



## Iraq's Savage Ironies

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The war in Iraq — as all wars — is fraught with savage ironies.

In the build-up to the invasion, anti-Americanism in Europe reached a near frenzy. It was whipped up by French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, and evoked warnings of an eternal split in the Atlantic Alliance. If Iraq had proved a catalyst for this expression of near hatred — fueled by long-standing angers and envies — it soon, however, proved to be a catharsis as well.

Both leaders overplayed their hands when the U.S. had already begun downsizing its NATO deployments in Germany. Elsewhere, Europeans started to have second thoughts about alienating America at a time of rising Russian belligerency, and suffered from increased worry over

radical Islamic terrorists at home and abroad.

The result is that their successors, Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel, are staunchly pro-American in ways their previous governments were not, even well before the Iraq War. And given the increased jihadist threats to Europe, worries about Iran, and the consistency of the U.S. effort in Iraq and Afghanistan, these governments may well have learned — in a way they did not anticipate in 2003 — that there really is no other ally like a steadfast United States, in these unstable times.

European youth can print all the anti-war leaflets they wish with splashy photos from Abu Ghraib — but their leaders quietly understand not only that the United States did not quit Iraq in defeat, but that it

also may be winning an unforeseen victory there. Moreover, they see that this victory has repercussions for the security of their own countries – and this will require readjustments to the easy anti-Americanism of the past.

The post-war occupation was supposed to be difficult, but few envisioned a bloody four-year struggle. Instead, after the fall of Saddam, al Qaeda chose to escalate its war against the West by sending thousands of jihadists into the new battleground of Iraq – in part, to aid the Sunni and ex-Baathist insurgencies in their wars against the U.S., and the Shiites. The violence that ensued left tens of thousands dead, and resulted in nearly 4,000 American battle fatalities. We spent nearly a trillion dollars, as public support dropped from a 70-percent approval of the war to less than 40-percent.

Yet it was not the American military that was ruined fighting an unpopular war in the heart of the ancient caliphate, but most likely al Qaeda who has lost thousands, (and, far more importantly, completely destroyed its Pan-Arabic mystique of religious purity).

The more the jihadists fought, the more they were killed by the U.S. military – while kidnapping, murdering, stealing, mutilating, raping, and outraging Iraqi civilians. Nothing is worse in the Arab world than to be seen as weak and cruel, and al Qaeda proved, eventually, to be both on Al-Jazeera.

After Iraq, the al Qaedaists' reputation has become more akin to the Cosa Nostra, than to romantic Holy Warriors. It was not our intention in going to Iraq to cripple and discredit al Qaeda per se, in some third-party theater; but once the jihadists upped the ante, they also raised the stakes of being defeated with global implications to follow. Polls in the Arab world show a decline in support for suicide bombing, and a radical change of heart about bin Laden.

We made all sorts of mistakes in the immediate aftermath of the war. Pundits still bicker over whether we should have disbanded the Baathist army – or whether there was anything much left to disband. And by openly allying ourselves with the once-despised Shiites, we alienated the powerful Sunni elite minority that not only had run the country, but alone in Iraq, knew how to administer the infrastructure of a modern state.

All that being said, it is difficult to see how we could have immediately reconciled with the Sunnis, given their past alliances with Saddam, and their furor at the results of our one-man/one-vote policy of democratization. It was as if the British had landed at Mobile in 1859, declared slavery over, and expected the Southern white population to join in such a foreign-inspired multi-racial reconstruction.

Yet four years later, the Sunni insurgency is largely over – but largely over only because it has been defeated by the U.S. military. Tribal sheiks feel that they have restored

the honor that was lost in Saddam's three-week rout, by fighting the Americans tooth-and-nail for four years. That said, they now have learned that resistance brought them nothing but defeat and, if it continues, abject humiliation.

So there is a sort of tragic irony here too. It may well be that the Sunni tribes have learned, only through their failed insurgency, that they cannot defeat the U.S. military; that their Sunni al Qaeda allies were far worse than we are; that the Shiite government is not going away; and that the United States is an honest broker of sorts that is advancing their interests with the Shiite majority.

The unexpected result of all this is that it is only now — after the Sunnis have fought, lost, and learned the futility of continued resistance — that there is a better chance for a lasting stability. It is impossible to imagine that the Southern Plantationists in 1860 would have been willing to reconcile with the North, or that Germans would have come to their senses and rejected Hitler in 1939. If the old dictum remains valid, that a war's reconstruction and reconciliation come after, not before, the defeat of an enemy, then it may well be that the Sunnis had to learn the hard truth, the hard way, about the perversity of al Qaeda, the military superiority of the United States, and the permanence of the Iraqi constitutional government.

It is sometimes said that someone must be culpable for not finding a David Petraeus and his team of bril-

liant colonels earlier in the conflict. I wish it were that easy.

But such a conjecture is like saying Lincoln should have known of a Grant or Sherman at the war's outset; or that earlier Union generals, even in error and blunder, did not attrite the enemy and provide both experience (even if by negative example), and some military advantage when Grant and Sherman finally emerged to positions of real influence; or that a Grant and Sherman did not themselves learn the necessary, prerequisite skills for their prominent command in 1864-5, while in obscurity during 1861-2.

The emergence of a Patton, LeMay, or Ridgway is usually through a process of distillation, where a military learns only from its mistakes, and only slowly sorts out the right people for the right job at the right moment. We should also remember that we did not suddenly discover the proper strategy for Iraq. We learned it only through the heroic sacrifices of thousands of lost Americans who took a heavy toll on the enemy all through 2003-6, and, in four years of trial and error, provided the lethal experience of what would and what would not work.

The war's savage irony even extends to the reconstruction. Iraq by now was supposed to be pumping over 3 million barrels a day during the post-Saddam reconstruction. But due to vandalism, insurgent attacks, corruption, and neglect, the oil industry rarely currently sustains over 2.2 million barrels produced per day — despite a capacity to pump 3

million, and a potential some day to produce perhaps over six million per day.

Yet, because oil prices, in unforeseen fashion, have more than quadrupled since the war, Iraq finds itself with more petroleum revenues than ever before. Its total oil annual worth may reach \$70 billion at the present price in the upcoming year, even without much of a change in production levels.

Electricity production has hit 5,000 megawatts per day and is climbing steadily, but consumption has skyrocketed from prewar levels. If Iraqis would consume electricity at prewar levels, they would probably now have power almost 24-hours per day. What the coalition and the Iraqi ministries are trying to do, then, is, at a time of war, protect and restore electrical service, but at the

same time increase it threefold to meet increased demand brought on by millions of imported electrical appliances.

Nothing is for certain in any war — as the savage ironies of Iraq have shown the last four years. Few envisioned the initial brilliant three-week war, and the utter and rapid defeat of Saddam. Fewer foresaw the ensuing bloody four-year occupation. And the fewest of all anticipated that out of that mess, the present chance at stability and a real reconciliation under a constitutional framework could come.

The lessons are only the eternal ones: that wars won't be fought as believed and won't end as planned, but that adaptability, self-critique, and persistence, in an effort believed to be both right and necessary, will eventually prevail.

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