

Doomed to Repeat It

Will the lessons of Iraq go unlearned?

By William R. Polk

ARE THERE ANY lessons to be learned from the American venture into Iraq? The great German philosopher of history Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel doubted our capacity to find out. "Peoples and governments," he wrote, "never have learned anything from history or acted on principles deduced from it." Writing about the Vietnam War, political scientist Samuel P. Huntington suggested that it would be best if policy-makers "simply blot out of their mind any recollection of this one." It seems that they did.

So, in at least some ways, the Iraq War has been proof of George Santayana's admonition that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. The urgent question today is whether the Iraq War will be similarly blotted out and similarly repeated. The odds are with Professor Hegel.

Huntington's argument was based on the notion that Vietnam was unique since, as he saw it, imperialism and colonialism have "just about disappeared from world politics." That is, they were fading memories of a now irrelevant past. But is this true?

Foreign domination has faded from our memory but not from the memories of many of the peoples of Asia and Africa. Focus on Iraq, which became "independent" by treaty with Britain in 1922. Then it became "independent" by recognition of the League of Nations in 1932. But few Iraqis believe that it became really independent by either of these acts. Britain controlled the econ-

omy and maintained its military presence while it continued to rule Iraq behind a façade of governments it had appointed. It then reoccupied the country during World War II. After the war, it ruled through a proxy until he was overthrown in 1958. So was 1958 the date of independence? On the surface yes, but below the surface American and British intelligence manipulated internal forces and neighboring states to influence or dominate governments; they helped to overthrow the revolutionary government of Abdul Karim Qasim and to install the Ba'ath Party, which ultimately brought Saddam Hussein to power. Knowing what they had done and fearing that they would do so again shaped much of the policy even of Saddam Hussein.

By giving or withholding money, arms, and vital battlefield intelligence, Britain and America influenced what Saddam thought he could do. So worried was he about his American connection that, before he decided to invade Kuwait, he called in the U.S. ambassador to ask, in effect, if the invasion was fine with Washington. Only when he was assured in 1990 that the U.S. had no policy on the frontiers with Kuwait by official testimony before Congress, by government press releases, and by a face-to-face meeting with our ambassador in Baghdad did he act. Either he misread the omens or we changed them. Our ambassador later said, incredibly, that we had not anticipated that he would take all of Kuwait. When he did, we invaded, destroyed much of his army

and the Iraqi economy, and imposed upon the country UN-authorized sanctions and unauthorized no-fly zones. Finally, in 2003, we invaded again, occupied the country, and imposed upon it a government of our choice. Whatever the justification for any or all of these actions, they do not add up to independence. Even Iraqis who hated and feared Saddam always felt that they were living under a form of Western control. The simple fact is that the memories had not faded because they were based on current reality.

There are many things to be said about the American invasion and occupation of Iraq. But one thing stands out: we were (and I believe still are) ignorant of Iraqi history and culture. More pointedly, we had (and still have) no sense of how Iraqis saw their own past and their relationships with us. This ignorance has caused us, often inadvertently, to take actions that many or perhaps most Iraqis have read as imperialist. This has been true even of actions that we felt were generous, far-sighted, and constructive.

Take the provision of a constitution as an example. Constitutions are surely good. We treasure ours even when we do not always abide by it. We believe that other countries should have them because they are the bedrock of democracy. That sentiment was so widely held at the end of the First World War that the British made giving the Iraqis one a high priority. Experts were called in, phrases were debated, studies were made of the

best then in operation, and finally, in 1924, a wonderful document emerged. It was greeted with great satisfaction but mainly by those who had given it, the British. Iraqis paid it little heed because it was not grounded in the realities of Iraqi society, practices, or even hopes. Time after time, governments came into power that overturned or simply neglected every paragraph it contained.

So what did the American occupation government do? Was it aware of this history? Apparently not. It set about writing a new constitution. The emphasis was, of course, on the occupation authorities. They wrote the constitution without any Iraqi input and just handed it to their appointed interim government. That, to my mind, amounted to astonishing insensitivity. What was even more astonishing was that it somehow never occurred to the American lawyers who wrote the new constitution that it would become worthless—that is, illegal—when the interim administration was replaced by even a quasi-independent government. It was surely the shortest-lived constitution ever written.

If constitutions are necessary for democracies, elections are even more so. Naturally, therefore, they too are good things. Iraq had to have one. Organizing and controlling it turned out to be a difficult task given what many Iraqis interpreted our election to mean: not to express a national consensus on democracy but to solidify our control over the country.

Because at least some Iraqis were determined to get us out of their country, using guerrilla warfare tactics and terrorism against us and those Iraqis who supported us, we had to use our military forces to set parameters on the issues, the personnel, and the form of this expression of freedom. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau long ago advocated, we decided to “force men to be free.” The fact that, however unfree they were,

the elections were indeed held was hailed as a great victory for democracy. I remain unconvinced. I suspect that two fatal flaws will soon become evident: a heightening of the divisive tendencies already inherent in Iraqi society and a devaluation of the very concept of representative government.

Our policies on security are similarly subject to different interpretation. Where we have done most of what we have done in the name of security, our critics in Iraq have sought sovereignty. We believed that security had to come first. A close reading of history leads me to believe that the order is usually the reverse. When foreigners get out, insurgencies stop; they do not stop, no matter how massive the force used against them or how costly in blood and treasure the fighting is, until the foreigners leave. This surely is the lesson of Ireland, Algeria, Chechnya, and even of our own revolution. I predict it will be that of Iraq too.

