

The “New” Iraq

By Col. Daniel Smith, U.S. Army (Ret.) | October 12, 2005

Random thought: Columbus Day is here again.

When I was growing up, Old Chris was still regarded as the first European to set foot on dry land in the western hemisphere. Then someone discovered that the Great Discoverer may actually have come in second. Yet it was Columbus’ voyage, not that of the Norse that, for good and ill, resulted in the eventual migration of Europeans to the Americas—followed by people from other parts of the globe, some involuntarily.

Among today’s U.S. public, only a few Italians (Columbus was Italian by birth) and Spanish (Spain financed the voyage) seem to be caught up in the “who was first” controversy. And there are other “Old World” rivalries that manifest themselves from time to time. But for the most part, in the 440 years since the start of the first permanent European settlement in North America (St. Augustine, Florida was founded in 1565), we have collapsed and integrated people from 190 countries and many Native Americans into one still-evolving identity. We have invented the “American.”

But this initial success concealed a trap. Having done a passable job inventing this new colossus—made possible because the country had numerous opportunities to correct mistakes made by earlier generations—politicians and other elites turned their gaze to the outside world. But rather than trying to discover (a relatively passive activity) what “is” the world and how the U.S. could best integrate its power for the global good, today’s politicians assume that the U.S. is entitled to go about inventing (a very creative and energetic activity) that world and making it adjust to Washington’s interests.

Re-Inventing Iraq

Hence Iraq. Hence the war to depose Saddam Hussein and liberate Iraq from a brutal dictator. The moment the Iraqis figured out that the U.S. adminis-

tration really was going to try to re-invent, not re-discover, Iraq is the moment that U.S. forces went from liberators to occupiers.

No country, least of all Iraq with its long history, is a *tabula rasa*. Its people fall into 27 traditional ethnic or sectarian divisions, each with its own leadership. In its re-invention, the U.S.-dominated Coalition Provisional Authority promptly collapsed these into 3, thereby effectively undercutting traditional Iraqi identity without presenting a viable alternative or web of alternatives. Such wrenching of the traditional basis of identity inevitably spilled into the myriad activities associated with rebuilding the country. This has been glaringly apparent in Iraqi politics where the central “power” offices—prime minister, president, speaker of the Assembly—have been effectively “Lebanized” by being “assigned” to each of the main blocs.

Ironically, even as the U.S. insists on dealing with its tripartite invention, at least two of them, Shi’ite Arabs and Kurdish Sunnis, are fracturing back into their more traditional competing power centers. At the same time, the closer-knit Sunni Arabs have been forced for survival reasons to engage politically in the October constitutional referendum. Yet if they vote overwhelming against the constitution and it still passes, they may well abandon political dialogue, feeling that their views and interests will always be ignored by the other factions.



And as the date for the referendum on the constitution neared, Sunni fears seemed confirmed. Unlike the incredible shrinking of Iraqi identity, changes to the draft constitution began to multiply. Agreements made were reversed; language was parsed so finely that different parties could assert widely differing meanings from the same phrase. The UN was to print two million copies of the draft in time for distribution to and examination by voters before the October 15 balloting. At one point, the Shi'ite majority in the national assembly declared that the electoral base for determining if voters in a province had accepted or rejected the draft would be registered voters, not the number of actual voters. If left to stand, this interpretation would have guaranteed passage of the constitution, thus making the whole election moot. Only after heavy UN and U.S. pressure was the original base—actual voters—restored.

It may be moot anyway. Shopkeepers in some areas, fearing reprisals, are refusing to accept copies of the draft to distribute with rationed goods. Elsewhere, province governors reportedly are accepting boxes containing copies of the draft constitution—and storing them in their offices. And in rural areas especially, tribal leaders are instructing their people how to vote—although even the leaders have not read the “latest” draft.

In the midst of all the goings-on and back and forths, the White House looks on benignly, asserting that the most important thing is not the end-document but the evolution of the constitutional process. Their number one exhibit is the U.S. Constitution, which secured approval of the required nine states because the Founding Fathers agreed beforehand that the first action of the federal congress would be passage of the Bill of Rights.

Unfortunately, the comparison doesn't hold, for the writers of the U.S. Constitution had settled, for their time, all the dominant issues save one—slavery. The Iraqi constitution going into the referendum leaves unsettled significant issues such as the relationship between and the powers of the prime minister and president, the role of women in an Islamic society, the role of sharia in contributing to the emergence and application of Iraqi law, and the inclusion of sharia judges on the secular Iraqi Supreme Court.

The real impact of these converging procedural and substantive disparities may well not be immediately clear. The Kurdish parties are expected to vote for passage of the draft constitution in the expectation that Kirkuk will be recognized by a Shi'ite-dominated government as part of Iraqi “Kurdistan.” The north now has an international airport with regular passenger and cargo service to and from European Union countries.

One Country, Many Systems?

Should post-referendum, post-election Iraq not fracture completely, its economy may. One U.S. economist has suggested that three economic systems may emerge: “free market” in the north (which they have had since 1996), centralized statism in the Sunni center (largely devoid of oil), and an Islamic south. Still to be found is that “something” that will induce or help induce in the fractionated Iraqi leadership a sense of national economic “ownership.”

In terms of defense and security, the Kurdish *pesh merga* constitute that area's “army,” separate from the Iraqi army being trained by coalition forces. (Interestingly, the *pesh merga* were not mentioned when Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. Central Command commander General John Abazaid, and the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, General George Casey, testified before the Senate Armed Forces Committee on September 29, 2005.) The Badr Brigade, the Mahdi Army, and militias associated with other power blocs in the south remain generally intact.

And in the middle? Sunni Arabs, especially officers from Saddam's army.

What transpires between now and October 15 is less important than what both U.S. and Iraqi leaders do and say on October 16. Restraint from the “winners” will be as vital as from the “losers”—and from U.S. politicians of both parties. In fact, what the U.S. Congress can do in the post-referendum period that would really boost Iraqi nationalism is to publicly declare that the U.S. will withdraw all troops from and will retain no bases in Iraq.

This policy statement, followed by Pentagon action to provide emerging Iraqi security forces with the same type of equipment U.S. forces have, would serve as the first and second moves in the orderly disengagement of U.S. forces from the Iraq that Washington “invented.”

And should Washington get this far, it just might discover that, left to itself, the “old” Iraq will underpin the “new” to the advantage of the Iraqi people as a whole.

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