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Iraq: One Year Later

By Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas J. Feith, the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington, D.C., Tuesday, May 4, 2004.

- I'm pleased to be here at the American Enterprise Institute. I have some long--time friends here, as you know if you've studied the published wiring diagrams that purport to illuminate the anatomy of the neo-con "cabal."
- This AEI conference is being held to look at Iraq now that a year has passed since Coalition forces overthrew the Saddam Hussein regime.

Review of the Past Year

- At the beginning of May last year, seven weeks or so after the war started, major combat operations ended. Iraq has changed greatly over the last twelve months, and largely for the good, though the intensity of the fighting in recent days tends to overshadow the progress. It is true that the past weeks have been as costly to us as any since March 19, 2003. We're in a difficult period now. So, sober reflection on where we stand, where we're heading and why Iraq is important should be at a premium. This conference is timely.
- Iraq has been transformed since last May.
- First and foremost: The Saddam Hussein regime is gone and is not coming back. The threats that he posed to us and to his region have been eliminated and 25 million Iraqis have been liberated.
- Economically, Iraq is recovering, though the ruinous results of the Baathist decades continue to impede progress.
- Given its oil resources, and the education of its people, Iraq should have been a wealthy country. Under Saddam, however, its infrastructure became pathetically dilapidated. Coalition forces managed to spare most of that infrastructure from destruction during the war and, over the last year, the coalition has worked to repair and upgrade it.

- Electricity generation has surpassed pre-war levels and is more evenly distributed. Iraqi schools have been repaired in large numbers. Health care spending in Iraq is *30 times* greater than its pre-war levels.
- Unemployment has fallen by nearly one-half over the past year. Inflation is a quarter of what it was before the war. A large-scale currency exchange was conducted successfully at the end of last year. The new currency has been remarkably stable, and its value has risen lately by 25% or so over its value last fall when the conversion was underway. Iraqi marketplaces are filled with consumer goods for the first time in decades.
- Politically too, Iraq has moved forward.
- At the national level, the major achievement has been the unanimous approval by Iraq's Governing Council of the Transitional Administrative Law – the TAL – which will serve as the interim constitution until an elected assembly drafts a permanent constitution to be ratified by the Iraqi people.
- The TAL is the most liberal basic governance document in the Arab world, with assurances of basic freedoms and equality of all citizens before the law.
- As you may remember, the status of Islam was one of the more controversial issues in the drafting the TAL. The result was a compromise that includes protection of “freedom of religious belief and practice” and a provision that no law may contradict “the universally agreed tenets of Islam, the principles of democracy, or the [enumerated individual] rights cited” in the TAL.
- This latter provision's precise meaning will have to be worked out over time – as is often the case with constitutional principles. But it's noteworthy that the TAL *assumes* a compatibility among individual rights, democratic principles and the “universally agreed tenets of Islam.”
- The TAL's text is important. But the process by which this interim constitution came into being may be even more so. After all, non-democratic regimes often have high-minded constitutions, decreed by the dictator, that are belied by the actual practice of officials who are above the law. By contrast, the TAL emerged from vigorous bargaining among diverse Iraqis – men and women, secularists and Islamists, Sunnis and Shia, Arabs and Kurds. It was not decreed by a cynic from on high. Rather it was debated, crafted and approved by the most representative governing body that Iraq has ever had.
- There have been welcome political developments at the local level too. Over ninety percent of Iraqi towns and provinces have local councils. More than half of the Iraqi population is active in community affairs.
- A number of Iraqi towns have held popular elections for local officials. Here is a press report about some successful local elections in Dhi Qar province. It comes from the *Guardian*, which – no doubt gritting its teeth – reported as follows on April 5:

... hundreds of would-be Iraqi voters pushed into a sparsely equipped school ... to cast their ballots for the local council of Tar.

Deep in the marshlands of the Euphrates, the town of 15,000 people was the first to rise against Saddam Hussein ... in 1991. Now it was holding the first genuine election in its history.

The poll was the latest in a series which this overwhelmingly Shia province has held in the past six weeks, and the results have been surprising. Seventeen towns have voted, and in almost every case secular independents and representatives of non-religious parties did better than the Islamists.

