



Amnesty for insurgents? Yes

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We had two political objectives in going into Iraq: deposing Saddam Hussein and replacing his regime with a democratic government unthreatening to the region and strategically friendly to the United States. The first objective proved far more easy to achieve than anticipated. The second has proved far more difficult than anticipated.

The most serious misconception had nothing to do with troop levels or whether to disband an army that had already disbanded itself. It had to do with gauging Sunni intentions. Decades of iron rule over the Shiites and Kurds had left the Sunnis militantly unreconciled to any other political order.

Moreover, the melting away of the Baathist regime from Baghdad gave the Sunni resistance weaponry, discipline and organizational know-how of a high order -- far higher, for

example, than the Shiites and Kurds were able to muster a decade earlier when they rose up against Hussein's regime, only to be crushed.

Perhaps the current Sunni insurgency could have been defeated by an overwhelming display of American force with a huge number of troops and a scorched-earth counterinsurgency. But that could well have resulted in a Pyrrhic and very temporary victory, increasing Sunni bitterness and resistance that would inevitably return as we drew down our forces. After all, we were never going to keep a huge land army in the desert forever.

For better or worse, we chose occupation lite. The insurgency continues, and it is not going to be defeated militarily. But that does not mean we lose. Insurgencies can be undone by being co-opted. And that is precisely the strategy of Prime

Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Given that his life is literally on the line in making such judgments, one should give his view some weight.

He intends to wean away elements of the insurgency by giving them a stake in the new Iraqi order. These Sunni elements -- unreconciled tribal leaders and guerrilla factions -- may well decide that with neither side having very good prospects of complete victory, accepting a place and some power in the new Iraq is a better alternative than perpetual war.

The Bush administration is firmly behind this policy. And who is sniping at it from the sidelines? Democratic senators, fresh from having voted for troop withdrawal rather than victory as our objective in Iraq, led the charge to denounce any sort of amnesty for insurgents who had killed Americans.

Apart from the hypocrisy, there is the bizarre logic: Is the best way to honor the sacrifice of those who have died in Iraq to decree an impotent, completely hypothetical policy of retribution? (Who, after all, is going to bell the cat?) Or is it to create conditions for precisely the kind of Iraq -- self-governing and internally reconciled -- that these courageous soldiers were fighting for?

Our objective in any war is not revenge but success. Confederate soldiers who swore allegiance to the United States were pardoned after the Civil War, even those who had killed Union soldiers. We gave amnesty to legions of Japanese and

Germans who'd killed thousands of Americans in World War II.

And those amnesties were granted after total victory. In conflicts in which there is no unconditional surrender -- civil strife that ends far more ambiguously, as in El Salvador and Chile, for example -- amnesty and reconciliation are the essential elements for the establishment of a stable, democratic peace.

In Iraq, amnesty will necessarily be part of any co-optation strategy in which insurgents lay down their arms. And it would not apply to the foreign jihadists, who, unlike the Sunni insurgents who would join the new Iraq, dream of an Islamic state built on the ruins of the current order. There is nothing to discuss with such people. The only way to defeat them is to kill them, as we did Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

But killing them requires depriving them of their sanctuary. Reconciliation-cum-amnesty gets disaffected Iraqi Sunni tribes to come over to the government's side, drying up the sea in which the jihadists swim. After all, we found Zarqawi in heavily Sunni territory by means of intelligence given to us by local Iraqis.

Protests in America over the amnesty suggestion have caused both the administration and the Maliki government to backtrack. But don't believe it. Amnesty will be an essential element in any reconciliation policy. Which, in turn, is the only route to victory -- defined today just as it was on the first day of the war: leaving behind a self-sustaining

post-Hussein government, both democratic and friendly to our interests. It is attainable. The posturing

over amnesty can only make it more difficult.