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EDITOR: John O'Sullivan

- 1615 L Street, N.W. • Suite 1230 • Washington, D.C. 20036 •
- (202) 467-4884 • Fax (202) 467-0006 • *editor@nationalinterest.org* •

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Retreating in Good Order

William E. Odom

THE UNITED States should begin a strategic withdrawal from Iraq now because it was never in the interest of the United States to invade that country in the first place. The mood in the United States before the war, created by the Bush Administration and supported by both parties in Congress, made a serious public discussion of the prudence of the invasion impossible. One year later, however, such an examination is difficult to avoid because the president and his aides assured us that the Iraqis themselves would greet U.S. forces as liberators and form a liberal democratic regime friendly to the United States in a very short time—months, not years. Clearly that has not happened and will not happen soon not in years or even decades.

My arguments for withdrawal fall into roughly four categories. *First*, the question of war aims and whose strategic

interests were served. *Second*, the argument that “liberal” democracy cannot be created soon, if ever, in Iraq, but “illiberal” democracy can and probably will be. *Third*, the implications for the United States of continuing to pursue the war. And *fourth*, I discuss how to reframe and address the strategic challenge the Greater Middle East presents, not just to the United States but also to allies in Europe and East Asia, including the unfinished war with Al-Qaeda.

Aims and Interests

PRESIDENT Bush has not always been consistent about American war aims in Iraq, but he has repeated three too often to deny:

- Destruction of WMD in Iraq
- Overthrow of Saddam Hussein and his regime

- Creation of a pro-U.S. liberal democratic regime in Iraq.

Fighting terrorism has been mixed and muddled with these three goals, but it should not be included, given that there is little or no evidence of Saddam's Iraq supporting terrorist groups in general and Al-Qaeda in particular.

Achieving the first aim was a hollow victory since no WMD has been discovered in Iraq. Second, Saddam is now in U.S. custody and his regime overthrown. Thus two of the three war aims have been accomplished. But the illusive third aim recedes daily like the horizon. That said, achieving the first two war aims has not necessarily served the American interest. Yet they have benefited the interests of America's foes. The destruction of Saddam's regime serves Iran's aim of sweet revenge for Iraq's invasion in 1980.

Four of Osama bin Laden's interests have also been served. First, he has long been dedicated to toppling secular Arab leaders. Second, Iraq is now open to Al-Qaeda as a base of operations, especially if an Islamic regime emerges there—a likely outcome. Third, the invasion has distracted the United States from its campaign against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and northern Pakistan. Fourth, the war has put the United States at odds with its European allies. Beyond these adverse consequences, we must remember the fiscal costs of the war to the United States—costs not shared by U.S. allies, as they were in the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

Thus Bin Laden and the Iranians have been the winners thus far. Presumably the proponents of the war would argue that spreading "liberal" democracy first to Iraq and then throughout the Arab world will offset these negative outcomes and also undercut support for Middle East-based terrorist groups. The case of continuing the war, therefore, hinges on whether the attainment of the third war aim is possible.

Arab Liberal Democracy?

HOW DO liberal democracies come about? The answer is key to understanding the strategic disaster confronting the United States in Iraq unless it changes course soon.

I provide a detailed answer in a recent book; here, I can merely summarize it.¹ There are about two dozen mature liberal democracies in the world today. Another dozen are tending toward constitutional breakthroughs, mainly countries in central and eastern Europe, but most of them will not achieve this over the next decade or two. Beyond this set, the prospects for new "liberal" democracies worldwide are very dim, especially so in the Arab world.

Democracies, however, are another matter. Electoral democracies are easy to create, but they can turn out to be illiberal regimes, like the one in Iran and in many states in Africa, Asia and Latin America. They never become "liberal", that is, truly constitutional regimes. Of the nearly fifty new democracies established since World War II, about ten are mature constitutional regimes, and they all had highly favorable preconditions to their establishment that are missing in the Arab world. The challenge is not "creating democracy." It is installing "constitutional order." And once "illiberal" democracy is installed, it has precluded, almost without exception, evolution to liberal democracy. In other words, establishing electoral democracies is a sure way to prevent the

¹William E. Odom and Robert Dujarric, *America's Inadvertent Empire* (Yale University Press, 2004), Chapter 1. Hundreds of scholarly books and articles have been written on this question—too many to list here—but one only needs to take the list of conditions conducive to liberal democracy in Robert Dahl's *Polyarchy* (Yale University Press, 1970) and match it to the conditions extant in Iraq to see how improbable the creation of a popularly supported constitutional order is in that country.

establishment of constitutional democracies. Liberal regimes inexorably resort to democratic procedures, but illiberal democratic regimes do not become liberal. Yet it is precisely an illiberal democracy that is being constructed in Iraq, given the schedule for elections in the next six months or a year.

At least a dozen other strong arguments from the academic literature could be advanced—for example, ethnic and religious minority regions, religious traditions, cultural patterns, distribution of property ownership, anti-liberal legal traditions—showing that a liberal regime will not emerge soon, not even in decades, in Iraq. At the same time, I cannot find any scholarly literature that offers strong reasons to reach the contrary conclusion.

No matter what kind of regime emerges in Iraq, it will be anti-American, and it will be deeply hostile to Western constitutionalism.²

Implications of the Status Quo

THE implications of continuing the fight in Iraq can be divided into those within the country, within the region and, finally, globally.

