

After Saddam: Still No Good Options in a Wrong War

Charles V. Peña

Saddam Hussein's capture by U.S. forces just before Christmas 2003 was certainly a joyous holiday gift for the people of Iraq and good reason for Iraqis to celebrate and dance in the streets. It meant that they no longer had to fear that the dictator who had brutalized them for more than three decades would return to oppress them again. And President Bush received a nice holiday gift of a boost in his approval rating to over 60 percent as well as renewed public support of the U.S. effort in Iraq. But with the euphoria of capturing Saddam (and the "bin Laden next" fever that accompanied it) fading after the new year, the reality in Iraq has set in again; the problems and future prospects after Hussein's capture are largely the same as they were after his removal from power in April. In other words, Santa Claus has not been any kinder than the Easter Bunny.

To be sure, information gleaned from interrogating Saddam will perhaps help coalition forces better deal with a persistent Iraqi insurgency. But Saddam's capture is not an end to the insurgency, nor does it mean that the fighting will end quickly or easily. The attacks against U.S. forces, other coalition personnel, and Iraqi civilians have continued unabated in the wake of that capture. In fact, two car bombs exploded in Baghdad the day after Paul Bremer, the U.S. administrator in Iraq, announced to the world, "Ladies and gentlemen, we got him." And the insurgents rang in the new year with a car bomb at an upscale Baghdad restaurant that killed eight people. In addition to the troubling signs that civilians increasingly are becoming targets, the

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rate of U.S. casualties doubled in the last four months of the year compared to the previous four months (according to Pentagon statistics).

The standard refrain of blaming the violence on Saddam loyalists (especially after his capture) is the same mistake made at the beginning of the U.S. occupation. Saddam and those loyal to him make up only one engine of the violence in Iraq. Baathists and other Sunni Arabs are likely to continue to resist the American military occupation and regime change because they perceive themselves as the losers in the formation of a new Iraqi government. They are fighting not for Saddam but for their political, and perhaps physical, survival. And the Sunnis cannot be assured that retribution won't be extracted for the more than thirty years of brutal rule by the Baath party and the Sunni domination of Iraqi politics and government dating back to British colonialism. A massive settling of scores has not yet occurred, but many former Baath party officials have been killed in apparent acts of revenge.

Other Iraqis—Shiites and Kurds—will also likely continue to chafe under U.S. military occupation. True, most of the insurgency has been confined to the so-called Sunni Triangle, but there has been sporadic violence in both northern and southern Iraq. That suggests that these areas could be simmering, ready to boil over if ignited by the right spark. For example, a deadly attack in Karbala—a quiet city in relatively peaceful southern Iraq—in late December 2003 left 19 killed and 135 injured. And in another sign that the insurgents are becoming more sophisticated, the Karbala attack comprised four nearly simultaneous strikes involving mortars, grenade launchers, and suicide bombers.

Finally, Islamic jihadists—perhaps even some al Qaeda terrorists—are relatively free to come over Iraq's porous borders (the equivalent of the U.S.-Mexican border, over which thousands of illegal immigrants cross every year) to practice the art of car bombing, throwing another lethal ingredient into the mix.

Because the insurgency is multifaceted, dealing with it requires three different strategies and sets of tactics. Unfortunately, the United States seems intent on finding a one-size-fits-all solution.

Beyond the problem of suppressing the insurgency, the United States continues to struggle with inventing a formula to create a new Iraqi government

that will be acceptable to all parties involved. But, to be fair, this challenge may be akin to computing the absolute value of pi or the square root of two. Because of the deep and long-standing ethnic divisions among the Shiite majority and the minority Sunni and Kurdish populations, attempts to broker some democratic or quasi-democratic power-sharing arrangement is likely to leave one or more parties dissatisfied. The Shiites expect that they should wield the most power because they constitute the largest segment of the population (about 60 to 65 percent). Neither Sunnis nor Kurds, however, want to live under Islamic *sharia* law, which many Shiites favor. Trying to balance power equitably among the three groups would deprive the Shiites control of the government, which they believe they rightfully deserve. This problem is clearly demonstrated by the question of how a new Iraqi government will be selected. The U.S. plan is for provincial caucuses, selected by committees whose members would be picked by the U.S. Coalition Provisional Authority, to choose legislators for a new national assembly, with real elections not until 2005. The outcome will supposedly be a more representative government. But leading Shiite cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has demanded full elections immediately, which would likely result in a Shiite majority government.

