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An Honest Presidential Address on the Iraq Situation

Abstract

This essay is a mock Presidential address designed to highlight the long-term consequences of the US occupation of Iraq.

Keywords

Iraq, Occupation of Iraq, ISIS, The Salvador Option, US Foreign Policy Iraq

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My fellow Americans, I have chosen this moment in history to do something unprecedented and present the truth about the history of US intervention and occupation of Iraq. It seems an opportune moment to simply let the record speak for itself so that no one is under any illusions about our limited options going forward.

When the George W. Bush Administration made the decision to target Iraq as part of the never-ending war on terror in 2003, it was apparent that this intervention was no different from our long history of military interventions and occupations from the Spanish-American War to the present. We can nitpick about how Democrats preferred a steady strangulation of Iraq with sanctions and selective bombing missions versus the Bush Administration's cowboy approach, but once we as a country committed to invasion and occupation, it was with the cooperation of both political parties. Most of the prominent Democrats, so cowed by the military-industrial complex, voted to give Bush an open-ended legislative authority to do whatever he pleased (something I used to my advantage in that Presidential race...where I muttered something about hope and change). The news media helped matters here by shying away from uncomfortable, let alone controversial, questions. They are indeed the best press corps money and flattery can buy!

So Bush authorized the invasion and occupation, and we did our usual thing. First, we began our systematic violation of international law by occupying a country that posed no threat to our national interests. Second, we abruptly rewrote the Iraqi constitution during the early stages of the occupation, another violation of international law. (International law is awfully useful when we want to charge others of war crimes, but becomes an annoying dishrag that we must discard when thrown at us!) We've used this playbook before, and we've carried it out successfully for long stretches of imperial history. In Iraq, we devised this cute-sounding Coalition Provisional Authority to govern the country, and it was our man Paul Bremer who was calling the shots for the entire country during most of the first two years of the occupation. He doled out privileged contracts for US corporations, opened up the Iraqi market for US exports, presided over the systematic dismantling of the Iraqi bureaucracy (and with that helped fan the flames of ethnic tension) and facilitated a US presence in virtually all the important Iraqi ministries.¹ It seems that foreign oil corporations were poised to benefit enormously from these changes, and many were active in helping to shape the terms of long-term petroleum contracts in the country. All appeared consistent with US history and with US occupations.

But, as with past interventions, things got messy pretty quickly. The Iraqis started to insist on early elections, when we just wanted to make sure they were ready to exercise their vote. Typically the way it works is that the market is divided for corporate and propertied interests first, their rights are locked in, and only then can the little people be allowed to exercise their voting rights. To extend democracy to the masses before property rights for the privileged were etched into law would violate every precept of capitalist history and so-called "democratic transition." Scholars are often on board with US democracy promotion nowadays. What a change from those turbulent 1960s and 1970s!

Despite our best intentions, those Iraqis continued to insist on early voting by staging numerous loud demonstrations and protests. So we were stuck between a proverbial Iraq and a hard place. Ha! Prominent Shiites urged the masses to mobilize, preaching the necessity of voting rights to

establish an independent Iraqi legislature, a maneuver that would surely lessen the influence of our Coalition Provisional Authority. We would have looked very bad if we simply resisted this popular pressure, so we did what we usually do: We expanded our ground warfare to undertake some rather ghastly and unpleasant interventions. We killed a lot of civilians, especially in Falluja, and left a lot of depleted uranium waste in neighborhoods that are still being affected to this day with high cancer rates and a very high rate of birth defects. But we have to understand this as the price of bringing freedom and democracy to Iraqis. We simply had to clean house so that Iraqi political institutions would be less contaminated by opposition groups—namely the Sunni towns that we had disproportionately targeted in our ground campaign.

As part of this effort, we enlisted the services of General David Petraeus, that shining knight of charisma who was fawned over in a very bipartisan fashion every time he appeared on Capitol Hill. Petraeus had an idea that was called “the Salvador option.” This refers to the US military intervention in the Salvadoran civil war during the 1980s, when a US group of special force advisors, led by Colonel Jim Steele, trained Salvadoran military units to wage war against rebel groups that we opposed. Essentially, the US special advisors provided the expertise and knowledge necessary to train the activities of Salvadoran death squads who engaged in indiscriminate terror against civilian populations, all to destroy the enemy by destroying any villages that housed the enemy. You know: old-fashioned counter-insurgency!

