

Iraq and the U.S. Legacy

By Colonel Daniel Smith, USA (Ret.) | November 26, 2004

“Competence...made order out of chaos. It knew how to analyze problems and set priorities...It saved lives. But a life saved is not a life released from hatred or the other legacies of violence or repression.”

As far as modern military organizations are concerned, U.S. forces would have to be rated as quite competent at what they are designed to accomplish: killing people, destroying things, and bringing chaos out of order.

If that were the extent of expectations about modern armed forces, nothing more would need be said. But today's military forces are expected to reverse the traditional process, particularly those who, like the U.S. in Iraq, created the problem. To date, efforts by the U.S. to recreate a stable, new order that incorporates the best traditions and practices of the past, nourishes expectations for the future, and meets the immediate needs of the population, have lagged significantly.

On meeting the immediate needs of the population, a survey by the Iraqi Health Ministry, the UN, and a Norwegian nonprofit agency found that malnutrition among children under five has almost doubled—from 4.0 to 7.7%—since the March 2003 invasion. The culprit is a combination of unsafe drinking water, lack of reliable electricity or fuel stocks to boil water, and crumbling or non-existent sewage systems.

Security—the absence thereof—for Iraqis, for humanitarian aid workers, for UN personnel, even for military forces in central Iraq and a number of locations elsewhere in the country, has created a climate of fear both for the present and the future. The U.S. trumpeted its action as liberating the Iraqis from a tyrant, which is true as far as it goes. But the tyrant, for all the predictable and utter ruthlessness he employed when “needed,” managed to provide enough services to keep a restive population under control.

So far, the U.S. has neither duplicated the provision of services nor provided a general sense of security. Major aid agencies have been forced to withdraw their staff because of the dangers. And despite the intentions of Washington, official government humanitarian aid and reconstruction has been limited by the continuing violence. As two long-time aid

workers observed November 23, “aid or reconstruction carried out at gunpoint...[is] virtually indistinguishable from military and political action.” Their summary: “Reconstruction has not occurred. Civil society has not been restored.”

In fact, 20 months after the invasion, some among those who supported war are beginning to call for troop reductions. The change of heart comes not because the security situation has improved but because it just might get better if the aggravating presence of large numbers of foreign troops is reduced. Fewer “occupiers” would remove a major pretext for continued violence and could serve to induce more Iraqis to abandon armed conflict for political participation.

Indeed, with the announcement of elections for the national assembly on January 30, a definitive statement of U.S. intentions in Iraq would be well-timed. It would complement other recent decisions and announcements, including:

- November 18: agreement by the “Paris Club” (the 19 wealthiest creditor nations) to write off 80% of Iraq's debt to the Club members (\$42 billion, roughly one-third of Iraq's total debt of \$120 billion) in three stages between 2004-2008.
- November 23: statement by Iraqi election officials that 220 parties had applied to participate in the elections. (Less well publicized was a November 18 report that 47 groups—Sunni, Shi'ite, Christian, and Turkomen—agreed not to participate because of the U.S. attack on Fallujah.)
- November 24: the communiqué from the high-level meeting at Sharm el-Sheikh of Iraq's neighbors, the Group of Eight leading industrial coun-

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tries, China, the European Union, Arab League, Organization of the Islamic Conference, and the UN that called for a concerted effort at pre-election nation-building that would set the stage for a “united, federal, democratic and pluralistic state.”

These follow a *fatwa* issued in October by Shi’ite Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani that directs all Iraqis to vote in the January ballot, a move that puts enormous pressure on the interim Iraqi government to stay with the electoral timetable, especially since the national assembly will choose a new interim government from its members. It will also draft a new constitution and prepare for a final round of elections in December 2005 for a permanent government.

So what could the U.S. do to move toward resolving its dilemma? It should:

- publicly commit the U.S. to total, unconditional withdrawal with no residual bases;
- cut Baghdad Embassy staff to fall in the range of other U.S. embassies in the region;
- concentrate redevelopment aid on small projects that directly employ Iraqis so that more Iraqis feel they have a future;
- respect existing cultural “authority” lines; they may be imperfect, but correcting them is not the purview of foreign occupiers;
- properly train and equip Iraqi security forces on the premise that quality is more important than quantity;
- trust these quality Iraqi forces and let them operate independently of U.S. troops;

- keep the commitment to leave unconditionally and completely.

The last, of course, is the most important—and will be the hardest to do. But without it, the U.S. may well discover that its Iraq adventure, instead of releasing Iraqis from “hatred or the other legacies of violence or repression,” only intensified and spread anti-American hatred throughout the world.

Dan Smith <dan@fcl.org> is a military affairs analyst for Foreign Policy In Focus (online at www.fpif.org), a retired U.S. army colonel and a senior fellow on Military Affairs at the Friends Committee on National Legislation.

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