

**B428. "Dial Down U.S. Involvement in Iraq" USA Today (August 27, 2003) p. 11A.**

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As of Tuesday, the number of U.S. casualties incurred after the end of major combat operations in Iraq exceeds those we suffered during the war. It is high time for a basic shift in approach: We must let Iraqis run most operations and openly take responsibility for them.

Once that happens, if there is not enough work, water or electricity to go around, Iraqis no longer will be able to blame us. If a water main or an oil pipeline blows up, it will be their own new government that is undermined, rather than U.S. forces and credibility.

The only matters that should remain under our control are the production and acquisition of weapons and the creation of a military force. This we can do from a small number of heavily fortified encampments outside of the major cities.

This radical change, critics may say, will allow the Baath party to reassert itself. As I see it, we should be willing to live with such a side effect during a transition period, just as we allowed many Nazi officials to keep running German ministries and factories after World War II -- for a while. Moreover, de-Baathification should be left to the Iraqis. If they refuse, they will live with the consequences.

Some may say that such a policy will lead to a Taliban-like Shiite government in the country's south. We should not be scared by such predictions. As long as we make it clear that if Iraqis host terrorists we will deal with them the same way we dealt with the Taliban, then they will be most unlikely to embark on such a course. And if the Iraqis are willing to put up with such a rigid, regimented life, that is their choice. Actually, given that many Iraqis, especially in parts of the country other than the south, oppose such fundamentalism, there will be plenty of opportunities for secular and religiously moderate Iraqis -- rather than Americans -- to confront the Shiites.

And what about the growing number of foreign terrorists? They did not come to fight a truly Iraqi government -- only our handpicked one. If they tried to tangle with a homegrown government, the Iraqis would run them out of town.

Above all, we should stop falling prey to our own propaganda. We promised to democratize and "reconstruct" Iraq. Given the ease with which we defeated Saddam Hussein, Iraqis believe we can accomplish anything if we simply wish it to be so. Moreover, Iraqis are used to a Soviet-style welfare state, with the government providing for their basic needs. No wonder they run to us complaining when there are no jobs, commerce is slow or services are poor.

Sometimes the little complaints say it all, such as the ones from Iraqis bitter that the United States has shown no intention of investing in their small businesses. One wonders: What in God's name made them think that we would? The answer is that we have made repeated statements that we will rebuild the Iraqi economy -- a monumental task after more than a decade in which the economy was robbed to buy weapons, build scores of presidential palaces and fatten Swiss bank accounts. Only if we walk away from our inflated promises and greatly narrow our mission and ambition is there a hope that Iraqis will do what they need to do: pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. The best news is that if there is one thing that unites the various Iraqi factions, it is that they say they want to govern themselves. On most issues, we should welcome their resolve.

One may argue that if we give up on democratizing and developing Iraq we will essentially give up on the only remaining argument for having gone to war in the first place. By now, few expect that weapons of mass destruction ever will be found. Even fewer believe they posed the kind of immediate danger that would have justified an invasion. Alleged al-Qaeda connections look highly unlikely. So the Bush administration now is stressing that our purpose was to liberate the Iraqi people -- as we indeed did.

But that does not mean that we have to mastermind and run the country. Iraqis should now be free to chart their course in all matters domestic and face the consequences of the mistakes they will inevitably make. We should be up in arms only if Iraqis make decisions they are most unlikely to choose, such as harboring terrorists or trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction, because our troops are near by.

"There will be no retreat," President Bush vowed Tuesday. But if we refuse to greatly dial down the scope of our mission, we shall be forced to do so. The American people will not accept ever-more casualties and an ever-steeper bill to pay for vain efforts to make Iraq into a Western democracy. Our credibility will suffer much less if we recalibrate now rather than retreat later.

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