

Iraq 1920

The U.S isn't the first to try remodeling Mesopotamia.

In their introduction to an August 22, 1920 piece entitled "A Report on Mesopotamia," London's Sunday Times explained that Lt. Col. T.E. Lawrence—better known as the legendary Lawrence of Arabia—"has written this article at our request in order that the public may be fully informed of our Mesopotamian commitments."

Lawrence first traveled to Mesopotamia—now Iraq—as an archeologist, but joined British military intelligence when World War I broke out. He went on to serve as the British liaison officer to the Arabs, organizing the tribes to defeat the Turks and extend Arab-British control. He argued for Arab independence at the Versailles Peace Conference, where Syria, Palestine, and Iraq were mandated to France and Britain against his objection.

By 1920, with British attempts to build an Iraqi colony growing as unpopular on the home front as they were in Baghdad, the Colonial Office appointed Winston Churchill to find a solution. He recruited Lawrence, whose gloomy assessment of British prospects then does not bode well for the current American project.

THE PEOPLE OF ENGLAND have been led in Mesopotamia into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity and honour. They have been tricked into it by a steady withholding of information. The Baghdad communiques are belated, insincere, incomplete. Things have been far worse than we have been told, our administration more bloody and inefficient than the public knows. It is a disgrace to our imperial record, and may

soon be too inflamed for any ordinary cure. We are today not far from a disaster.

The sins of commission are those of the British civil authorities in Mesopotamia (especially of three "colonels") who were given a free hand by London. They are controlled from no Department of State, but from the empty space which divides the Foreign Office from the India Office. They availed themselves of the necessary discretion of wartime to carry over their dangerous independence into times of peace. They contest every suggestion of real self-government sent them from home. A recent proclamation about autonomy circulated with unction from Baghdad was drafted and published out there in a hurry, to forestall a more liberal statement in preparation in London, "Self-determination papers" favourable to England were extorted in Mesopotamia in 1919 by official pressure, by aeroplane demonstrations, by deportations to India.

The Cabinet cannot disclaim all responsibility. They receive little more news than the public: they should have insisted on more, and better. They have sent draft after draft of reinforcements, without enquiry. When conditions became too bad to endure longer, they decided to send out as High Commissioner the original author of the present system, with a conciliatory message to the Arabs that his heart and policy have completely changed.

Yet our published policy has not changed, and does not need changing. It is that there has been a deplorable contrast between our profession and our practice. We said we went to Mesopotamia to defeat Turkey. We said we stayed to

deliver the Arabs from the oppression of the Turkish Government, and to make available for the world its resources of corn and oil. We spent nearly a million men and nearly a thousand million of money to these ends. This year we are spending ninety-two thousand men and fifty millions of money on the same objects.

Our government is worse than the old Turkish system. They kept fourteen thousand local conscripts embodied, and killed a yearly average of two hundred Arabs in maintaining peace. We keep ninety thousand men, with aeroplanes, armoured cars, gunboats, and armoured trains. We have killed about ten thousand Arabs in this rising this summer. We cannot hope to maintain such an average: it is a poor country, sparsely peopled; but Abd el Hamid would applaud his masters, if he saw us working. We are told the object of the rising was political, we are not told what the local people want. It may be what the Cabinet has promised them. A Minister in the House of Lords said that we must have so many troops because the local people will not enlist. On Friday the Government announce the death of some local levies defending their British officers, and say that the services of these men have not yet been sufficiently recognized because they are too few (adding the characteristic Baghdad touch that they are men of bad character). There are seven thousand of them, just half the old Turkish force of occupation. Properly officered and distributed, they would relieve half our army there. Cromer controlled Egypt's six million people with five thousand British

troops; Colonel Wilson fails to control Mesopotamia's three million people with ninety thousand troops.

We have not reached the limit of our military commitments. Four weeks ago the staff in Mesopotamia drew up a memorandum asking for four more divisions. I believe it was forwarded to the War Office, which has now sent three brigades from India. If the North-West Frontier cannot be further denuded, where is the balance to come from? Meanwhile, our unfortunate troops, Indian and British, under hard conditions of climate and supply, are policing an immense area, paying dearly every day in lives for the willfully wrong policy of the civil administration in Baghdad. General Dyer was relieved of his command in India for a much smaller error, but the responsibility in this case is not on the Army, which has acted only at the request of the civil authorities. The War Office has made every effort to reduce our forces, but the decisions of the Cabinet have been against them.

The Government in Baghdad have been hanging Arabs in that town for political offences, which they call rebellion. The Arabs are not at war with us. Are these illegal executions to provoke the Arabs to reprisals on the three hundred British prisoners they hold? And, if so, is it that their punishment may be more severe, or is it to persuade our other troops to fight to the last?

We say we are in Mesopotamia to develop it for the benefit of the world. All experts say that the labour supply is the ruling factor in its development. How far will the killing of ten thousand villagers and townspeople this summer hinder the production of wheat, cotton, and oil? How long will we permit millions of pounds, thousands of Imperial troops, and tens of thousands of Arabs to be sacrificed on behalf of colonial administration which can benefit nobody but its administrators? ■

The mysterious affair of the two undercover British soldiers who were apprehended by Iraqi police near Basra on Sept. 19 is being hushed up by both London and Baghdad.

The mission of the two commandos continues to be somewhat opaque, but what is clear is that they were armed far too heavily to be engaged in a simple reconnaissance mission. Initial police reports indicated that they had bomb-making material inside their vehicle. It has been suggested that the soldiers might have been intending to set off a bomb to embarrass Moqtada al-Sadr or to sharpen the division between his Mehdi Army and the rival Badr Brigades. That they were busted out of jail by a squadron of tanks suggests that they were viewed as very important by the British high command. In their operations in Northern Ireland, the British occasionally resorted to proxy bombings and assassinations to support their political objectives, and it is perhaps not so far-fetched to speculate that they are doing the same in Iraq.



Chastened for its slow response to Hurricane Katrina and fearful of its falling poll numbers, the White House is dumping hundreds of billions of borrowed dollars on Mississippi and Louisiana.

It is eager to shift the blame for poor planning away from the administration and has appointed a decidedly partisan panel to examine the government failure. Heading the investigation is Frances Townsend, White House adviser on terrorism, and the spin has already begun: her brief is to "determine what could have been done better." Townsend is regarded as extremely loyal to the president, and it is inconceivable that she will come up with any findings that might embarrass the White House. (She was missing in action for two days after Katrina, even though her job at the National Security Council was to co-ordinate with the Department of Homeland Security.) Other panels have been set up by the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House panel, which is dominated by Republicans, will begin by grilling the hapless former FEMA head Michael Brown, who will no doubt be the fall guy in the upcoming drama. The Senate has its own investigation. It is almost certain that, apart from Brown, no one will be held accountable for anything.



Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko has secured parliamentary approval for his candidate to be prime minister, moderate economist Yuri Yekhanurov.

Yushchenko's former prime minister, Yulia "Lady Macbeth" Timoshenko, is now a bitter enemy and will run to unseat him in the next presidential election. The tiff at the center of the Orange Revolution is really over who will be allowed to steal government assets and on what terms because nearly everyone accepts that a license to steal is one of the perks of office. Former Prime Minister Leonid Kuchma only got into trouble because he stole too much too fast. Timoshenko, a self-made billionaire, has frequently been accused of corruption. The depiction of Yushchenko as the Ukraine's own version of Jimmy Carter was largely a creation of the Western media.

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