Believing that security comes first has led our government to concentrate on

could not defend itself; nor can most other states. Those that can are those that have the ultimate weapon. Acquisition of even a few nuclear weapons provides security because the cost of attacking a power armed with them is too high. I am told that at least some African, Asian, and even European observers believe that if Saddam Hussein had waited until he had a nuclear weapon before attacking Kuwait, we would not have gone to war. North Korea today reinforces this assessment. There we react with anger, economic sanctions, and propaganda but not with military force.

The process of acquiring nuclear weapons, however, is a time of deadly danger. So governments that decide to acquire them naturally try to move with the utmost secrecy and speed. They also usually seek to avoid provocations that might bring down upon them the wrath of the existing nuclear powers. That too is a lesson of Iraq: had Saddam not provided a provocation, we would probably not have gone to war. Indeed, we were

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rebuilding an Iraqi army since doing so appeared to offer security at a bargain price. But Iraqis remember the terrible costs to their society of the creation of armies. The one the British created time after time subverted or overthrew civil governments. A new army, absent balancing civic institutions that can grow only slowly and by internal developments, will surely again pave the way for a military dictatorship.

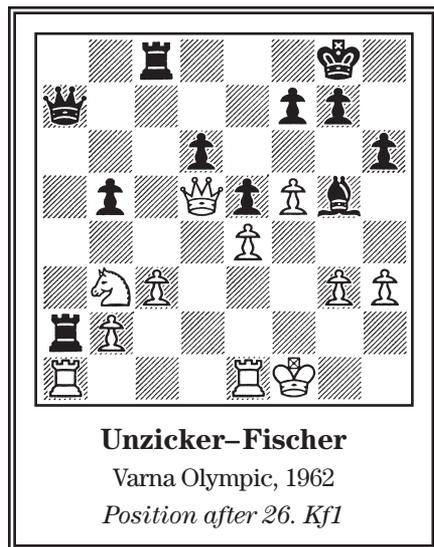
Related to, but to some extent external to, Iraq are other lessons we should ponder. What happened to Iraq showed other governments that they live at the sufferance of the United States. Iraq

supplying him with the components and equipment to make weapons of mass destruction right up to the time of our intervention. Surely this lesson is in the minds of the Iranians today, as it was in the minds of the Russians, Chinese, Indians, Pakistanis, and Israelis. The only alternative to this highly dangerous and ruinously costly drift in international affairs is mutual disarmament, but current American policies are rushing us, and the world, in exactly the opposite direction.

Finally, there is a grab-bag of other lessons again laid before us by Iraq: the first is that war is always unpredictable

no matter how powerful the advantages one side seems to have at the beginning. The second is that wars are always horrible. Not only are people killed or severely harmed, but whole societies, even of the victors, are brutalized. This was true of the British in Kenya, French in Algeria, Americans in the Philippines, Russians in Central Asia, and Chinese in Tibet. Finally, guerrilla wars are, at best, unwinnable, lasting as in Ireland for centuries and in Algeria for a century and a half. The people of Chechnya suffered massacre, deportation, rape, and massive destruction for nearly four centuries and still is not “pacified.” No one wins a guerrilla war; both sides lose. The only sensible policy is one that aims to stop such conflicts rather than to win them. Hegel and Santayana may be right; we may not learn. But certainly, Huntington is wrong in urging that we blot the lessons out of our minds. ■

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[oriental despotism]

Red Sun Rising

The U.S. shouldn't presume that the PRC wants a peaceful future.

By James P. Pinkerton

BEIJING—As I watched the Chinese soldiers goose-stepping across Tiananmen Square, it occurred to me that maybe the U.S. and China weren't destined to be such close friends.

Once upon a time, people hoped that the logic of capitalism would knit countries together. In 1910, the British economist Norman Angell wrote *The Great Illusion*, arguing that it was illogical for industrial nations not to co-operate with each other, since confrontation—war—was so obviously catastrophic; the illusion was that a European war could be profitable or beneficial. Angell didn't prophesy that rich countries would never fight. He merely pointed out that if they did go to war, they would impoverish themselves. And in 1914, he was proven sadly correct.

The new great conventional wisdom, pushed by American neoconservatives and their fellow travelers, is that it is democratic nations that are naturally friendly toward each other. Democracy breeds tranquility. But *sacre bleu*, what about France, one of the world's oldest democracies? The French seem to be leading much of democratic Europe in an increasingly anti-American direction, as countries such as Italy and Ukraine withdraw their remaining forces from Iraq and the U.S. and the European Union go their separate ways on issues ranging from Iran to Airbus.

OK, that's Europe, which is mostly “old.” But what about the rising democracies here in Asia? Aren't they more pro-American? Maybe, maybe not.

Earlier this year in Indonesia, the young democratic government did nothing when a Jakarta court sentenced Abu Bakar Bashir to a mere 30 months in jail, meting out meager punishment for his role in the conspiracy to fire-bomb 202 people to death in Bali three years ago. The U.S. and Australian governments protested Bashir's light sentence; the newspaper *The Australian* editorialized that the sentence was “an obscene slur against the memory of the innocent victims of the Bali bombing.” Of course, in the bad old undemocratic days, high-powered protests from abroad might have had an impact on the Indonesian judicial system. That is, maybe a strongman in Jakarta would have tacked a few decades or centuries onto Bashir's jail time or arranged for him to be “accidentally killed while trying to escape.” But nowadays, the popular passions of the Indonesians, all 238 million of them, must be taken into account.

So popular passion, also known as “majority rule,” is good news for Bashir and his al-Qaeda-wannabe terrorist friends. Why? Let's be honest: there's a certain distinct sympathy in the Third World for brown people who kill white