

The Challenge of Establishing Democracy in Iraq: Past Mistakes and Future Possibilities

Notes for a talk at Beth Emet, the Free Synagogue, June 16, 2006

I want to thank you for the privilege of speaking here at Beth Emet tonight. I cannot claim to be an expert on the Middle East. I teach economic and political theory. But a theorist's job is to help sharpen the questions that we ask about the world, and there are important questions that Americans need to raise about Iraq. Most importantly, if our invasion of Iraq had a goal of bringing democracy there, we need to think much more about how America can encourage democracy in other countries.

In 2003, with our uninvited invasion, we destroyed the only network of political power in Iraq, and we took to ourselves the responsibility for governing a wounded nation. Americans have a moral obligation to ask whether this responsibility was appropriately fulfilled.

Freedom and democracy are great virtues of American civilization, but that does not mean that they automatically follow American influence wherever it goes. When we launch an unprovoked pre-emptive war, we undermine international law just like any other country. When we conquer a foreign land, our appointed governor cannot simply plant democracy in the tread of his boots.

What is democracy? Democracy is more than just holding elections. Democracy is a system in which politicians compete for power by earning voters' confidence and trust. When leaders compete for power by earning the confidence and trust of soldiers, that is not democracy.

We have simplistically learned many categories for describing Iraqi leaders: Shi'ite and Sunni, Arab and Kurd, Secular and Islamist. But we should understand that, across every category, there are many who have ambitions to win a share of political power in Iraq. For Americans who would encourage democracy in Iraq, only one distinction really matters: between those whose political strength is based on a reputation for providing services to voters, and those whose political strength is based on a reputation for leading gangs of fighters.

In spending the Treasury's money, a democratic political leader typically has two goals: to show the voters that his administration can provide good public services, and to reward his active supporters with nice patronage benefits, by contracts for these services. Without democracy, a leader can just concentrate on the latter goal, rewarding his active supporters. That is the theory of why democracy is better, because it creates an incentive for leaders to make sure that the public at large gets some benefit from all that public spending.

Our Occupation authorities founded a new university at Hilla in Iraq to teach the theory of democracy. But to build a real system of democratic competition, what Iraq most needed was lots of politicians with good reputations for spending public funds responsibly. During the Occupation, America had a unique opportunity to begin cultivating such democratic political

careers all over Iraq, if we had done two things:

- (1) As soon as possible after the invasion, our Occupation officials should have allowed Iraqi voters to begin electing municipal and provincial councils in free local elections.
- (2) Throughout the Occupation, our officials should have allowed these local Iraqi councils to administer funds for reconstructing Iraq.

Why didn't we do this? Why did our officials insist on handpicking the members of local councils in Occupied Iraq? Why did we hire American firms to reconstruct Iraq, instead of letting Iraqis hire their own?

It may be easy to see why our leaders funneled patronage profits to American corporations: to strengthen democratic competition in America, by rewarding contributors to our elections!

It is harder to see why Paul Bremer, the head of our Coalition Provisional Authority, refused to allow any free elections in Occupied Iraq. Nobody has offered any serious explanation for this crucial decision to ban elections. But Noah Feldman, who advised the Occupation on democratization, remarked in April 2005 that the new Iraqi government closely resembled the group of expatriate Iraqi leaders who gathered to meet Paul Bremer when he first arrived in Baghdad in 2003. For this group, it would have been very inconvenient to let local politicians all over Iraq begin building independent reputations for responsible government. The ban on local elections in our Occupation left the way clear for leaders in this group to take power afterwards. National elections in 2005 served mainly to determine the distribution of power within this group.

We understand that civilian control of military forces is essential in a democracy.

Early in the Occupation, Paul Bremer dissolved the old Iraqi Army, and he announced the creation of a new Army that would be loyal to a democratic Iraq. But during the Occupation, when there did not exist any democratically elected leaders in Iraq, how could such an army be loyal to anyone but their own officers? So perhaps it was good that the new Iraqi Army was so ineffective during our Occupation. It could only have been effective if its soldiers had developed strong bonds of loyalty and trust for their commanders, and then these generals would have been in a position to dominate Iraq today.

Instead, the lack of legitimate leadership during our Occupation left a chaotic power vacuum that was filled by the growth of militias throughout Iraq. Opportunity, and the need for self-protection, drove ambitious leaders to build paramilitary forces. The recent struggle for control of the Interior Ministry demonstrated how important these armed gangs have become as a source of power in Iraq. This is the opposite of democracy.

The question of disarming or regularizing the militias will be critical for the fate of Iraqi democracy. Leaders of militias are essential to the governing coalition, and they cannot be

simply dismissed. But regularizing one of the larger militias could give its leader the basis to become a new dictator. A better plan may be to buy them off with civil-service jobs, as Iraq's intelligence chief has suggested. To me, discussion of such proposals is the most hopeful recent news from Iraq (better than the recent death of the terrorist leader al-Zarqawi).

Let me go beyond Iraq for just a bit. In December 2003, I was in Moscow, and I asked a group of young Russian professors whether America's invasion of Iraq had any effect on the prospects for democracy in Russia. I said that I could see no logical reason why America's policy in Iraq should have any implications for domestic politics in Russia, but I still wondered. Then they explained to me how our invasion has indeed hurt the cause of democracy in Russia. Before the invasion, they told me, opponents of democracy in Russia would argue that democracy might be good for America, but that Russia is different from America. To this, defenders of democracy could counter that maybe Russia should be more like America. Now, they told me, nobody in Russia wants to advocate America as a role model.

What can we do now? I understand that this congregation is considering a resolution to call for withdrawal of all American troops from Iraq by the end of 2006. I don't know whether I would support this, because I cannot be sure whether total withdrawal now would cause even worse harm to the people of Iraq.

But I agree that something has to change about our military presence in Iraq. Perhaps instead we should call for the American troops in Iraq to remain in Iraq only as part of a peace-keeping mission that is directed by the United Nations. Such a resolution might well be worthy of support, so that our presence in Iraq could become a force for international law, not against it. There may be serious questions about how long our forces will be needed in Iraq for humanitarian reasons, but such questions could be better decided in a multinational forum like the United Nations.

I'd also suggest that America has a moral obligation to review and scrutinize how our officials exercised the responsibilities of governing Iraq during the Occupation. It is easy to say that Iraqis might have been worse off under Saddam, but that is not an excuse for ignoring the harm that our forces may have done, or for avoiding questions about whether we could have done better for the people of Iraq. Our national reputation may depend on our facing up to the mistakes that we have made.

Such a full Congressional inquiry into our Occupation policies seems unlikely in the near future. But I could make one last suggestion that is within our reach here in Beth Emet. We should all try to learn more about the impact of our nation's invasion of Iraq, the good that our forces did, and the evil. And next fall, at Yom Kippur, we should ask how we can atone for the evil.

<http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/bethemet.pdf>

References:

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Reference to University of Humanistic Studies at Hilla, and problems of not funding local councils:

"What went wrong in Iraq," by Larry Diamond, Foreign Affairs, Sept/Oct 2004.

Related essays on Iraq by the same author: <http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/iraq.pdf>

General information about Iraq and America's involvement there: www.juancole.com

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