

Favored Post-Saddam Leaders Belie Bush's Democracy Rhetoric

By Conn Hallinan

With congressional support safely tucked away, it is now just a matter of time before the Bush administration invades Iraq. Since our recent track record of pummeling Third World countries is solid, it should be pretty much a slam-dunk. It's afterwards that's the tricky part.

Iraq is a patchwork country put together by a British colonial office in 1921. The country was deliberately splintered between the majority Shiites (who have no power), the minority Sunnis (who have all the power) and Kurds (who would rather have their own country). It was planned instability, with everyone at everyone else's throat, while the English quietly plundered the oil.

A U.S. invasion will bring all that instability to the surface, and it is not unlikely that Iraq could literally implode, spreading instability to the rest of the region, with Iraq's huge oil reserves up for grabs. The oilmen in the White House can't have that, so we are going to need another strongman to keep things together. The leading candidates are a chilling lot.

The front runner is Gen. Nizar Al-Khazaji, whom David Mack of the U.S. State Department describes as having "the right ingredients" for being a future leader. The Danish Ministry of Justice disagrees: it has placed Khazaji under partial house arrest while it investigates war crimes charges brought against him by 89 Kurdish and human rights organizations.

Our "future leader" was the Iraqi Chief of Staff from 1980-1991, leading the invasion of Kuwait. He was also in charge of gassing 5,000 Kurds at Halabja in 1988. According to the Danes he personally chose the specific chemicals and their concentration levels. During his

savage repression of the Kurds, some 4,000 villages were bulldozed, and as many as 100,000 people may have died. If we want a real hands-on guy, he's our man.

Another highly regarded fellow is Brigadier-General Najib Al-Salihi, who heads up the Free Officers Movement based in Virginia, and whom the British Foreign Office describes as a "rising star." During the invasion of Kuwait he commanded a Republican Guard armored division, and after the Gulf War was in charge of suppressing the revolts that generated 1.5 million refugees. He even wrote a book about his butchery titled *Al-Zilzal* (The Earthquake).

The guy the Defense Department is pushing is Ahmad Al-Chalabi, who fled Iraq in 1958 when the British-imposed monarchy was overthrown. The Financial Times says it was Chalabi who convinced the Bush administration to go for a "regime change" in Iraq. He has some problems, however. Like a 32-year prison sentence in Jordan for embezzling millions from the Petra Bank and fleeing to London. The State Department and the CIA don't like Chalabi much either, because they think he pilfered some \$2 million from the Iraqi National Congress, which he created in 1992.

Lastly, Vice President Dick Cheney and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz are pushing a seriously loopy proposal to unite Iraq with Jordan under a Hashemite monarchy, essentially obliterating Iraq as a country.

There are always the Kurds, but, since they only represent around 20% of the population, no one seriously thinks they can hold Iraq together. Even if they could, the two main Kurdish parties are long-time, often bloody rivals.

Of course the Bush administration could always deal with Saddam Hussein's internal opposition, but that is pretty unlikely. The two major resistance groups with any following in Iraq are the Iraqi Communist Party and the largely Shiite Al-Da'wa Al-Islamiyya (Islamic Call). In spite of horrible repression, both have managed to keep their underground organizations intact.

Al-Da'wa has close relations with Iran, although those ties have been vastly overblown by a U.S. foreign policy establishment that is essentially clueless to nuances in Islam. Yes, Al-Da'wa is Shiite, and, yes, Iran is

Shiite, but the former are Akhbari Shiites, while the latter are Usuli. Unlike the Usuli, the Akhbari do not believe in direct political rule. And Iraqi Shiites fought Iranian Shiites during the 1981-88 Iran-Iraq War.

And given who runs this administration, can you imagine them even talking to communists? In any case, both Al-Da'wa and the Iraqi Communists have been dealt out of Bush's post-war plans because they oppose a U.S. invasion, which they see as a disaster for the Iraqi people.

So here we are on the eve of destruction, fighting over which thug, crook,

or king should take over afterwards, while crowing to a credulous media about democracy flourishing in the region as a war dividend. "What sort of Iraq do we wake up to after the bombing and what happens in the region?" asked UN General Secretary Kofi Annan recently. Good question.

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