

Fighting Cynicism in Iraq

By Karl Zinsmeister

*The American fights for mankind, for freedom, for the people, not the land. Yet... a man who has been shot at is a new realist, and what do you say to a realist when the war is a war of ideals? —Joshua Chamberlain, *The Killer Angels**

When Americans came to Iraq they arrived with great plans. Some were determined to document previous atrocities, train lawyers, and mete out justice against evildoers. Others intended to privatize state industries and plant local businesses, to undo the stultifying socialism of the Saddam years. It was expected that hospitals would be rebuilt and stocked to the brim with modern machines and medicines. Campaigns were mapped out to immunize children, give them libraries, and rebuild their schools. Sports fields and universities and publishers were going to be revived and expanded. Most of all, Americans aimed to plant the seeds of individual rights and self-rule.

These things have been carried out to various degrees. But none has unfolded on the original scale intended. Certain efforts, like transforming Iraq into a market economy, were abandoned almost immediately in the face of local opposition or inertia.

Today there is less idealism toward Iraq among Americans, and hopes are more modest. Even between April and December of this year—my latest periods of extended reporting from Iraq—there has been a notable downsizing of American goals. We are well into the cynical stage of this war.

One can hardly blame our soldiers and diplomats on the ground for experiencing some compassion fatigue, given their experiences with Iraqis. One commander I know paid a Baghdad contractor \$6,000 a few months ago to clear and level a trash-strewn lot so it could become a soccer field for long-deprived neighborhood children. A few weeks after the field opened, an opportunistic local, probably conniving with the contractor, quickly built a large house for himself on the newly attractive site. I saw its two-thirds-complete shell with my own eyes, surrounded by manicured yard, incongruously bracketed by soccer goals on each side. When there is an opportunity to be grabbed, to hell with local kids.

Americans in Iraq have seen the dereliction of duty that results in Iraqi police chiefs stealing body armor and weapons from their own men to resell for personal profit on the black market. They have seen the selfishness that causes Iraqis to argue against the extension of sewer and water pipes to their neighbors, because that might slow the satisfaction of their own wants. They have endured a level of dishonesty which makes it impossible to take the word of almost any local. Iraqis lie easily to Americans, but they also lie habitually to each other, because that is an accepted way of gaining advantage in their dog-eat-dog world.

American soldiers and civilians working in Iraq have seen the kind of hate that causes men to shoot at ambulances, bomb churches, and put grenades in Beanie Babies

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headed for children's hands. They have seen the kind of rancor that inspires someone who has just been given a gift of a pair of shoes or a water pump to steal another from a weaker comrade. Occasionally someone will pick up a rock and throw it at the donors as they leave an aid site.

So not surprisingly, many of the Americans doing the hard daily work have entered a kind of holding pattern in their efforts to reshape Babylon. They toil to keep the peace and damp official kleptomania. They punish ethnic bullying, and fight the rise of private militias. They concentrate on building a non-political Iraqi army, and protecting an Iraqi government that will abide by basic international norms. But when it comes to improving Iraqi society, they have sharply lowered their expectations.

Iraq once had a chance to be dramatically redirected into prosperity by the USA—as Germany and Japan were after World War II. To a considerable degree, Iraqis have squandered that opportunity. Too many lacked the wisdom or work ethic to take up the offer. Too many were trapped in resentment and sloth. The courage, integrity, and patriotism needed to face down the minority in their midst who are committed to terror (perhaps 20,000 individuals in a land of more than 27 million) was in short supply.

In this sense, Iraq has been a disappointment. The disappointment is not in our ideals, our mission, or our soldiers and diplomats. The disappointment is in many of the people of Iraq, and the foul inheritance of Arab cultural baggage, Islamic obscurantism, and political brutality that weighs them down. In conversations with me in December, even notably humane Westerners expressed frustration that Iraqis have fumbled so many opportunities for cooperation, peace, and prosperity.

But while many of our soldiers have lowered their sights, most retain their magnanimity. Scrawled, as someone's reminder, on the wall of a grimy U.S. sniper post in Ramadi today, you can find this statement (first made by John McCain on the floor of the Senate in 2003): "America is great not because of what she has done for herself, but because of what she had done for others."

With some high hopes and idealism now put aside, the U.S. remains on course to succeed at the more basic and self-interested task of neutralizing the Middle Eastern radicals of various stripes who have concentrated themselves in Iraq, and establishing a beachhead against the strong-arm traditions of the region. Everyday Iraqis have leapt at our offer to elect their own leaders, and will not lightly surrender their right of self-determination in the future. In the long run, the resulting political competition will gradually civilize the Iraqi government, and neutralize it as a threat to its neighbors and to us. That was the deepest justification for breaking up the previous regime.

So our central interests are being met. The fact that Iraqis could have had this and also much more—a relatively quick path to modernity, personal liberty, and true prosperity—is a sad

loss to them. But for Americans it is merely another example of wasted human potential, something common enough in history. Most of the globe's governments are guilty of the same failures.

And it remains undeniable that an Arab spring is unfolding today. It is not as deep or as thoroughgoing as it could have been, but a self-governing Iraq, a Syria-free Lebanon, female emancipation in the Gulf states, a popular non-medieval Afghan government (see some fascinating media-ignored data on page 55)—these are large accomplishments for four years' work. When the authoritative annual report *Freedom in the World* was released at the end of 2005, it reported that the "ratings for the Middle East represent the region's best performance in the history of the survey."

Is the area now whistling Zippedy-doo-dah? Hardly. Miles and miles of productive transformation are still needed. Yet even rough and muddled democracy is vastly preferable to what has been replaced. We must not let an absence of the best blind us to the rise of something good. If we demand paradisaical results, fail to appreciate the significance of what has already been achieved, or let impatience overwhelm us, we will throw away the Middle Eastern softenings we have just won, and lose any chance of defanging the area permanently.

It will be a long haul before our work is complete. Still: can anyone point to a previous diplomatic, economic, military, religious, or political initiative that accomplished even a tenth of what our Afghan and Iraq liberations have already inspired from Libya to Lebanon, Kuwait to Kyrgyzstan—the globe's most heartbreaking crescent in our current lifetime?

There is no pretending that the accomplishments chalked up thus far have been easy. Let us say outright: our costs in this deadliest part of the world have been high. The question is not whether the war against terror and extremism launched from the Middle East will be painful. The question is simply whether this effort will be a Normandy (high costs resulting in a high payoff) or a Vietnam (high costs mishandled to yield low benefits).

In Vietnam, it was weak political leadership and social division that caused us to give up and waste a potential success. Historian Lewis Sorley literally wrote the book on this, and on page 32 of this issue of *TAE* he draws lessons from Vietnam for today's war. Victor Davis Hanson provides similar perspective on page 28. Will the classic brew of division and weakness at home undermine U.S. efforts in the Middle East?

Winston Churchill noted that America's World War II generation came as far as it did because it wasn't made of sugar candy. Can the same be said of us? Will America have the strength to keep punching through disappointments in the war on terror? Will we have the maturity to be satisfied with modest transformations in Iraq? Will we stand by fledgling nations, born under our wing, that are highly imperfect, yet good enough?

Will we?

