

Rethinking Iraq and the Region

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The Bush administration never *did* subtle. No grays colored its political assessments. After 9/11, you were either with America or against it. The full measure of one's patriotism, or whether an ally was truly an ally (remember France? old Europe and new Europe?), could be decided by whether the administration and its adherents thought you were for or against *it*. Nuance was the business of the reality-based community.

It seems fair, therefore, when one assesses the invasion of Iraq—the centerpiece of the administration's response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—to use an equally simple schema. So, Iraq: Won or Lost?

Lost, is Peter Galbraith's unflinching response.

What does he mean by that? "The United States," he says, "has no chance of achieving what President Bush has defined as victory: a self-sustaining, democratic, and unified Iraq." Defeat in Iraq, Galbraith argues, "is easy to picture because it has already taken place. Iran's allies dominate Iraq's central government. Iraq is divided along ethnic lines into Arab and Kurdish states and there are civil wars being fought between Sunnis and Shiites in the Arab parts."

There are those, of course, who are prepared to answer that the war is won. Bret Stephens, a member of *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial board, bluntly declares in a *Journal* column that "The war in Iraq is over. We've won." He goes on spinning the "winner" thread: "We now have a government that does not threaten its neighbors, does not sponsor terrorism, and is unlikely to again seek WMD. We have a democratic government, a first for the Arab world, and one that is increasingly capable of defending its people and asserting its interests." Iraq will be "an Arab bulwark against Iran's encroachments in the region" once a "lasting security partnership" is formed between Baghdad

and Washington. And for good measure, Stephens pronounces Al Qaeda defeated, following its attempt to make Iraq its "central battlefield" after the American invasion.

Two assessments, two wildly different verdicts. Stephens's description of Iraq, like the administration's arguments for war and its Orwellian

pronouncements on the war's progress (the province of Vice President Dick Cheney and former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld), is a simple treatment that reassures with comforting touchstones: Iraq is

democratic, it's on America's side. But most important in the argument is that Iraq isn't what it used to be. Thus it is considered self-evident that the war was worth the blood and treasure it has cost.

Galbraith readily agrees that Iraq is no longer what it used to be. But that is where agreement ends. As in his previous book, *The End of Iraq*, Galbraith sees a future Iraq that is split into competing regions and is a source of instability in the Middle East. *Unintended Consequences* conveys a relentless drumbeat of a single damning proposition: George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq was a strategic blunder born in illegitimacy and managed by ideologues, a misbegotten adventure that has sputtered to an endgame that will bring no benefit to Iraq, the region, or the United States.

The evidence for this proposition draws on an incisive critique of the "surge" that has become the mantra of "America has won" pundits like the *Journal's* Stephens, on a short analytical history of the political system put in place by the US occupation, and on a survey of the region grounded in a realistic understanding of who truly has won the war: Iran.

According to Galbraith, the decline in violence in Iraq (both civilian killings and US combat deaths have plummeted over the past year) is not the result of the American strategy to deploy an additional 20,000 soldiers in 2007—what the author calls the "Potemkin surge." Instead, credit, if that

**Unintended Consequences:
How War in Iraq Strengthened
America's Enemies**
by Peter W. Galbraith.
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is the right word, goes to a decision in 2006 by the largest indigenous insurgency to accept a marriage of convenience with the United States and strive to remove Al Qaeda in Iraq instead of attacking US troops. David Petraeus, the US military commander in Iraq, was nimble enough to see and welcome this change in attitude within the Sunni insurgency and to work with its leaders. Galbraith wields too broad a brush in sweeping aside all claims that the US surge has been the source of the current relative calm in Iraq. Indeed, some credit must go to Petraeus and a reoriented Bush administration for taking advantage of this shift in events on the ground, and for implementing a more robust US troop presence outside military bases.

Even so, the Americans' embrace of the Sunni insurgency only forestalls an answer to the question of whether Iraq will remain a single, sovereign nation. The largely Shiite central government in Baghdad has accepted the decision to arm and materially aid the Sunni militias because doing so has helped reduce violence and stabilize the country. The Shiites, however, have been reluctant to bring Sunni militias into the ranks of the government's military and security forces, so Iraq remains a country with armed militias in Kurdistan in the north and among Sunnis in the west, as well as among competing Shiite factions in the south.

Joined with this dispersal of armed might is a constitutional structure that grants virtual de facto independence to Kurdistan and enormous power to the country's Shiite majority. The Sunnis, because of both their own electoral inaction and the constitutional system's structure, remain frozen out of power and likely will remain so. Even if the Sunnis were to become a viable voting bloc, they would find it difficult if not impossible to make changes to the constitution in the face of the Kurds and the Shiites, who took advantage of the civil war during the US occupation to ensure the writing of a constitution that gave them political leverage. Galbraith argues that Iraq, with a constitution premised on the idea of a weak central government and strong federalism—along with the right to form super-regions with enormous political and economic power (the latter drawing from oil revenues)—is poised to become three states, with all the regional instability that would entail.

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Further fueling regional instability, according to Galbraith, will be actions other powers in the Middle East may take in accommodating this new incoherent entity. Sunni-majority states like Saudi Arabia and Jordan could continue to fund a Sunni insurgency if the Sunnis and their militiamen are not integrated into the central government and are instead offered the western deserts of Iraq as their super-region pie crumb in the new Iraqi federation. More positively, Turkey may accept Kurdistan politically and even find it an economic boon (though this possibility may reflect more desire than realism on Galbraith's part, since he has been a long-time advocate of Kurdish independence). Yet the author also thinks that Turkey's governing (and Islamist) Justice and Development Party could at the same time reach out to Iran and Syria, turning away from the United States after suffering through the Bush administration's inept handling of relations since the Iraq War began.

And then there is Iran. "Of all the unintended consequences of the Iraq War," Galbraith writes, "Iran's strategic victory is the most far-reaching." The Bush administration believed that one of the *intended* consequences of the invasion of Iraq would be the undermining of Iranian power as Tehran found itself squeezed by US-backed regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq. Instead, of course, Iran has found itself in an even more strategically powerful position than it was before Saddam Hussein's ouster. The Shiite-majority government in Baghdad is closely allied to Shiite Iran; it is no puppet regime, but it certainly does not threaten Iran as Hussein did. Galbraith details the many ways in which Tehran and Baghdad, and the Kurdish government in the north as well, have found common cause. This common cause, however, is not necessarily to Washington's detriment in the region since, as Galbraith himself notes, Iran will not work to destabilize a Shiite-governed Iraq.

It is not clear what Galbraith thinks Iran will do if Iraq does fragment into three states, but he is adamant that "Iran is the winner of the war that George W. Bush lost." At the least, this is a considerable part of the reality that will confront President Barack Obama as his administration develops a new foreign policy for a region strewn with the unintended consequences of Bush's blunder.