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The American-made Debacle in Iraq

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Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry minces no words when he attacks President George W. Bush about his Iraq policy. Kerry calls the invasion of Iraq "the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time." Since Kerry voted in favor of the war as a senator, his footing and standing on the problem had remained shaky up to now.

Kerry has made a counterproposal of sorts. Specifically, he wants to improve relations with U.S. allies, get NATO troops stationed in Iraq and make Iraqi troops and police undergo training without delay to help them defend their own country. Kerry says his policy would allow the United States to reduce both its financial burden and the danger to its troops, and put in place a system so that U.S. forces could be withdrawn within four years.

It appears Kerry is only concerned about shifting costs and risks to someone else. Perhaps it can't be helped because his proposal is directed to voters. Still, isn't it too self-seeking? To begin with, his outlook on the situation in Iraq is overly optimistic.

A provisional government was put in place by the end of June, effectively ending the U.S.-led occupation. But Iraq is still a battleground. The situation in Baghdad and the Sunni triangle in central Iraq, where the Sunnis maintained predominance under the Saddam Hussein regime, is increasingly dangerous.

In hindsight, the pinpoint-destruction tactics directed at the core of the regime and advocated by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld seem to have backfired.

There is no question that if high-tech weapons are used to effectively destroy the mainstay of power at its peak, an administration can be swiftly overthrown.

But in this case, the operation only scattered forces below or around the peak. Moreover, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) dismantled both the Iraqi army and the Baath Party. As a result, Iraq became the haunt of remnant insurgents and a storehouse of scattered weapons and ammunition. Of the hundreds of thousands of tons of ammunition formerly kept by the Iraqi forces, only tens of thousands of tons are said to have been found.

Thus, Iraq remains a very dangerous place. That is why it cannot attract investors or create jobs. About 40 percent of young adults remain unemployed. The security situation is going from bad to worse. To maintain order, the country relies on militiamen representing different tribes and sects, which contributes to undermining the rule and prestige of the government.

Larry Diamond, a senior fellow at Stanford University who served as a CPA senior adviser, said the crux of the Iraqi problem is in the way it "may have been a government but it was not a state." Only when a country can exclusively control violence can it be called a state, and the provisional government has yet to meet that requirement, he notes.

Likewise, perhaps Iraq faces the paradox that it may be able to hold an election but cannot establish democracy. Only when a country can simultaneously protect and respect its minorities under the rule of a responsible majority can it be called a democracy. But this is difficult to achieve. Iraq faces many problems such as antagonism and fear among ethnic groups, religions, sects and tribes; relations among all of these and with Iran (Shiites) and Turkey (Sunnis); distrust between repatriated and ordinary Iraqis; the spell of oil; and rampant weapons.

Actually, the U.S. military presence is barely preventing the outbreak of civil war and the country from fragmenting.

The fact that the war lacked a just cause still weighs heavily. It had no U.N. backing. There were no weapons of mass destruction. Nor were there ties between the Saddam Hussein regime and al-Qaida. In short, there were no grounds for war.

In a testimony before the Congress on Sept. 13, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell made reference to weapons of mass destruction supposedly kept by Saddam's administration. "It turned out that we have not found any stockpiles," Powell said, adding, "I think it is unlikely that we will find any stockpiles."

This is a reversal from February 2003. At that time, Powell made a strong case before the U.N. Security Council with the statement, "There can be no doubt that Saddam Hussein has biological and chemical weapons."

At the September hearing, the secretary also said: "We have to now go back through and find out why we had a different judgment. Some of the sourcing that was used to give me the basis upon which to bring forward that judgment to the United Nations were flawed, were wrong."

Flaws in information may be a problem. But more importantly, flaws in policy need to be rectified. Thorough verification is also needed for the sloppy implementation of postwar reconstruction plans.

War is not the only problem. The Pentagon-led occupation and the Iraqi Governing Council centering on repatriated people picked by the Pentagon also lacked a moral cause. The current provisional government selected by the governing council also tends to be seen as a minion of the United States. How will an election of the national congress slated for next year be seen? Provided it can be held, that is.

The United States can hold elections. It is also a dynamo of democracy. But the Bush administration refuses to change its course and the opposition Democratic Party is unable to present a persuasive counterproposal to rap the Bush administration's failed Iraqi policy.

It seems that the true function of democracy to raise objections and propose alternative plans has weakened after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. If so, it is very unfortunate not only for the United States and Iraq but for the whole world as well.

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