

The Iraq-U.S. Second Anniversary

By Col. Daniel Smith (Ret.) | March 18, 2005

March 20th marks 731 days—two years—since the first munitions of the second U.S.-led coalition against Saddam Hussein's regime exploded in Baghdad.

Two years later, the U.S. remains wedded to Iraq, providing the vast majority of the military force that is trying to subdue if not suppress a virulent insurgency that United Nations observers on the ground estimate is comprised of as many as 43 different factions. Violence continues on a daily basis—averaging 50 to 60 incidents a day with fatalities in the 20s and 30s not unusual. Most deaths are among the indigenous population, both low-level officials (primarily police and local government) and ordinary Iraqis. But foreign military forces occupying the country remain targets.

This is not the first intervention by the U.S. to effect regime change, nor is it the first to go astray. But it is the one chosen and launched by the Bush administration 24 months ago, the one that is draining lives—U.S., Iraqi, and others—and treasure that should be devoted to human needs:

On March 2nd, 2005, U.S. military fatalities passed 1,500. (The toll on March 18 stands at 1,518.) Ten and one-half months passed after the first Tomahawk missiles fell before the U.S. experienced the 500th war fatality. The milestone of 1,000 dead came after only another 8 and one-half months. It took but 5 and three-fourths months for the next 500 to perish. Who will be the last U.S. soldier to die—and when? Who will be the last Iraqi to die during the occupation?

As of February 2005, Congress had appropriated \$154 billion for military operations and reconstruction in Iraq. The FY2005 supplemental request contains another \$64 billion for Iraq, according to the House Budget Committee democratic staff. Moreover, the Pentagon has already put Congress on notice that a supplemental funding bill will be needed in FY2006 for the war in Iraq. How many have died from preventable diseases because money was not available for purchasing and distributing medicine? More to the point, how many *more* will perish?

Iraq today, like Germany after November 1918, is at a crossroads. Post-World War I Germany's Weimar Republic, formed January 1919, immediately faced three problems: incipient secession, politically induced violence, and devastating economic pressures.

In the election January 30, 2005, Iraqis chose 275 delegates to a new national assembly that, under the Transitional Administrative Law of March 2004, is to form a transitional government and a constitutional drafting committee. Six weeks after the election, the transitional government has yet to be fully formed. The national assembly has met once—on March 16. The hope that violence would decrease over the rest of 2005 because more Iraqis would identify their interests with a unified Iraq that is completely sovereign politically and economically has yet to be clearly demonstrated.

For this to be the outcome, the transitional government and constitutional committee must be perceived as unifying forces independent of the foreign military presence. This may be difficult, for of the 111 slates of candidates who participated in the January election, three dominated the ballot. The challenge before the winners, as they bargain for positions of governance, is to include those ethnic, tribal, and religious groups that are not within the circle of big winners.

The Bush administration has also complicated the task of the national assembly by refusing to make a clear, unequivocal declaration that the United States has no imperial interests in Iraq. President Bush has made general statements several times that U.S. troops will leave Iraq, but neither the administration nor the Congress has been willing to unequivocally declare that the United States will leave no troops or bases behind. At the same time, the president is spending millions of dollars to build "permanent"



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military bases and U.S. military commanders privately estimate troops could remain in Iraq for many years.

This lack of clarity is particularly dangerous in a society awash in weapons. Iraq is a country in which many political organizations had—and some still could reconstitute—private militias first formed to harass Saddam Hussein's security apparatus. As exiled leaders flowed back into Iraq on the heels of the U.S. invasion force, these militias emerged, with some—notably Moqtada al Sadr's Mahdi army—even attacking the coalition forces. Should any of these factions feel the transitional government is deliberately ignoring its demands or curtailing legitimate dissent, it could reconstitute its fighters, thereby creating a new and very different rationale for the current violence: disenfranchisement.

The nine partisan militias had until January 2005 to comply fully with the order to dissolve. The unvoiced question is whether those fighters who have been folded into the new Iraqi army would—if summoned—revert to their former, narrow allegiance or stay with the national army.

As Iraq marks the second anniversary of the beginning of the second Iraq war, there is good news. In an early March poll by the International Republican Institute, 62% of Iraqis polled said they thought their country was going in the right direction. The bad

news is that two heavily Sunni and a Kurdish provinces, where violence is highest, were not included. And among those who were questioned, only 33% of Sunnis were optimistic as compared to 71% of Kurds and 66% of Shi'ites.

Iraqis, like the U.S. public, remain deeply divided on most aspects of the war. As for the future, the wisest course may be the standard military rejoinder when no ready answer to a problem is apparent: "Wait. Out."

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