The lesson for the United States is the same lesson it should have learned from its ill-fated intervention in Lebanon in the 1980s. Inevitably, the United States will have to choose sides, and in so doing it will become a target of aggrieved parties, getting caught in the crossfire between the feuding factions. This harsh reality leaves the United States with three options: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The “good” option is probably better described as the least bad option. The United States needs to give up on the Woodrow Wilson fantasy of creating a democracy in Iraq. Instead, the United States must be realistic, make the best of an admittedly bad situation, and do what’s in the best interest of U.S. national security: hand the reins of government over to the Iraqis and fashion an expeditious military exit. This would not be cutting and running, but simply cutting U.S. losses before Iraq becomes a sinkhole that swallows billions more of taxpayer dollars and all too many American lives. As noble and well intentioned as wanting to create a democracy and better the Iraqi people’s lives is, the U.S. government’s first responsibility is to Americans,

not the people of Iraq. And U.S. national security demands only that whatever government replaces the former regime—even an Islamic government—does not harbor or support terrorists who would do harm to the United States.

The “bad” option is the one advocated by Senator John McCain: pouring more U.S. soldiers into Iraq. The irony is that McCain was right when he said that “we do not have sufficient forces in Iraq to meet our military objectives.” Currently, the United States has about 130,000 troops in Iraq, of which only about 56,000 are actually combat troops, and only half of these are on duty at any given time—so there are really only about 28,000 troops on duty trying to provide security for a nation of 25 million people in a country the size of California. The history of the British experience in Northern Ireland (a close parallel to America’s precarious position in Iraq) suggests a need for a ratio of 10-to-20 soldiers per 1,000 civilian population to have any realistic hope of restoring security and stability. In Iraq, that translates to a force of 240,000 to 480,000 troops, the latter being the size of the entire active-duty U.S. Army.

But the paradox of a larger force is that it would only make the problem worse—confirming that the United States is an occupying power and increasing Iraqi resentment and resistance among the general population. Worse yet, a larger military contingent in Iraq removes any shred of doubt from the case made by the radical Islamists that the West is invading the Islamic world, which only encourages Muslim populations, regardless of their sympathies toward al Qaeda, to unite against the United States.

The “ugly” option is the course the Bush administration seems to be charting, which is a faux exit. The good news is that the United States has put the process of giving the Iraqis nominal political control on a fast track by agreeing to the creation of a provisional government that will assume power by 1 July 2004. The transfer of power has already begun, and with goodwill toward Americans fading fast, this probably can’t happen soon enough. And the reality check served up to Bremer is that it’s probably the best the United States can hope for. Gone is the requirement for the Iraqis to write a new constitution prior to the handing over of government. Reportedly, many of the administration’s overly ambitious plans for creating a democratic Iraq in America’s image—secular, pluralistic, and market driven—

may be scaled back. Thus, Bush's eleventh-hour rationale for invading Iraq—rebuilding the country as the first step in transforming the Middle East—may be more rhetoric than reality.

The bad news is that the United States apparently has no intention of leaving Iraq. To be sure, the current Pentagon plan is to reduce the force size to 105,000 troops by spring 2004—but that's hardly a withdrawal of U.S. forces. And that plan may not be a done deal—with the security situation in Iraq still unresolved. According to President Bush, “We could have less troops in Iraq, we could have the same number of troops, we could have more troops in Iraq—whatever is necessary to secure Iraq.” Even if there is an eventual troop reduction, there seems to be no end in sight to the duration of the U.S. presence in Iraq. According to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the troop reduction “does not mean we would physically leave the country any sooner.” And Bush assured a group of Iraqi women at the White House “that America wasn't leaving. . . . When they hear me say we're staying, that means we're staying.”

The administration's current plan is a train wreck in the making—pinned down in Iraq and forced to adopt Israeli-style tactics that create more anti-American resentment, fuel the insurgency, and create a pool of would-be suicide bombers for al Qaeda. It is the worst of all worlds—a combination of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, in which military action to suppress the insurgency creates more new terrorists and an endless cycle of violence, and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, with Muslims from around the region (if not the world) flocking to Iraq for jihad against the American infidel.

Beyond the problem of trying to fix what it broke in Iraq, the Bush administration faces lingering questions of why it chose to go to war in the first place—questions that are not answered by Saddam's capture.

The weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that the administration originally used as a justification for war are thus far undiscovered. And the specter of Iraq acquiring nuclear weapons in the near future turns out to have been a phantom menace. Even if WMD are eventually found (which is less likely as time passes by), Iraq did not have any long-range military capability to attack the United States, and all the evidence suggests that Saddam was deterred from using them, and could have been deterred indefinitely.

