



We Were Right to Disband Them. The administration did the right thing by disbanding the Iraqi army after the fall of Saddam

(Published in The Weekly Standard. From December 23, 2004)

***By Tom Donelly**

Colaboraciones n° 219

30 de Diciembre de 2004

One of the enduring controversies of the American experience in Iraq has been the decision to disband Saddam's army after toppling his regime. Current conventional wisdom holds that this was a huge mistake which accelerated the breakdown of order in Iraq.

The trouble we're experiencing building new and effective Iraqi forces is taken as obvious proof of this truth. Plus, a bonus of the conventional wisdom is that it conveniently places the blame on Ambassador Paul Bremer, who has stepped down from his post and departed the immediate scene.

President Bush's frank assessment of the current state of Iraqi security forces at his press conference would seem to reinforce this argument.

At last accepting that the simple size of the Iraqi force--formally 114,000 today--wasn't the real measure of effectiveness, the president acknowledged that, while there were some good leaders and a number of units that were performing well, "the whole command structure necessary to have a viable military is not in place." Bush even earned kudos from the editorialists at the *New York Times* for being "admirably

blunt" in confronting this "sobering reality."

It is undeniable that building effective Iraqi security forces is a tough task. But the very difficulty of the job is, if nothing else, a measure of how broken Saddam's army itself was. The old Iraqi army's sole claim to competence was its performance in the Iran-Iraq War of 1980 to 1988. For many years, that impressed American intelligence and military analysts, but their assessment rested on a poor understanding of the facts on the ground and a comparison with an Iranian army whose tactics were built on human wave attacks by troops inspired with religious fervor and mullah-strategists inspired by a lust for power.

The true qualities of the old Iraqi army were more fully revealed--"exposed" might be a better word--during its extended encounter with U.S. forces in the first Gulf War, the no-fly-zone operations of the 1990s, and the invasion of March 2003. It's hard to think of a more one-sided and less distinguished record of human combat; it puts Omdurman in the shade. Most notable is that, in something like 300,000 no-fly-zone sorties, the United States and its coalition partners--remember when France was on our side?--lost not a single aircraft. American forces routinely lose people in training accidents because of the stress of realistic exercises; Iraqi performance was less than training "opposing forces," who, of course, have no live ammunition.

If Saddam's army proved a paper tiger against the U.S. military, it was

moderately more capable in its ability to massacre Iraqi civilians. With its Sunni-dominated officer corps, the old security forces were a symbol of the violence that Saddam's minority rule visited upon the Kurds and Shia. Not surprisingly, then, the old army's command structure was picked much more for its Baath party membership and personal loyalty to Saddam than its discipline or competence. It's not just that we would have had to replace a lot of rotten generals after the invasion, it is that the entire structure was rotten to the core.

OUR TROUBLES in building competent military and paramilitary forces ought more properly to remind us how truly revolutionary our purpose in Iraq and in the region really are. In fact, there were no legitimate state institutions in Iraq--civil or military. There was no significant body of "technocrats" who, with proper guidance, could accelerate the business of state-building. And embracing the Saddam's army would have sent an unmistakable message to the Iraqi people that the United States was either unwilling or unable to wrest control of the instruments of state power from the Baathists.

Indeed, the challenge in postwar Iraq, as in Afghanistan, is that security institutions "legitimate" to one group, in the sense of having popular support, are violently unacceptable to others. The only effective military forces are those like the Tajik-heavy Northern Alliance in Afghanistan or the peshmerga Kurdish militia in Iraq,

which contain an obvious sectarian character. In both places, the United States has been working hard to "nationalize" these forces, bringing them over time, with a mix of carrots and sticks, into emerging national armies and police forces.

Would such a gradual conversion process have been possible with the old Iraqi army--a Sunni militia, writ large? Perhaps, but unlikely. Certainly a more orderly demobilization, in which Sunni officers might have been quietly bought off, could have taken some of the bite out of the insurgency. But one way or another, the old Iraqi

army had to go--and with it, the old regime.

Ultimately, it is putting the cart before the horse to believe that there can ever be fully legitimate and effective national military forces prior to the birth of a legitimate national government. Our greatest postwar military mistake in Iraq was thus not that we disbanded the old Iraqi army too quickly but that we moved to create a new Iraqi state too slowly.

**Tom Donnelly is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a contributing writer to The Daily Standard.*