

Of Resolutions and Rhetoric, of Promises and Performance

By Ian Williams | June 16, 2004

On June 8 the UN Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1546—a combined road map and time table for the end of the American occupation in Iraq. The world welcomes penitent sinners, and even though the repentance was forced and expedient, the Security Council equally pragmatically blessed the belated conversion of the U.S. to multilateral paths of righteousness.

Any reading of its final text should be compared to its three previous drafts, and weighed against the triumphalism from the “Pentagon Intellectuals” a year ago when George W. Bush declared “Mission Accomplished.” Indeed it bears favorable comparison even with the wild hopes Washington entertained when it first mooted a new resolution some months ago, before the absence of WMD’s combined with the presence of vicious torture in Abu Ghraib to convert what seemed to have begun as a tactical electoral ploy into a wholesale diplomatic rout.

The resolution is hardly a declaration of Iraqi independence—but as a road map it is far less likely to lead to forty years in the wilderness. It looks particularly good in comparison with meaningless routine pledges from the Quartet powers to the Palestinians about ending the occupation.

The problem facing the Security Council has been that of the apocryphal lost traveler in Ireland, who asks for directions and is told “Well, if I was you, I wouldn’t be startin’ from here.”

The other Council members could have simply refused to deal with what the UN still coyly calls “the Situation between Iraq and Kuwait.” They could have tried to condemn the U.S. invasion outright in a resolution and seen it vetoed, which would have had a doubly dire effect: of destroying any chances of bringing the U.S. back inside the Charter—and direct dire consequences for the movers.

Even in the General Assembly, despite ringing denunciations of Kofi Annan and the UN in many Arab capitals, the President of the Assembly, Jan

Kavan, could not find a single nation prepared to put its name to an explicit resolution. Instead, France, Germany, Russia and other members of the Security Council moved to recognize the *reality* of the occupation, while at no point recognizing the *legitimacy* of the invasion. There was no mood of cutting of Iraqi noses to spite American faces.

The text and tenor of the earlier resolutions showed the Security Council on the defensive against U.S. and British demands. They were also helped along by some appreciation for the U.S. trying to come back into the multilateral fold after its foray into international lawlessness, even if this owed less to contrition than to Washington’s discovery that they could not sell Iraqi oil on the world market without a UN seal of approval.

By the time the text of 1546 was being negotiated in May, the balance of power had tilted completely. The torture pictures and stories combined with American casualties to blunt the President’s re-election prospects at home.

An Occupation in Trouble

Instead of Iraq being a long-term strategic asset and a base for American assaults on Syria and Iran as some of the wilder Pentagonistas had plotted, the U.S. was now having difficulty garrisoning the occupation. Once again, the administration had discounted the malign effects of not getting UN backing for its invasion. The Turks, Pakistanis, Indians and others that they had been counting on to provide troops did not deliver. Half the garrison in Iraq was National Guard and reserve units called up to fill the gap.



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Washington sources had originally suggested that the resolution would disband the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection teams and leave the U.S. inspectors to tidy up the loose ends of the weapons of mass destruction claims. That disappeared even before the first draft, and by the final draft the Russians had inserted a clause recognizing the UN inspectors and promising to revisit their mandate. It was a small but highly symbolic victory given the casual dismissal of these same inspectors by the Bush administration in the lead up to the war.

Washington was originally going to keep a tight hand on the purse strings, but they have now lost the ability to loot Iraqi oil funds for Halliburton, although, buried deep in the text of the resolution is a continuing 5% of oil revenues to go for reparations, mostly to Kuwait.

Of course, watching the news broadcasts in the U.S., one might not appreciate just how far Washington had been forced to retreat. Resolution 1546 says that U.S. troops lose their mandate as soon as the constitutional process is finished, and that their presence could be “reviewed” even earlier—as soon as the Iraqi government wants, and in any case within twelve months. Those sunset clauses are insurance against Bush & Co. changing their minds if re-elected.

