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DEMOCRACY, FEDERALISM, AND REALISM IN POSTWAR IRAQ

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The United States scored a decisive military victory in Iraq, but building a stable, democratic, pro-American Iraqi government will be more difficult than winning the war. To accomplish its postwar goals, the United States will have to overcome the resistance of hostile Iraqi political forces, referee the deadly factional struggles of bitter political rivals, and minimize the meddling of Syria and Iran, both of which seek to hijack Iraq's political future and drive out American influence. Building a stable democracy under these conditions will be a complex long-term challenge.

The Bush Administration has wisely pledged to turn Iraq over to the Iraqis as soon as possible to minimize the risks of an anti-American backlash, but Iraq may not be ready for full-fledged democracy by the time U.S. troops withdraw over the next two to five years. The Bush Administration should patiently assist the Iraqis in laying the foundations for democracy in Iraq, but it should also avoid pressing for an overly ambitious rapid democratic transformation that could bring anti-democratic forces to power and/or destabilize Iraq.

Avoid Pitfalls on the Path to Democracy.

Although Iraq, unlike Afghanistan, has considerable oil wealth, a well-educated population, a secular tradition, and a modern infrastructure, there are daunting political, cultural, and historical obstacles to building a stable democracy in Iraq. American troops, initially welcomed as liberators by many Iraqis, soon will become scapegoats for all of Iraq's

problems. America's honeymoon period may already be ending in Iraq: Last week, tens of thousands of Iraqi Shiites on a pilgrimage in Karbala used their newly won political freedom to call for an Islamic state and the immediate withdrawal of American forces.

Washington should remember that the British, welcomed as liberators in Baghdad in 1917 after defeating the Ottoman Empire, were the target of the "Great Iraqi Revolution" three years later. That uprising took the British more than four months to quell, at the cost of 450 British dead and 1,250 wounded, and was followed by repeated tribal and nationalist uprisings until 1936. Britain established the trappings of democracy—a constitution, parliament, king, and council of ministers—but British meddling, Iraqi political corruption, and the government's inability to meet basic needs discredited democracy in the eyes of many Iraqis. Iraq's army eventually terminated Iraq's democratic experiment, staging 15 coups between 1936 and 1968, when Saddam Hussein's Baath Party finally

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seized power.

Building a genuine democracy in Iraq requires much more than regime change. It requires a supportive civil society, strong support for the rule of law, and a political culture that rewards compromise rather than zero-sum political competition. These will require many years to develop. Iraq's civil society has been ravaged by more than 30 years of totalitarian Baath Party rule. Iraq's shrinking middle class, a potential base of support for democratic rule, has been crushed by economic hardship and political repression. And, as in Yugoslavia, longstanding ethnic and religious tensions are likely to explode in political violence as repressed groups, such as the Kurds and Shiites, reassert themselves and seek vengeance against their former oppressors. It is unrealistic to expect that the United States can quickly remedy all these shortcomings.

Moreover, attempting to compress the radical changes necessary for building a genuine democracy into a short five-year time frame would be a risky experiment. Premature elections would favor Islamic radical parties whose concept of democracy is "one man, one vote, one time." In 1992, an overly ambitious scheme to inject democracy into Algeria's one-party political system led to the electoral victory of the Islamic Salvation Front, plunging Algeria into a bloody civil war that has claimed more than 100,000 lives. A premature rush to democracy in Iraq could lead to a similar disaster.

Leaven Idealism with Realism. The Bush Administration should set modest goals and have realistic expectations about the limits of its ability to transform Iraq. It should remember that the original purpose of the war was to disarm Iraq and protect Americans, not to implant democracy. Ultimately, only Iraqi civilians can build democracy. Tasking U.S. troops with democracy-building risks bogging them down in a social engineering project that could backfire disastrously, just as mission creep led to debacles in Lebanon in 1983 and Somalia in 1993. The Bush Administration must avoid overreaching in Iraq and embarking on a neo-Wilsonian crusade to make the world safe for democracy.

Washington should refrain from raising Iraqi expectations about a quick transition to democracy too high. Democracy should be phased in incrementally: first local and municipal elections, then provincial elections, and finally national elections. In the meantime, the United States should gradually transfer power to an inclusive, broad-based Iraqi interim administration that will prepare the ground for future national elections. The democratic, pro-Western Iraqi National Congress should play an important role in such an administration.

Transforming Iraq into a genuine democracy is a long-term undertaking that can be completed only after American troops are long gone. Over the next two to five years, the Bush Administration should focus on attainable goals that help create the conditions necessary for a successful democratic transition: restoring law and order, rebuilding Iraq's infrastructure, reviving the Iraqi economy, and reforming civil society. Retired U.S. Army Lt. General Jay Garner, the chief civil administrator for Iraq, has made a start, but nudging Iraqis toward democracy will be like herding cats.

The United States must also block any attempts at meddling by Iraq's anti-Western neighbors, Syria and Iran. Both countries teamed up in the early 1980s to block Western peacekeeping and nation-building efforts in Lebanon by supporting the Hezbollah terrorist group, a Lebanese surrogate. Both countries reportedly are now working with Iraqi clients to oppose U.S. efforts to reform Iraq. The Bush Administration should follow up its public warnings to Damascus and Tehran to stop meddling in Iraq with private warnings about the possible diplomatic, economic, and military consequences of such behavior.

Conclusion. By focusing on these short-term objectives, the United States can help put the Iraqis on the path to democracy. But Washington cannot compel Iraqis to reach that destination. It can only patiently assist the Iraqis to find their own way.

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