

OC Register

U.S. should leave Iraq – for good

By **DOUG BANDOW** / Senior fellow, Cato Institute

December 13, 2011

Despite the Obama administration's best efforts, U.S. troops are on their way home from Iraq. Only Iraqi opposition prevented American forces from garrisoning yet another nation forever.

It is time to leave. Finally. Completely. Permanently.

Many of Washington's wars have been unnecessary. Few have been as foolish as Iraq.

The U.S. has badly mismanaged Gulf policy for decades, starting when Washington imposed rule by the thuggish Shah on the Iranian people in 1953. That entangled America in Iraqi as well as Iranian affairs.

President George Bush's invasion was begun under false pretenses: nonexistent weapons of mass destruction and nonexistent ties to al-Qaeda. The war turned a limited problem into a crisis. At a cost of 4500 American lives, a couple hundred thousand dead Iraqis, and \$850 billion so far, "victory" was won.

Hubris led to a great fall. Overthrowing Saddam Hussein proved easy; creating a new democratic nation state turned out to be far more difficult. Instead of demonstrating America's power and cowing America's adversaries, the invasion damaged Washington's international reputation, over-burdened the U.S. military, provided recruits to al-Qaeda, sacrificed precious lives, and wasted valuable resources. It was a striking example of what Washington should not do.

Whatever the purpose of President George W. Bush's misbegotten Mesopotamian adventure, Iraq is no longer a member of the fabled Axis of Evil. Yet after more than eight years of war there is a bipartisan consensus in Washington that America should not leave. President Bush reluctantly agreed in 2008 to the withdrawal of U.S. forces by the end of this year. President Barack Obama opposed the war but pushed the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to let the U.S. stay.

Some analysts wanted American soldiers to remain to police Iraq. For instance, Boston Globe columnist Jeff Jacoby contended that "Iraq's fractious, fragile democracy is still little more than a multitude of factions capable of backsliding into violence without an American presence to keep the peace." William Bennett, best known as Ronald Reagan's drug czar, cited a top official involved in the disastrous Bush occupation of Iraq to declare that the country "cannot survive sectarian violence and Iranian influence on its own."

But how could a few American troops in the future stop sectarian violence when far more American troops in the past could not do so? The Kennedy School's Meghan O'Sullivan argued that the troop presence is a "psychological backstop to a still delicate political system."

However, Iraq's problems reflect the country's underlying reality: it is an artificial nation, tying together Shia and Sunni, and Arabs and Kurds. Hussein's totalitarian rule suppressed these divisions. Washington's invasion unleashed them. In the future contending factions actually might be more willing to risk brinkmanship if they believed that Washington would intervene in a crisis.

Moreover, America's military presence itself would be divisive. Radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr threatened attacks on any occupying garrison and called resistance "an obligation." Even Army Chief of Staff Ray Odierno, a former Iraq commander, warned that maintaining a large presence would "provoke new claims of U.S. occupation." America should get out of the maelstrom of Iraqi politics.

Equally dubious is the argument that American troops must defend Iraq from its neighbors. Having wrecked Iraq's military, Washington obviously left the country defenseless. Since then Baghdad has reconstituted its army, but remains deficient in important areas, such as air power. However, none of Iraq's neighbors poses

much of a threat. Not Jordan, Kuwait, or Saudi Arabia. Turkey has been intervening in Kurdistan for years, but has no designs beyond. Syria is "otherwise occupied," one might say.

What of Iran? Max Boot of the Council of Foreign Relations warned that Iran's Quds Force "must be licking its chops" at the prospect of taking over Iraq. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) said "I'm very, very concerned about increased Iranian influence in Iraq" and argued that the withdrawal was "a strategic victory for our enemies in the Middle East, especially the Iranian regime." Retired Gen. John M. Keane contended the U.S. should stay to "keep the Iranians away from strangling that country." Indeed, he added, "the Iranians are gaining influence in Iraq. And that strategically should be unacceptable to us."