Brahimi’s Role

Does the U.N. have a “vital role” in the transition? Well, it did, albeit smaller than many would like, but certainly more than Richard Perle, who trumpeted the death of the organization a year ago, and those like him, desired. It was above all a symbolic role, although for U.N. Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi it was hard work. As an outsider, he could shuttle between the various parties to break the inces-

tuous cycle of a U.S.-appointed government requesting the continued presence of U.S. troops.

Without Brahimi’s role, in his own words as a “catalyst,” it would not have been possible to form a new government. While one may have doubts about the popularity, or indeed the representativeness of the new Iraqi regime, their independence is certainly suggested by the maneuvering they pulled on Bremer and Brahimi in the last days of the handover.

It is now in their own interests, and indeed that of the Multi-National Force (MNF), for the interim government to appear as ostentatiously independent as possible if there is any hope of lessening the continuing attacks.

One of the key fudges in the resolution was over the extent to which the Iraqi administration has effective direction, if not direct command and control, of the MNF. Understandably, in the real world, the Coalition military wants to be able to respond to attacks without waiting for a cabinet meeting in Baghdad, but in the fantasy world of the

Pentagon civilians, it is inconceivable to admit openly that U.S. troops should come under foreign command, Lafayette, Pulaski, and Kosciusko notwithstanding.

Powell’s compromise pledge, endorsed by the resolution, is that “The commander of the MNF will work in partnership with the sovereign Government of Iraq in helping to provide security while recognizing and respecting its sovereignty.” This panders to the Pentagon by not giving the Iraqis an explicit veto and to the Security Council and the Iraqis by re-emphasizing the latter’s sovereignty.

However, even if Bush were re-elected, it would be politically very difficult for the Americans to mount a Falluja-style operation in defiance of the Iraqi government, although no one ever lost too much money betting on the obtuseness of this administration.

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There are many Iraqis angry with the U.S., who seem to want to continue attacking the MNF. It is to be hoped that their current pledge to quit, combined with an injection of sensitivity into the U.S. forces may erase, or at least soften the entirely understandable impression that so many Iraqis had formed, that these were brutal racist invaders who never intended to leave.

Pledges and Promises

How Iraqis judge the sincerity of those pledges depends on U.S. behavior over the next few months. One serious disappointment in the text was the lack of the explicit human rights clauses that were originally asked for by Brazil and other members of the Council. The International Red Cross has pointed out an aspect of it that has deep significance in the shadow of Abu Ghraib: will the U.S. abide by the Geneva Conventions and either charge or release all prisoners captured before the end of the Occupation on June 30? That includes the big one himself: Saddam Hussein.

If the U.S. holds onto prisoners after that date, it is signaling that the occupation is in fact continuing—and inviting continuing resistance. Another similar incitement would be if the U.S. secures any kind of extraterritorial status for the twenty to thirty thousand private contractors currently working in Iraq.

And then there is the ambition of the interim government. Even with Chalabi temporarily sidelined, some of its members could reasonably be suspected of having only the most expedient attachment to democracy. One counter to that is a strong U.N. monitoring presence, able to report back to the Security Council, but once again, that depends on the security situation. Kofi Annan will not risk the lives of his staff on a wholesale basis again.

In addition, in the long run, anyone who wants to ensure a belligerent and vengeful future Iraq just has to make sure that the country carries on paying one barrel in twenty of its oil exports to Kuwait and other claimants.

Even so, if everyone carries out their promises then Iraq at least has some hopes, once direction of events is out of the hands of Washington, perhaps the world's most inept ever imperial power. The scofflaw administration that marched into Iraq unilaterally waving the stars and stripes, is now trying to slither out under cover of the U.N.'s blue flag.

Hastily contrived, verbose, fudged and filled with diplomatic ambiguity as it is, Security Council resolution 1546 is an epitaph to the wilder dreams of empire entertained by most of the Bush administration. There is no doubt that the U.S. broke Iraq and created the present sorry mess, but it is clearly beyond its competence to repair it. The resolution allows the Iraqis to make an attempt themselves.

As Algerian Ambassador Abdallah Baali admitted after supporting the resolution, it is not perfect, but it is "the best we could get under the circumstances."

(Ian Williams contributes frequently to Foreign Policy In Focus (online at www.fpif.org) on UN and international affairs.)

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