000, but noted that “official Iraqi figures are consistently higher.” The Iraqi Human Rights Ministry figures 250,000.

Iraqi society suffered grievously in other ways. The civilian infrastructure, including medical, educational, and other essential services, was wrecked, with predictable human consequences. Crime exploded, with religious minorities especially vulnerable to robbery, extortion, and kidnapping. Ethnic cleansing became the norm, and the systematic destruction of mixed neighborhoods was as important as the U.S. troop “surge” in eventually reducing the violence ravaging Iraqi society. As many as five million Iraqis were driven from their homes, many to Kurdistan and perhaps two million overseas. As many as half of Iraq’s Christians were pushed into exile.

Alas, elections did not beget liberty. Iraqi writer Ahmad Saadawi complained that “the Iraqi elite has failed to establish a political system capable of withstanding and resolving sectarian differences under a democratic framework. It has failed to fortify the state and its institutions against the rampant corruption that has become an Iraqi specialty.”

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is no Saddam Hussein, but he isn’t a Thomas Jefferson either. His government has taken an authoritarian path, with the country’s Sunni vice

president sentenced to death in absentia and currently in exile in Turkey. Other leading Sunni politicians are living among fellow Sunnis for protection.

American forces witnessed evidence of Iraqi prison torture before withdrawing. Amnesty International recently reported: “Torture and other abuse of detainees has been one of the most persistent and widespread features of Iraq’s human rights landscape.” Sunni protests are increasing and repression is likely to grow as sectarian violence again rises. Indeed, Maliki reportedly plans to postpone local elections in the Sunni-majority provinces of Anbar and Ninevah.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq has revived, and is blamed for several recent bombings. In fact, the Jamestown Foundation warned that “the Iraqi al-Qaeda affiliate Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) has maintained a steady rate of attacks over the last few months.” According to the *Wall Street Journal* the CIA is “ramping up support to elite Iraqi antiterrorism units,” which not so reassuringly report directly to Maliki.

Finally, as Secretary Kerry discovered, Baghdad is going its own way internationally. The Shia rulers of Iraq have more in common with officials in Iran than in America, whether Republican or Democrat. Iraq’s antagonism toward Kuwait did not disappear with Hussein’s ouster. Baghdad’s dominant Shiites prefer Syria’s Assad over his largely Sunni opponents.

America will pay for its Iraq mistake for years, perhaps decades, to come. Yet the most fervent neoconservative war-makers are like the French Bourbon royalty who when restored to power in 1815 were said to “have learned nothing and forgotten nothing.” The tenth anniversary of the invasion has brought forth many mea culpas, but mostly from outsiders who clambered aboard the neocon bandwagon.

In contrast, former Vice President Richard Cheney—the man who had “other priorities” when his government called on him to serve in war—said he would “do it [again] in a minute.” Sen. John McCain used Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel’s confirmation hearing to insist that he had been right about the conflict.

Hoover Institution’s Fouad Ajami admitted that not everything had worked out in Iraq and blamed ... Barack Obama for not offering “meaningful protection for the fledgling new order in Baghdad.” *National Review*’s editors also acknowledged problems, but similarly emphasized that it was all ... the president’s fault.

National Review explained: “Shamefully, [President Obama] had no interest in building on [the situation bequeathed him] or even maintaining it. The administration failed to secure an agreement with the Iraqis to maintain a U.S. troop presence. As soon as we left, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki let loose with his worst instincts. He has ruled as an authoritarian and Shia sectarian and has allied himself with Iran. In our absence, al-Qaeda in Iraq has begun to make a comeback.”

Iraqis still are assumed to be irrelevant ciphers, malleable clay to be casually molded by an assertive American government. Yet the Obama administration actually followed the timetable and agreement reached by its predecessor. Prime Minister Maliki rejected administration proposals for a continued U.S. presence; Shia activists and the Iraqi public pressed for America’s withdrawal.

Even had Washington succeeded in browbeating Baghdad into accepting a continuing occupation, the Iraqi people would have been hostile. U.S. forces likely would have become targets of the violence now being employed against Iraqis. Nor would the presence of a few thousand American soldiers have transformed Maliki into a Western democrat or won his support for U.S. objectives. Ajami acknowledged that Maliki has been erecting “a dictatorship bent on marginalizing the country’s Kurds and Sunni Arabs and even those among the Shiites who questioned his writ.” That would be Maliki’s objective even in the presence of the U.S. American forces, which would have ended up buttressing, not liberalizing, his authoritarian regime.

After Baghdad rejected his plea for assistance against Syria, Secretary Kerry was reduced to whining that members of Congress “are increasingly watching what Iraq is doing.” But they will watch in vain. Occupiers rarely win people’s gratitude. The *Wall Street Journal* editorialists similarly complained that Baghdad “is looking out for its own interests, with little concern for how they square with America’s.” However, that is what naturally happens when nations’ interests diverge.

Yet even now many of the Iraq War’s architects are clamoring for more wars.

America needs peace. War should be a true last resort, not just another policy option for frustrated social engineers and impatient internationalists. Wars are sometimes tragically necessary. But not in Iraq.

After the Spanish-American War, William Graham Sumner wrote an essay with the ironic title: “The Conquest of the United States by Spain.” So too can we speak of Iraq’s conquest of America. The result has been death, misery, and debt. Individual liberty and limited government have been sacrificed. America’s reputation has been sullied.

Americans should hold accountable those responsible. And say no to similar misadventures in the future. Declared former Defense Secretary Robert Gates: “any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should ‘have his head examined,’ as General MacArthur so delicately put it.” Hopefully Gates’ successors will feel the same way. If so, the Iraq War will yield at least one positive legacy.