Meghan O'Sullivan said "it is inconceivable that any sensible strategy for addressing Iran would involve withdrawing all U.S. troops from Iraq." Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) argued that the Iranians have "a shot in Iraq they would never had otherwise." The Washington Examiner editorialized that the withdrawal was "encouraging Iranian expansion." Fred Kagan of AEI and Kimberly Kagan of the Institute for the Study of War complained "that Tehran has achieved its goals in Iraq while the U.S. has not." With the war over, wrote Charles Krauthammer, the president's "obligation was to make something of that sacrifice, to secure the strategic gains that sacrifice had already achieved."

Washingtonians apparently live in an Alice in Wonderland world. Iran has influence in Iraq? Who could have imagined?

Iran lies next door to Iraq. The economic and community ties are strong. The people share a common religion. Many Iraqis spent time in Iran in exile while Saddam Hussein was in power. Iraqis and Iranians have far more in common with each other than with Americans. Influence by Tehran on Baghdad is inevitable.

As Robert Merry of the National Interest observed, "if it was a genuine neocon concern, these people should have considered it before they beat the drums for an Iraq invasion that would inevitably upend the centuries-long balance of power between the Persians and Mesopotamians." To the contrary, the Bush administration derided people who thought in terms of containment and balance of power. The very people who most fervently denounce Tehran for "meddling" were the architects of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq—which sound an awful lot like, well, "meddling."

Anyway, American troops are not needed to stop Iranian aggression. Tehran, itself facing domestic political turmoil and international pressure over its alleged nuclear program, has no interest in starting a war with Iraq. After all, influence comes naturally for Iran, reflecting shared values and interests as well as personal and communal ties. War would destroy all of them for no obvious gain. Iran likely could defeat the Iraqi military, but not govern the Iraqi people.

Simply bizarre is the belief that any number of U.S. personnel could prevent Iranian influence, which grew even when Washington formally occupied Iraq. Indeed, an American presence would support Iranian claims that the U.S. is an imperial power dedicated to subordinating Iraq to American interests.

Some Washington policymakers claimed that a continuing occupation would promote democracy. For instance, House Armed Services Committee Chairman Buck McKeon (R-CA) worried about shortcomings in Iraq which "could reverse the decade of hard work and sacrifice both countries have endured to build a free Iraq." Gen. Keane said U.S. forces should stay "to strengthen democracy."

Argued Secretary of State Hillary Clinton: "We will have a robust continuing presence throughout the region, which is proof of our ongoing commitment to Iraq and to the future of that region, which holds such promise and should be freed from outside interference to continue on a pathway to democracy." She added: "No one should miscalculate America's resolve and commitment to helping support the Iraqi democracy."

However, what kind of democracy has resulted after eight years of U.S. occupation? Once seen as weak, Prime Minister Maliki has concentrated power in his hands. He turned a minority parliamentary position into the premiership and refused to honor a power-sharing agreement his chief opponent.

The International Crisis Group pointed to Maliki's expansion of government control over supposedly independent agencies tasked with overseeing the government. Worse, reported Yochi Dreazen: "Maliki has refused to appoint either a permanent defense minister or an interior minister, keeping Iraq's U.S.-trained armed forces and intelligence services under his sole control. He has also taken direct command of the ostensibly neutral 150,000 Iraqi troops stationed in Baghdad, using them to arrest rival politicians, human-rights activists, and journalists."

Maliki brutally suppressed anti-government demonstrations coinciding with the Arab Spring, targeted human rights activists, and cracked down on the media, having critics of his regime arrested and tortured. A number of journalists have been murdered, with government agents the chief suspects. Ghada al-Amely of the al-Mada newspaper told National Journal: "We feel just as scared as we did during Saddam's time." Maliki recently used improbable rumors of a Baathist coup to arrest more than 600 former members of the Baath party, including academics.

Washington has said little. Indeed, Wikileaks captured America's ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, observing that "It is in the interests of the U.S. to see that process of strengthened central authority continue." So much for democracy.

In fact, the desire for a continuing American garrison has little to do with stabilizing Iraq and everything to do with pressuring Tehran. Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates spoke of keeping forces in Iraq to "make Iran uncomfortable." Sen. Lindsey Graham complained that "The Iranians don't fear us at all." Andrew Tabler of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy contended that keeping forces in Iraq "would have really facilitated our policy vis-à-vis the Iranians." Bennett worried about the military withdrawing "from its strongest post from which to engage Iran."

