

American Voters Must Not Reward Failure

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Region: [USA](#)

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How critical is the situation in Iraq? It depends on who you ask and when. Common sense tells us that the situation there has always been critical. In fact, one could dare claim that the country has been stricken with political and social upheaval since the early 1990s, when the US led its 'coalition of the willing' to liberate Kuwait.

Unfortunately, since American intent was hardly freedom for Kuwait for its own sake, the violent episode didn't end right there and then. The war established a completely different mood in the region where a permanent American military presence and subsequent built ups threatened a second, and much larger war.

Unlike the dominant narrative, however, the 1990-91 war never brought peace or tranquility to the region; rather, it agitated internal strife within Iraq, positioning the entire region through the barrel of a gun. Over the next decade, US-led UN economic sanctions wrought untold destruction to the very fabric of Iraqi society, as hundreds of thousands perished because of lack of medicine and food. The US government calculated that a weary Iraq could not withstand a future military action, and that ravished Iraqis would welcome the toppling of the Iraqi dictator.

Much of that came to fruition in March 2003. Although the televised statue toppling near the Palestine Hotel was at best cheesy military propaganda. In truth, many Iraqis were indeed content to see the end of the Saddam era, while some felt utterly uneasy about replacing an Iraqi dictator with an American one; literally.

But there was no honeymoon to speak of, even during those early stages of occupation. The fact that Shia areas initially welcomed the Americans and largely Sunni population centers fought them, tells us more about the sectarianism of Iraqi society than a particular event that served as a turning point in the anti-occupation struggle. Sectarianism in Iraq is deep-rooted indeed, but it was even further infuriated by a determined US policy that sought an alliance with Shias and Kurds to achieve what it termed 'Debaathification of Iraq', similar to the 'Denazification of Europe' decades earlier. This policy was founded on the misguided hypothesis that the Baath party was largely an 'anti-Shia and Kurd', exclusively Sunni club. The process entailed the dismantling of the Iraqi army — an icon of stability and order in Iraq — and replacing it with an army that consisted largely of Kurdish militias in the north and Shia militias everywhere else; both groups had vengeful and murderous intents.

Like always, the situation was critical then, as it continues to be so, but Iraq, nonetheless, was losing its appeal as a primary news item, for those who were being killed were simply members of the crowd most hostile to the occupation, even if civilians. Only when Al Qaeda militants capitalized on the Sunni communities' feeling of betrayal, vulnerability, ceaseless

demonization and eventually being factored out of the political equation altogether, did the Iraq story regain its sense of urgency. It's much easier to sell the American public a fight against Al Qaeda than one against disfranchised Iraqi Sunnis, for obvious reasons.

The Bush administration, its faithful strategists and PR managers have done their utmost to carry out the president's vision for a new Iraq that would serve as an icon of democracy for a new Middle East, and have worked tirelessly to sell the 'achievements' of the administration to an unimpressed public, who slowly but determinately realized that that the Iraq war was a colossal mistake.

I do remember the days when I predicted similar scenarios to what is taking place today, only to be shouted out by right wing radio show hosts, for my apparent lack of patriotism. Now the president himself, accompanied by leading army generals and senators, is saying more or less what progressive writers and intellectuals have contended for years: Bush is finally seeing some similarities between Iraq and Vietnam, and top American officials are candidly talking of Iraq as a "problem" and a "very difficult" one at that. (A similar storm was unleashed in Britain when General Sir Richard Dannatt, chief of the general staff, said in a newspaper interview that the presence of foreign troops might be "exacerbating" the situation in Iraq.)

But why did it take the Bush administration all of this time to reach such a simple conclusion, that was deduced by almost three quarters of the US population before it was inferred by the administration itself? Did 650,000 Iraqi and nearly 2,800 American lives have to be wasted in order for the president to summon General John Abizaid, overall US commander for the Middle East, and General George Casey, in command of the American troops in Iraq, to discuss the country's other options out of the quagmire?

The bipartisan Iraq Study Group, appointed by the US Congress and co-chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker to examine alternative solutions to the growing Iraqi nightmare, will not reveal its findings and recommendations until next January. Leaks made to the media predict that the very gloomy report could make extraordinary recommendations, including phased withdrawal, diplomatically engaging Iran and Syria, among other options. But even with such a dramatic shift in approach, Baker warns "there's no magic bullet for the situation in Iraq. It's very, very difficult."

President Bush meanwhile continues to wow his ardent followers with tired speeches of wars that must be won, democracies that must be achieved and is still industriously infusing his preverbal 'cut and run' mantras, knowing deep inside that his dream of a clean Iraq victory is long gone.

At the time of the drafting of this article, Al Sadr militants seem to be controlling the streets in Amara, south of Baghdad, ready to 'liberate' other cities, while British forces are preparing a grim return to a city they victoriously handed over to the Iraqi police. America's allies, the militias and their deaths squads, are increasingly determined to fight the 'occupiers'; as if the Iraq nightmare could possibly get any more frightening.

But I am still not sure why the situation is critical now, as opposed to last March, for example. Is it a last resort change of strategy prior to the US legislative mid-term elections? The Republicans are trailing in the polls and a deciding factor in that is their botched Iraq strategy; maybe a more pragmatic president who appreciates the intensity of the crisis and is doing his outmost to face it is the best image that Bush's advisors can conjure up at such

short notice. It's anything but one of Karl Rove's other 'genius' ideas, but is certainly worth the effort. On November 7, however, only the American voter has the power to decide: whether to reward failure or to gracefully search for a way out.

Ramzy Baroud's latest book: The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People's Struggle (Pluto Press, London) is available on Amazon.com.

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