That the threat posed by Iraqi WMD was sheer speculation based on flimsy evidence used as pretext for an ill-conceived and needless war was made glaringly apparent in President Bush's interview with Diane Sawyer on ABC's *Primetime* in mid-December 2003. When pressed by Sawyer that the administration had presented the WMD threat as hard fact but that the evidence uncovered in Iraq shows no weapons or active programs, President Bush responded, "So what's the difference?" Sawyer's follow-up question should have been, "But Mr. President, how could you have asked Congress for a resolution to go to war against Iraq without being able to claim that Saddam Hussein had WMD that he would give to terrorists who would attack the United States?" In other words, there was no clear evidence of peril, and the president's portrayal of Iraq's WMD falling into the hands of terrorists and becoming a threat "that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud" was pure scare mongering and hyperbole.

President Bush has admitted that "there is no evidence that Saddam was involved with September the eleventh." And if the evidence linking Saddam to 11 September amounts to nothing, then the evidence linking the former regime in Baghdad to al Qaeda is next to nothing. Neither the Central Intelligence Agency nor the Federal Bureau of Investigation can find any evidence supporting the claim that Mohammed Atta (one of the 11 September suicide hijackers) met with an Iraqi intelligence officer in Prague, Czech Republic, in April 2001. And the Ansar al-Islam terrorist group, with alleged ties to al Qaeda, was based in Kurdish northern Iraq, outside of Saddam's control. Furthermore, Ansar al-Islam was a radical Islamist group seeking an independent Islamic state—making it an enemy, not a friend, of the former regime in Baghdad. And the administration has not rushed to embrace the classified Pentagon memo leaked in a story by the *Weekly Standard*, which alleges a long-standing operational relationship between Saddam and al Qaeda but depends on the same cherry-picking of data used by the administration to make its specious case for WMD. The same is true for the story reported in the *Telegraph* of London alleging that Mohammed Atta was trained by the Abu Nidal terrorist organization in Iraq. These stories appear to be nothing more than desperate attempts by the most ardent war advocates who are unwilling to accept that their analysis of the threat posed by Iraq was wrong.

Thus, Iraq was the wrong war. Not because the United States used preemptive military force—preemptive self-defense would have been justified in the face of a truly imminent threat. Not because the United States acted without the consent of the United Nations—no country should surrender its defense to a vote of other nations. And not because, so far, WMD have not been discovered—even if they existed, they were a threat that could have been deterred.

Iraq was the wrong war because the enemy at the gates was—and continues to be—al Qaeda. Not only was Iraq not a direct military threat to the United States (even if it possessed WMD, which was a fair assumption), but there is no good evidence to support the claim that Saddam was in league with al Qaeda and would have given the group WMD to be used against the United States. In fact, all the evidence suggests the contrary. Saddam was a secular Muslim ruler while bin Laden is a radical Muslim fundamentalist—hardly compatible ideological views that would make them allies. And bin Laden has expressed contempt for the former regime in Baghdad, even while exhorting Muslims to defend Iraq against American aggression. Indeed, bin Laden has used the same description for Saddam and Americans: infidels.

And if Iraq has become—as President Bush asserts—the central front in the war on terrorism, it is only because of the U.S. decision to invade that country. Iraq under Saddam's brutal dictatorship was not a hotbed for al Qaeda, but those al Qaeda operatives who may be in Iraq are more than likely there simply because the U.S. military presence is a convenient target. The real irony is that there are probably more al Qaeda in Iraq now than when Saddam was in power.

Ironically, President Bush provided his own indictment of the Iraq war when he addressed the UN General Assembly in September 2003: “No government should ignore the threat of terror, because to look the other way gives terrorists the chance to regroup and recruit and prepare.” But looking away is exactly what the United States did by going to war against Iraq.

The result is that the United States is stuck holding the bag in Iraq, trying to find a way out of an increasingly untenable situation that as of the end of 2003 had cost 479 American service members their lives (not to mention over 2,700 wounded) and \$150 billion to U.S. taxpayers. With all the administration's prewar Iraq rhetoric ringing hollow—no WMD, no al Qaeda con-

nections, and no guarantees of a made-in-America democratic Iraq, with the Department of Homeland Security raising the threat level to orange alert (indicating a high risk of terrorist attacks) over the Christmas and New Year's holidays, and with a new bin Laden audio tape at the beginning of 2004 urging jihad against the United States—the latter two both highlighting that going to war against Iraq was not part of the war on terrorism against al Qaeda—the price tag is anything but a bargain. And having captured Saddam won't change that unpleasant reality.