More extreme is Boot, who called for "effective imperial oversight" to transform the region. Obviously one war is not enough. Several of Iraq's neighbors deserve attention. Complained the Washington Examiner: the "sudden unwillingness to preserve an adequate U.S. presence in Iraq will only provide comfort to Syria's Bashar al-Assad regime, further isolate Israel, and embolden Turkey's increasingly anti-Western faction."

But even if endless bloody war was in America's interest, why would the Iraqis go along with such plans? It would be beyond stupid for Baghdad to turn America's enemies into Iraq's enemies. The Iraqis have not allowed their nation to become a client state of Tehran. They do not want to become a client state of Washington either. Even U.S. favorite Ayad Allawi, a secular-minded former prime minister, explained: "Keeping Americans in Iraq longer isn't the answer to the problems of Iraq. It may be an answer to the problems of the U.S., but it's definitely not the solution to the problems of my country."

Thus, Baghdad decided that American forces had to leave. Explained Defense Secretary Leon Panetta: "The bottom line is that this is not about us. It's about what the Iraqis want to do and the decisions that they want to make." In fact, polls showed that 80 percent of Iraqis wanted the U.S. to leave.

After loudly proclaiming their fidelity to democracy, the administration's Republican critics assumed the Iraqis were mindless puppets. In the GOP's view, President Obama could have won Iraqi assent had he wanted to do so. Characteristic was Fred Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute: the president decided "to abandon America's interests in Iraq and damage our position in the Middle East."

Lots of theories were advanced: if President Obama had talked more often with Prime Minister Maliki, if Washington had engaged Baghdad sooner, if the administration had initiated "serious" negotiations, if the Pentagon had proposed deploying a larger number of troops, then all would have been well. Perhaps, but the people offering these assurances were generally the same ones who insisted that the military operation was going to be a cakewalk, the Iraqis would embrace a disgraced émigré as president, and the new government would do whatever Washington wanted. It turned out that Iraqis were uncomfortable about agreeing to a presence designed to advance America's strategic designs.

Even with the formal withdrawal, America will still be heavily involved in Iraqi affairs. Sean Kane and William Taylor of the United States Institute of Peace noted that "This military-to-civilian transition in Iraq involves the State Department and a plethora of civilian agencies taking on tasks ranging from traditional diplomacy and development assistance to police mentoring, military modernization, and managing and providing protection to an estimated 17,000 employees and contractors."

Nor has the Pentagon quit trying to create a permanent garrison. Gen. Jeffrey Buchanan, the top military spokesman in Iraq, said the U.S. "has committed to an enduring partnership with Iraq." Vice President Joe Biden visited Baghdad in November and Prime Minister Maliki indicated that the U.S. would have some role in training Iraqi soldiers. Administration officials also said they hoped to use the 2008 Strategic Framework Agreement as an excuse to bring back U.S. forces.

Moreover, with U.S. troops coming home from Iraq Washington is pressing Kuwait to add 3500 to 4500 more Americans to the more than 20,000 already stationed there. The administration also is seeking to expand military ties with the Gulf's dictatorial monarchies. And the Pentagon is talking about increasing the U.S. naval presence in the region. Overall, Secretary Clinton explained: "Iran would be badly miscalculating if they did not look at the entire region and all of our presence in many countries in the region, both in bases [and] in training, with NATO allies, like Turkey."

With the impending U.S. departure there is much talk of "loss." Gen. Keane worries about "losing the peace." Columnist Jacoby argued that if the president "turns out to have squandered the peace after so many sacrificed so much to win the war, there won't be much doubt about who lost Iraq." Bennett opined: President Obama "risks losing a country.... And he risks losing it to Iran." Krauthammer declared: "Years from now we will be asking not 'Who lost Iraq?'—that already is clear—but 'Why?'"

But Iraq is not, and never was, America's to lose.

Most wars end badly, with far more casualties and costs than predicted. So it was in Iraq. Invading Iraq was one of the worst strategic blunders in recent U.S. history. Nothing can reverse the costs of an unnecessary war, but pulling out the troops will avoid the costs of an unnecessary occupation.