Fortunately, Col. Steele himself was available, after all these years, to assist Petraeus in formulating the Salvador option for Iraq. Who better to lead this effort than a man with a lot of experience? Col. Steele was given the authority to supervise the training of the Iraqi Special Police Commandos, who would operate much like the Salvadoran death squads did. In fact, to make this easier, the US lifted the ban on the participation of violent Shia militias like the Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army in these Special Police Commandos. This way, the Commandos, equipped with a multimillion dollar US budget, could undertake “all means necessary” in razing villages, killing suspected Sunni insurgents, and leveling the playing field through indiscriminate acts of terror, including the torturing of political prisoners that continues to this day.² At the same time, Petraeus and Steele had enough cash to offer a deal to Sunni militia leaders who had been inclined to fight the Iraqi government. The deal was: We’ll pay you to join us if you abandon the fight against the Iraqi government, and we’ll shower hard currency on your communities as a further reward. Boy did we do our job well! Elections were held, but at the same time that US-led military operations were being conducted. Elections by any means necessary, just as in El Salvador!

Petraeus was summarily praised by many of the talking head pundits, and Congressmen could not wait to be photographed next to him. After his Salvador option for Iraq was deemed a success, he seemed a natural to take his skills on the road to Afghanistan. Although our relationship was not always smooth, I picked him as my nominee to head the Central Intelligence Agency. This is yet another indication of the kind of bipartisanship that the US establishment is known for in its foreign policy choices.

The only problem with militarizing our presence to such an extent in Iraq and around the world is that it has this rather regrettable tendency to produce blowback, a CIA term that Petraeus understands very well. Blowback is when our policies generate consequences that end up

rebouncing against us. Unfortunately, we are now seeing this in Iraq, due to our policies which helped make the Iraqi state one of the most repressive in the world. You can look it up, but Iraq ranks very high among states in the torture of political prisoners, the jailing of political opponents, the systematic discrimination against Sunnis both in restrictions of civil liberties and significant obstacles to effective political participation.³ The very policies we have encouraged in Iraq seem to be encouraging revolutionary mobilization against the Iraqi state that we helped construct! I kept trying to tell Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to go easy on this extreme sectarian stuff, knowing full well that we opened the barn door on this one. Ha! But I figured that the Iraqi state had at the very least been so well-trained in all the repressive stuff that it would be well-equipped to put down rebellions.

Boy was I wrong! My opponents are using the rising strength of the group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to make political hay over my supposed tendency to retreat too quickly from our commitments. But many of my opponents were onboard with our de-escalation strategy at the time, and besides I had to at least appear to give some scraps to the left-wingers in my own party, who can become pretty obstinate about this non-intervention thing. In fact, the American public is rather overwhelmingly opposed to any further expansion of US military intervention, which of course goes against the *raison d'être* of the imperial state that I am helping to construct.

So it's back to being caught between Iraq and a hard place again. There are really no good options for us despite our imperial bluster. One of our main allies in the region, Saudi Arabia, is a funding source for ISIS, which has helped them amp up their activities in Syria and now Iraq. Meanwhile, and this is where the world really gets funny, our arch-enemy Iran is eager to take the lead in fortifying the Iraqi government from further destabilizing attacks. As my predecessor might have said, it is hard work being an imperial power these days. Even our repressive governments appear to have a shorter shelf-life than usual. But somehow we'll muddle through with a likely bombing campaign, perhaps to show our strength in the region, even if it accomplishes nothing more than killing innocent civilians. I can't be too bothered with that concern, what with the drone strikes and all. We have to be seen as doing something, after all.....

¹ Michael Schwartz, *War Without End: The Iraq War in Context*, Haymarket Books, 2008, 37-50.

² Mona Mahmood, et.al., "From El Salvador to Iraq: Washington's Man Behind Brutal Police Squads," *The Guardian*, March 6, 2013.

³ *Costsofwar.org*, "Did the Wars Bring Democracy to Afghanistan and Iraq?" February 2013.