

"Walking Away: The Least Bad Option"

Except for a hardy band of neo-con optimists and the official apologists of the Bush regime, almost everyone is agreed today that the United States has gotten itself into a nasty, self-wounding mess in Iraq where it is fighting a drawn-out guerrilla war it cannot win. At the same time, a very large number of the critics of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, both in the United States and in Europe, repeatedly say that nonetheless the United States cannot just "walk away." What not walking away means is not very clear, but it seems to mean maintaining U.S. troops and bases in Iraq for a considerable length of time while the United States tries, vainly, to enable the Iraqi government under its tutelage to assert some kind of reasonable control over its territory and restore a modicum of peaceful life to its citizens.

Let us explore why it is said that the United States cannot just "walk away." There is a long list of supposed consequences that all seem plausible on the surface. One is that it would result in unconstrained civil war in Iraq. This may be true, although many Iraqis feel that they are already living in precisely such a civil war, even with U.S. troops on the scene.

A second reason is that it would mean the takeover by Al-Qaeda-like jihadists in Iraq. This is a remote possibility, although it is not too plausible. In any case, it is the presence of U.S. troops in Iraq that has provided the main basis for recruitment of Iraqis into such organizations. They weren't there at all in the days of Saddam Hussein. The U.S. invasion led to their emergence within Iraq. As for Afghanistan, the Taliban were indeed there before U.S. troops came in. They lost power in the central government as a result of the invasion. But they seem to be in the process of regaining it now, despite the presence of U.S. and NATO troops in some number. Furthermore, how long the NATO troops will be willing to stay is most uncertain.

A third reason is that a U.S. withdrawal would mean the strengthening of Iran's position in Iraq and more generally in the Middle East. Again, this may be true, but most serious analysts feel that Iran has already been the biggest beneficiary of the U.S. invasion. It destroyed a serious opponent of Iran, Saddam Hussein. It has placed Shia and Kurdish groups in considerable power in Iraq, groups that have had close links with Iran and will probably continue to maintain and strengthen these links. There is no indication that the U.S. presence is weakening Iran's position. Quite the contrary.

A fourth reason is that withdrawal would hurt U.S. access to the oil supplies of the Middle East. However, the U.S. presence has led to a decrease, not an increase, in Iraqi production, which will not resume seriously as long as the war is going on. Furthermore, the decline in U.S. power resulting from the failed invasion has led Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other producers to begin to expand their role as a supplier of oil to China, India, and other countries, at the long-run expense of U.S. access.

A fifth reason is that withdrawal of U.S. troops and bases would be an incredible humiliation of the United States, an acknowledgement of its defeat and loss of power. Furthermore, it would be seen as a "betrayal" by all those members of the military who fought and died in Iraq. This is undoubtedly true. The question is whether this is not already happening anyway. And the even bigger question is whether it "supports" those who have fought and died to have still more persons fight and die, in a war that will not be won.

Let us explore the alternatives that lie before the United States. The only two truly realistic alternatives are eviction by the Iraqi government or "walking away." With all the talk about irreconcilable ethnic rivalries in Iraq, we should not neglect the strength of Iraqi nationalism among both Sunni and Shia. After 2009, when they will see that the probable Democratic administration of the United States will continue to waffle about withdrawal, the pressure to find a united front of Sunni and Shia, which can only be constructed on the basis of the need to get out from under the U.S. omnipresence, is likely to become enormous. We already are witnessing the quiet negotiations that are going on in this regard. As for the Kurds, provided they retain a reasonable amount of autonomy, they will reluctantly settle for such autonomy as the best option they have in the situation that now exists. I consider this the most probable outcome of the present situation.

What then would be the plus in "walking away"? First let us clarify what this means. It means a statement by the U.S. government that it will withdraw all troops without exception and shut down all bases in Iraq within say six months of the date of announcement. Is this better than being evicted (that is, asked formally to leave) by a new government, resulting from a new nationalist alliance within Iraq? Yes, of course. U.S. withdrawal would mark the first step on the long and difficult path to healing the United States of the sicknesses brought on by its imperial addiction, the first step in a painful effort to restore the good name of the United States in the world community.

Walking away will indeed be difficult and painful. But it is just as necessary for the United States to withdraw as it is for an alcoholic to withdraw, taking the first step on the path to total renunciation of the addiction.

by Immanuel Wallerstein