

"U.S. Withdrawal?"

In the beginning of 2003, the great debate, in the United States and throughout the world was, should the United States go into Iraq? Now the debate has become, should the United States withdraw from Iraq? The occupation has not gone at all as the U.S. authorities had hoped, and expected. Iraqi armed resistance is spreading. The U.S. armed forces are stretched thin. The Iraqis are increasingly and openly hostile to the U.S. and all those who support the U.S., even the Iraqi Governing Council that the U.S. installed to be its faithful ally.

The centrist, Establishment elements in the United States, who all supported the U.S. president's decision, and if in Congress voted for it, are now all very queasy, and they do not know what position to take. One fallback is to say that, while it may have been justified to go into Iraq (the most acceptable justification for this group was to oust Saddam Hussein from power), the war has been conducted badly. The U.S. tried to do it with too small an army. It failed to do what it took to "win the hearts and minds" of the Iraqi people. The government didn't plan ahead for the post-Saddam period and has made grievous errors. This is not a very strong dissent from the Bush administration's position. The obvious conclusion of this kind of criticism is to call for an increase in our military force in Iraq, for spending more money on reconstruction, and a revival of the draft. This is the position of Republican "critics" like Senators McCain and Hagel.

The Democratic leadership, and most notably Sen. Kerry, go one step further. They say the U.S. should "call in" the United Nations and NATO, which they say Bush should have done from the beginning. The fact that neither the U.N. nor NATO is ready to be called in to the U.S.-created disaster zone is not mentioned. But these people have one more argument, which was spelled out very clearly in a *New York Times* editorial on April 25:

"This page felt it was a mistake to invade Iraq without broad international support, and since then we have seen few indications that Mr. Bush's notion of establishing a stable democracy is anything but a dream. Yet leaving Iraq now would create a situation so horrific that the United States is obliged to press forward as long as there seems any hope of making progress.... This is not the moment for retreat and it certainly is not the moment for half measures."

Yet, as has become clear in the battle of Falluja and the siege of Najaf by the U.S. armed forces, half measures seem to be the only realistic choice. "Full" measures promise even greater disaster for the United States.

What would really happen if the U.S. withdrew? First, we need to know what it means to "withdraw" - all troops or some troops; immediately, soon, or "when the situation stabilizes"? There is clearly today no central government in Iraq, and there is no army (since the U.S. disbanded the only one Iraq had). There is scarcely a police force. The United Nations' representative, Lakhdar Brahimi, says he is hoping to achieve agreement on a brand new central government by the end of May which would be an "interim" government of "experts" until the holding of elections, projected for January 2005.

In the meantime, the U.S. proconsul, Paul Bremer, says he is hoping to reconstitute an Iraqi army, using some of the old generals, who were only "nominally" members of the Baath party. This is being roundly denounced by the former Pentagon favorite, Ahmed Chalibi, who has been in charge of "de-Baathification" of Iraq. Chalibi, who has been unable to

demonstrate that he has any popular support anywhere in Iraq, is also opposed to Brahimi's plan, which would eliminate him (and his "party") from the government, probably permanently.

So, maybe there will an army of some sort by January 2005. There are also "militias" of varying importance - at least two that are Kurdish, at least two that are Shi'ite, and probably one that could be easily constituted in Sunni areas. This is the source of the frequent argument that, left alone now, Iraq would fall into civil war. This seemed more likely three months ago. U.S. incompetence has created nationalist links among these rival factions. And U.S. military actions in Falluja and Najaf may seal a new unity, or at least something strong enough to reduce radically the likelihood of anything resembling what happened in Bosnia in the 1990s.

We have recently learned, through the book by Bob Woodward, that Colin Powell reminded George W. Bush, as he was making his decision to invade, of the "antique store" theory of intervention in foreign zones: "If you break it, you own it." That is what the *New York Times* is now saying: "The United States is obliged to press forward." Obligated? Surely not legally. Morally? Let us look at that more closely.

If you hurt someone and make his situation worse, should you stay around and offer to help? Well, yes, if that would be a remedy, and would be welcomed by the person you're helping. But certainly not, if that would make the situation still worse. Personally, I don't see that what Bremer plus Gen. Abizaid are doing is remedying anything. The situation is steadily deteriorating. And the thing the Iraqis are complaining about most vociferously now, even those who were initially somewhat friendly to the invaders, is that the U.S. is doing great damage to Iraq, and looks like it is going to do still more. The reason is simple. There is very little that the U.S. can do at present that will bring stability and order to Iraq, much less the so-called democracy the U.S. claims it wishes to impose.

The Iraqis have two principal grievances about the U.S. occupiers. They are hurting (and killing) all sorts of people who are not combatants in their understandable efforts to save the lives of U.S. troops and presumably to reestablish order. But secondly, and probably more important, the Iraqis are not persuaded that the U.S. ever intends to leave. And they have good reason to doubt this, since Bush officials have been saying as much for a long time. The U.S. is building permanent military bases in Iraq. The U.S. has said that the "sovereignty" that is being restored to Iraq on June 30 is only "partial." Sovereignty is however like virginity - you either have it or you don't. There is no in-between. If U.S. armed forces can act as they deem wise in post-June 30 Iraq, the country is not sovereign. If the government cannot make laws without clearing them with the U.S., the country is not sovereign - it's a colony.

So, what can the U.S. do? I suppose, since there is at the moment no central government and no army, an instantaneous U.S. withdrawal would indeed have chaotic consequences. But the U.S. could commit itself *now* to turning over *full* sovereignty to the interim government on June 30 (which would make the use of the U.S. military restricted and limited by the decisions of this government). It could permit immediately the reconstitution of an Iraqi army. And it could commit itself to total withdrawal of U.S. forces as of say January 2005. But above all, it could renounce all aspirations for any U.S. bases in Iraq in the future.

Does this have some risks from a narrowly U.S. point of view? Of course, it does. But this is the cul-de-sac in which the Bush administration put the U.S. and this is the best way to cut U.S. losses, probably the only way. Will the new government of Iraq be friendly to the U.S.?

Quite possibly not. The U.S. didn't know it had a good thing with a virtually toothless Saddam Hussein in power. But when you make a really big mistake, the best thing to do is to admit it and pick up your life from there. Will George W. Bush do it? Almost surely not. Will John F. Kerry do it? Perhaps, but it is very far from sure.

Immanuel Wallerstein