

March 9, 2010

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Victory in Iraq at Last (Not!)

Many neoconservatives and the politicians and pundits who love them have abandoned the we've-turned-the-corner-in-Iraq story plot - or the-next-six-months-will-prove-critical-in-Iraq expectation game - a long time ago. But when it comes to trying to salvage their Iraq-War narrative, some hard-core neocons would resort to almost anything, including to coning us -- and deluding themselves (hallucination being a familiar trait among members of the Faith-based community) -- that the recent election in Iraq has "vindicated" their push to oust Saddam Hussein and invade Iraq. Forget all the naysayers, they say. You know, those guys who had warned that Saddam had ties to Al Qaeda, that Iraq didn't have WMD's, that the Americans would not be welcomed as "liberators," that the U.S. could not plant a democracy in Iraq, that the invasion of that country would result in enormous costs in life and treasure. They were wrong. And we were right.

The somewhat weird spectacle of those who were directly or indirectly responsible for one of the worst - if not the worst - strategic disaster in American history declaring V(ictory)-I(raq) Day can probably be compared to a scene in which the rats are returning to the sinking ship. The election was a "sign that the war in Iraq, while costly and deservedly controversial, was not for nothing," according to then-and-now Iraq War cheerleader Jonah Goldberg. "Putting Iraq on a path to democracy and decency is a noble accomplishment for which Americans, of all parties, should be proud," he wrote recently. The election "constitute the biggest victory yet for democracy in the Middle East" and demonstrated that "The Bush-Cheney Vision [for Iraq] Wins," argues pop-strategist Thomas Barnett. And even Newsweek magazine, whose reporters and writers were critical in the past of the Bush Administration's Iraq policies, has come out with a cover story titled "Victory at Last: The Emergence of a Democratic Iraq."

"The arguments for abandoning Iraq to Saddam Hussein -- and the contention that democracy has somehow been forced upon a reluctant country, will be consigned forever to the graves they deserve," predicted a neoconservative flack by the name of Bartle Bull in The Wall Street Journal. The guy was probably drunk on kool-aid when he wrote the following: "Iraq's Shiites know whom they have to thank for their freedom. Shiism itself, with its reverence of human saints and its roots in Aristotelian reason, has powerful affinities with Western humanism. A Shiite-dominated Iraq means a free Iraq, and it behooves Washington to start acting on the potential in this friendship." Indeed, it's the dawn of a new age of Aristotelian reason and Western humanism in Baghdad.

Other pundits, noting that Obama Administration officials have described the Iraq election as an

"achievement," as Robert Kagan has done in The Washington Post, arguing that both "the administration and the Republican opposition are committed to a stable, increasingly democratic Iraq" which supposedly reflects the emergence of new bipartisan consensus on foreign policy that supposedly echoes the ambitious neoconservative principles. Perhaps we need to reiterate the old post-Mission-Accomplished neoconservative slogan, "We're all neoconservatives now!" And now let's be on our way to do a regime-change in Tehran.

Indeed, the leaders of the neoconservative surge assume that the most effective way of winning this recent battle over the foreign-policy narrative is by lowering the bar for victory in Iraq, reminding me of the Onion headline from June 23, 2004, "Coalition: Vast Majority of Iraqis Still Alive" and the "news report" that quoted a U.S. official declaring that "as the Coalition's rule draws to a close, the numbers show that we have an awful lot to be proud of", and asserting that after all, "as anyone who's taken a minute and actually looked at the figures can tell you, the vast majority of Iraqis are still alive -- as many as 99 percent. While 10,000 or so Iraqi civilians have been killed, pretty much everyone is not dead."

It is true that the 2007 U.S. troop "surge" may have prevented a humiliating American military defeat in Iraq a la Vietnam. That may be described as great news if you consider the more depressing alternative of helicopters carrying U.S. personnel from the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad's Green Zone. Isn't it, however, like celebrating the fact that your financial advisor who had promised to help your triple your investment hasn't lost all your money. But measuring one's success should be based on the standards that he or she had set for themselves. So let's recall how the Bushchenev Administration and its disinformers had framed the decision to oust Saddam Hussein and invade Iraq -- their own standards for victory there or what they promised us would happen - and measure those expectations against what had really happened:

1. The Bushchenev Administration succeeded in winning the support of Congress and the American people - as well as some allies - by arguing that Saddam's Iraq was a clear and present danger to U.S. national security post-9/11 - that the Ba'ath regime in Baghdad supposedly had ties to Al Qaeda (and perhaps was even involved in the attacks in New York and Washington) - and that it had weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) that it was planning to use against the U.S. We know now that these main rationalizations for going to war - WMDs in the hands of an alleged buddy of Osama - proved to be based on totally wrong assumptions.

2. Neoconservative ideologues had promised that winning the war in Iraq would be a "cake walk" - a relatively brief and cost-free military campaign that will not require many American troops and vast financial resources (Iraqi oil will pay for it), that the American soldiers will be welcomed with flowers and will end-up withdrawing after a few months after our Iraqi "allies" (Ahmad Chalabi) will form a stable government. We know now that Mission Accomplished didn't happen. U.S. troops are still stuck in Iraq with 4,379 US Soldiers killed, 31,669 seriously wounded. See the rest of the statistics on Iraqi and other casualties and financial costs here.

3. Bushchenev and the neocons also dismissed warnings that the U.S. invasion would open a Pandora Box of ethnic, religious and tribal rivalries between Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds and assured us that Iraq would be transformed into a functioning liberal democracy and that a pro-American Iraq could serve as a model for the entire Arab Middle East. And the rest is history, as they say. The Pandora Box exploded and while Iraq has not descended into a full-blown civil war, the collapse of the Ba'ath regime, followed by a series of provincial and national elections has failed to create the foundations for a liberal and secular democracy where the rights of women and minorities are protected. Instead, it helped bring to power the Shiite political parties that are backed by militias and death squads and who maintain ties to the Shiite clerics and to Iran. At the same time, Sunni resentment has made it easier for Al Qaeda and its affiliates to win new recruits while the Kurds have established an autonomous mini-state in the North. The state controls most of the economy, unemployment rate is above 50 percent and according to Transparency International Iraq is the fourth-most-corrupt country in the world. And close to 5 million Iraqis, including members of the middle class, professional and many Christians have been displaced since the U.S. invasion.

4. Recall that the "road to Jerusalem leads through Baghdad," that the ousting of Saddam and the U.S. victory in Iraq was supposed to create the conditions for peace in Israel/Palestine and advance U.S. interests. In fact, the removal of Saddam and his secular Sunni-controlled Ba'ath regime had

removed the main military power in the Persian Gulf that was containing the power of Iran and its Ayatollahs. Coupled with the increasing power of the Hizbollah in Lebanon and the election of Hamas in Palestine - two developments that the Bush Administration helped bring about, the invasion of Iraq has shifted the balance of power in the Middle East in favor of Iran and its regional allies and encouraged the Iranians to accelerate their nuclear military program, resulting in the erosion of American influence in the Middle East, harming the interests of its allies in the region, diminishing the chances for Israeli-Palestinian peace, encouraging anti-Americanism and terrorism in the Broader Middle East, and diverting military resources from the fight against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Yes. The Shiites and Kurds of Iraq may be free than they were under Saddam. But it's not clear in what way that advances U.S. interests, especially if the new regional balance of power will end-up producing new regional military conflagrations, like a war with Iran.

And the bottom line is the following: Would the Bush Administration been able to win support from Congress and the American people to invade Iraq in order to liberate the Shiites and the Sunnis there while considering the costs of such a "victory?" With victories like that, who needs defeat?

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