In Iraq: U.S. military forces may exhaust the remnants of the Ba'ath but that will not overcome Shi'a groups like Moqtada Sadr's militia. Shi'a can count on support from Iran because that country will take great pleasure in seeing American blood flow in Iraq. Sunni groups may also receive outside aid from supporters in Syria for similar reasons. Al-Qaeda and other terror organizations are reportedly in Iraq (although I have seen no fully confirmed evidence of the scale and size). At some point, the Kurds may declare an independent state. That, in turn, may bring direct Turkish military intervention.

Even if U.S. forces have periodic successes at various stages in the progression

of a widening conflict, that will hardly guarantee eventual overall success. Why? Any Iraqi leader who can rule the whole country will also have to be anti-American. And he will have to claim that he has liberated the country from American invaders.

In the region: So-called moderate Arab leaders are deeply conflicted. On the one hand, most of them are glad to see Saddam defeated. On the other hand, their own youth are being radicalized. We should not exaggerate what the so-called "Arab street" will do, but we should worry about where Arab oil money will end up and to what purposes it will be put.

Looking back to (relatively) more stable times in this region, we note that they were based on the United States having a firm foot in all camps—Israeli, Persian and Arab. When the Shah of Iran fell, the United States lost its footing in the Persian camp. To restore the balance required larger U.S. military force projection capabilities. That prompted the creation of the rapid deployment force and the Central Command in 1979–81. The invasion of Iraq and the strong tilt to Sharon's side in Israel endangers U.S. footing in the Arab camp. If it is lost, the resulting imbalance will require huge military power: Far greater land forces than the United States now possesses.

These trends have so weakened the U.S. position in the region that it no longer makes sense to stay on the present course. Abandoning Iraq and accepting the consequences is the obvious way to slow the trends—if not to reverse them outright. Moreover, a U.S. pullout might galvanize the moderate Arab regimes themselves to try to control events within Iraq.

²On the likely anti-American character of even a democratic regime, see Ray Takeyh and Nikolas Gvosdev, "Democratic Impulses versus Imperial Interests: America's New Middle East Conundrum", *Orbis* (Summer 2003).

Critics will warn of all the untoward implications of withdrawing. Civil war in Iraq, the breakup of the country into three smaller ones, Iraq becoming a base for terrorist groups and others. All of these things may happen, but most of them will occur even if U.S. forces remain. It has become an “internal war”, one the United States cannot win without destroying something like 20 percent of the population and imposing a ruthless U.S.-run regime in Baghdad. Failure to recognize that the nature of the war has been transformed will lead to a much larger defeat for the United States in the longer run.³

In the global context: The U.S. unilateral initiation of the war in Iraq has come close to breaking the Atlantic Alliance. Gaining an Iraq of any form is not worth losing Europe. If the United States is to maintain some kind of regional stability in the Middle East and Southwest Asia, it cannot do it alone. American power depends on collaborative efforts with the informal members of its empire. In total, it produces roughly 70 percent of the world's gross product, and its collective

military budgets are 66 percent of the world's total.⁴ President Bush's unilateralism has denied us the military support of almost half of the 66 percent, not to mention the political and moral support from most of America's allies. Moreover, this and previous administrations have maintained an overly large maritime military force structure and dangerously small land force structure. Aircraft carriers and submarines do not help in Iraq. At present, the U.S. Army is so over-stretched that its tactical vulnerabilities are worrisome. In the course of the next six months, they will become strategic vulnerabilities unless fresh units in twice the present number are deployed there. Since that is not possible in the time available, we must address this reality openly, not hidden by sleight-of-hand rotation schemes for troops to Iraq or pretty much anywhere else.

To regain international support and to have the resources of our allies available for a comprehensive strategy toward the region, the United States will have to produce a highly positive outcome in Iraq or withdraw. Since we are reasonably sure that a positive outcome is impossible, and certainly decades away in the best event, withdrawal is the most sensible course today.

Our military investment in Iraq is what economists call a “sunk cost.” We cannot retrieve it by investing more there, no matter how much. Thus, to say that we cannot afford to fail is a costly illusion. We ensured failure when we decided to invade. Our choices now are to get out of Iraq early, regroup with our allies, and try to stabilize the region, or to continue down the present path in Iraq and risk the dissolution of the American-led international order. □

³See Odom, *On Internal War* (Duke University Press, 1992). This book deals with U.S. and Soviet approaches to supporting governments in countries involved in internal wars. Its analysis, however, is just as relevant to the U.S. predicament in Iraq, where it engages in “colonialism by ventriloquy”, and the inability of the U.S.-supported regime to seize the tax base, denying it to opposition groups, and to wall off support coming to them from outside the country.

⁴*America's Inadvertent Empire*, pp. 37, 66. The explanation of the nature of American power in this book, especially in chapters 1 and 2, clarifies why such a strong country destroys its own power by assertive unilateralism that alienates its allies. The Bush Administration seems to have failed to grasp the *nature* of U.S. power while underestimating its *extent* when properly used.

Lt. General William E. Odom, U.S. Army (Ret.), senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and a visiting professor at Georgetown University, was the director of the National Security Agency.