

**B449. "American Fantasy: Instant Democracy" International Herald Tribune (March 5, 2004) p. 8.**

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The Bush administration plans to put before the next Group of Eight meeting an ambitious program to democratize the "greater Middle East." Increasingly, the administration has claimed that its reason for invading Iraq was to free the Iraqi people from tyranny and to establish a democratic regime. The frequency with which this rationale has been cited has increased in direct proportion to the waning of the reasons first given for invasion — weapons of mass destruction and links to Al Qaeda. Charles Krauthammer, a columnist and leading neocon ideologue, recently told a Hilton ballroom packed with Bush officials and loyalists, including Vice President Cheney, that the United States needs a vision; that real politics, which builds on raw power, will not do. However, he warned that "global democratization" was too ambitious; the United States should install democracy only "where it counts" — in the Middle East. Yet study upon study has shown how false is the promise to democratize countries with little preparation for democracy, especially if it is done on the run. A study conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace found that out of the 18 forced regime changes to which U.S. ground troops were committed, only five resulted in sustained democratic rule. These include Germany, Japan and Italy, in which conditions prevailed that are lacking in large parts of the world; Panama and Grenada, listed as democratized, actually have yet to earn this title.

The difficulties that the United States and its allies have in democratizing Afghanistan and Iraq are but the most recent examples in a long list of failures, which include Bosnia, Cambodia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Kosovo, Somalia and South Vietnam.

Democracy is a delicate plant that thrives only if the soil is carefully cultivated. Even an incomplete list of what it takes to secure democracy suffices to show how hollow are promises to mass-produce it. For democracy to take root, there must be a fair level of law and order, economic development and education; a sizable middle class; respect for the rule of law; independent judges; and a rich fabric of voluntary associations.

Once these are in place, constructing the regime requires political leaders and parties able to compete freely; open and fair elections; separation of powers; a low level of corruption; protection of minority rights; and freedom of association, expression, and the press. I know this is a mouthful, but history has shown that less will not do.

When many of these factors are lacking, and when big powers are quick to declare victory and go home — especially as elections loom — they lower the definition of democracy, pinning the label on whatever they have concocted. Elections are a frequent fixture of these sleight-of-hand democratizations, disregarding the fact that elections are regularly held in places like China, Iran and Singapore. In Iraq, neither elections nor caucuses. Currently the debate about the future of the Iraqi regime is focused on whether direct elections held or caucuses will compose the first government. These debates disregard the fact that in neither case will result in anything resembling democracy.

At best, the new regime will be a very unsteady coalition. One group, the Shiites, is controlled by mullahs who already govern southern Iraq and will control whoever represents them. their tribe and what policies they will favor. Another group, the Kurds, is controlled by rival tribal chieftains who govern the north. and "represent" it. Together, they control about 80 percent of the population. If they work together, which would be no mean feat, it would be

more like a coalition between the church and the mafia in old Sicily than anything resembling a democratic government.

Assuming that the country will not break up once the Americans recede, the national government of Iraq is more much more likely to be headed by a relatively benign autocrat, à la Vladimir Putin, than by a true representative of the people, accountable to a Parliament and scrutinized by a free press and a free people. Alternatively, Iraq will follow the way that Afghanistan's "democracy" is evolving — with a weak, imported leader national figure, who cannot rely on his own people even as his bodyguards and barely dares to leave the capital, and with large parts of the country controlled by regional warlords and heads of ethnic tribes.

A high level of corruption must be expected, as we have seen in the elected Palestinian Authority and already seen among members of the temporary Iraqi government. Although the new Iraqi government may not insist on introduce a strict Muslim regime based on the sharia, it is likely to enforce various Islamic concepts. We have seen this in the way women are treated in the new Afghanistan, despite what it says in its constitution — the appearance of women as singers on national television prompted the new Afghani courts and the culture ministry to demand that these broadcasts cease. Other rights, equally unfamiliar, are not likely to be respected any better for years to come.

It is better if such governments are not labeled democratic, so that when they lose credibility democracy's name is not muddied. If we must label such regimes, "post-tyrannical" will do.

I cannot stress enough my disagreement with those who hold that Arabs are congenitally incapable of democracy. I merely follow a sociological giant, Max Weber, who showed that in some cultures economic and political development is more difficult to achieve than in others. Note that Even in more favorable settings than the Middle East it took a long time to lay the foundation for something that resembles the real thing. After all, British and American democracy did not exactly develop overnight under the tutelage of an alienating foreign power. The occupation of Japan lasted seven years; it took 10 years before full control over foreign relations and trade, industrial production, and military security was turned back over to the Germans. The costs of the Marshall Plan were very hefty indeed, and the willingness of the United States to cough up the dough was much higher as, in those days, foreign aid amounted to 13 percent of the U.S. budget, compared to less than 1 percent today.

The people of the Middle East, and all concerned with democratization would be best served if the United States and its allies restrained their rhetoric, promised less and delivered more. The most that can be hoped for in the near future is to keep Iraq from falling apart, avoid civil war, provide in the Sunni triangle the level of security already available elsewhere — and let the Iraqi people sort out what regime they are willing to embrace and fight for. Slowly, in time measured in decades rather than years, they may well lay the foundation for a democratic Middle East.

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