

14. What if Iraq Had Not Been Invaded?

NEWS ABOUT IRAQ during the past two months has ranged from not good to extremely bad, with illustrative events including the Abu Ghraib abominations, mounting evidence of civil disorder, and sustained military and civilian casualties.

Forecasts drawing from this news have envisaged continued deterioration, reflected in repetitive use of the term *quagmire* resurrected from the Vietnam era.

Although I admit that the Iraqi glass currently appears less than half full, I want to focus on a few items of good news that have been neglected by the media and in most public discussion. These items are not the ones that have from time to time been reported on—such as progress in the reconstruction part of Operation Iraqi Freedom, for example, schools and hospitals rebuilt and back in operation, oil production above preinvasion levels, and so on.

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The things I'll mention briefly fall into two categories:

First, indistinct but growing signs that Iraq's disparate groups and their leaders may be coalescing, or "consensualizing," to at least the extent that *maybe*—just maybe—they'll be able to give reality to the abstract notion of exercising sovereignty post-June 30.

Second, what if we hadn't invaded Iraq on March 19, 2003; what would the situation have been and now be in and around Iraq? This is something critics of the war never consider. I opine that the situation in Iraq currently would be decidedly worse than it now is—that is to say, worse for the United States and, as well, worse for the world.

To start with the first category:

Several recent and ongoing circumstances constitute what may be emerging signs of a tenably sovereign Iraq after June 30. These circumstances include the following:

1. The four-way agreement negotiated among Muktada al Sadr, the Grand Ayatollah Sistani and the city fathers and Shia clerics, the Fifth U.S. Marine Brigade, and the Iraq Governing Coalition (IGC), calling for al Sadr and his Mahdi army to evacuate police stations, mosques, and other city buildings in Falluja and Najaf and lay down their arms and for the marines to withdraw to the city outskirts.
2. The agreements (negotiated among many more than four sides) that the interim "sovereign" Iraqi government will have at its head a Shiite prime minister, Ayad Allawi; a Sunni president (either Pachachi or al Ghazi); and two vice presidents—one a Kurd and the other a Shiite.
3. Frankly, I don't profess to understand all the ins and outs of these negotiations—either those relating to Falluja and Najaf or those relating to the interim "sovereign" Iraqi government—but a couple of things about them seem clear and im-

portant: first, all sides seem to have given some things up, as well as gotten some things they wanted; second, the Iraqis—on the IGC and the clerics outside of it—seem to have stood up quite vociferously both to Brahimi (Kofi’s guy), and to Bremer and Blackwill on the CPA and U.S. side, rejecting what the latter “3-B’s” separately or jointly preferred. I think both of these are indications of what I referred to as “consensualizing,” and are at least mildly encouraging signs of a tenable post–June 30 “sovereign” Iraq.

Let me turn next to the “what if?” category. Suppose the United States and its coalition partners hadn’t invaded Iraq, what would the situation there now be? Would we—that is, the United States—be in a better or worse position? And what about the world at large?

Of course, we don’t know: a counterfactual situation is not scrutable. But consider the following as a plausible—in my opinion, highly probable—counterfactual scenario:

1. The 60,000–70,000 U.S. forces in Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and adjoining Arab states in the preinvasion period would for logistic and other reasons have returned to their U.S. or other normal bases.
2. Hans Blix and the UN inspectors would have returned to Iraq for another couple of months, have found nothing, and then, like Robert Frost’s fog, have silently faded away.
3. The UN sanctions imposed on Iraq would have been ended at the behest of the French and the Russians, or, if token sanctions were maintained, they would have been severely attenuated. Concomitantly, the oil-for-food-and-medicines program would have been terminated and, incidentally, the oil-for-food UN scandal that Paul Volker and associates are ostensibly investigating would have been forever buried.

4. Saddam not only would still be in power but would now have both enormously enhanced resources to pursue WMD development discreetly but aggressively, probably with ample assistance from A.Q. Khan and Kim Jong-Il.
5. Finally, secular Saddam, now endowed with increased financial resources, would have forged indirect financial and perhaps strategic and operational cooperation with Osama, Zarkawi, and al-Qaeda's other top echelons.

Bottom line: Homeland security in the United States as well as the global security environment would be much more severely imperiled than it currently is. QED: The United States and the world are better off for having invaded Iraq than they would have been had not this "preemptive" action been undertaken!!

POSTAUDIT

These remarks were originally given at a corporate dinner, fifteen months after U.S. and coalition forces invaded Iraq. Retrospectively, the analysis summarized in the essay still seems sound, although the conclusion drawn from it is less convincing.