- This good has been wrought collectively by a large number of people – Iraqis, Americans and Coalition partners, military and civilian, government employees and others, who have served in Iraq during the past year. They have been self-sacrificing and brave. Iraqis in this effort have risked assassination, and refused to be intimidated as they committed themselves to building a new, free Iraq. Coalition troops – our own and those of partner countries – have borne the brunt of the fighting and are making sacrifices every day. Our forces deserve praise and gratitude for their bravery, resourcefulness, high mindedness and devotion to duty.
- It's especially important to make this point now, as the horrific stories are told of the abuse of some Iraqi prisoners. The Defense Department's leadership will continue to ensure that the ongoing investigations are completed properly and remedial action is taken. Individual accountability is crucial.
- Let me add: No country in the world upholds the Geneva Conventions on the law of armed conflict more steadfastly than does the United States. This is true not only because Americans recognize a moral obligation to be humane and because Americans are law-abiding by nature and in practice. It is true also because no country in the world has a greater practical interest than the United States in respect for the laws of war. We'll deal promptly and properly with the terrible abuses. The interests and dignity of our numerous, admirable military forces must not be undermined by the reprehensible actions of a few individuals.

The Current Situation

- Now, I'd like to shift to some comments about the current security picture. There has been great interest in whether the fighting in Fallujah represents a widespread insurgency. It is not one now. Coalition forces, Iraqi authorities and the Coalition Provisional Authority are working with Sunni tribal and other leaders to try to ensure that it does not become a broad-based attack that could threaten the progress country-wide toward Iraqi self-rule. They are working to prevent the other major Sunni cities from erupting in sympathy with Fallujah.
- In the Shi'a community, Moqtada al Sadr's power grab has not succeeded. According to all

reports, support for him continues to decrease as the major Shi'a religious figures influence their community against him. Our desire to avoid fighting in the Shi'a holy city of Najaf has given Sadr something of a sanctuary for the moment, but the Shi'a community continues to pressure him to agree to a peaceful resolution of the situation.

- So neither Sadr nor the Fallujah anti-coalition fighters represent a broad movement or insurgency in Iraq. Unlike in other historical guerrilla or terror campaigns, hardly any bombings in Iraq have been accompanied by a claim of responsibility. The Ba'athists and terrorists behind the bombings know that they have no philosophical or political basis on which to appeal to the Iraqi people.

- Their only hope is that we will lose heart and depart, and that they will then be able to impose their rule on the Iraqis. This is not going to happen.

Why We Went to War

- This AEI conference is a good opportunity to remind ourselves of why we went to war in the first place.

- The controversy concerning our failure to find stockpiles of chemical or biological weapons has obscured the actual strategic rationale for the war – the public debate lately has focused on questions relating to the intelligence failure: Were the assessments “cooked?” Was there political influence on the intelligence process? And so forth.

- The intelligence failure, and the blow to US credibility that it caused, is a serious matter. We should get to the bottom of it, and the President's decision to appoint a commission on WMD intelligence reflects his desire to do so.

- But that matter shouldn't blind us to the larger point: The strategic rationale for the war didn't actually hinge on classified information concerning chemical and biological stockpiles. Rather, it depended on assessments about the nature of the Saddam Hussein regime and its activities. The relevant facts were available to the public.

- Intelligence can play a crucial role in operational decision making. But it should surprise no one that the grandest strategic considerations of statesmen in democratic countries are commonly based on open, rather than secret, information. Such statesmen, after all, would have a hard time arguing that their country should go to war, for example, but the reasons for the war cannot be shared with the public. President Bush made no such argument. Rather, he explained to the American people and the world the reasons that it was necessary to oust the Saddam Hussein regime.

- Saddam's regime was recognized widely as a threat to world peace since at least 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait. Saddam had launched aggressive attacks against a number of countries in his region. His military was the first in history to use nerve gas on the battlefield. He was outspokenly hostile to the United States and defiant of numerous attempts by the UN Security Council over a

dozen years or so to constrain him and compel him to account for and destroy Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

- Saddam had ties of various types with various terrorist groups. For example, the terrorist Abu Nidal lived in Iraq for years, as did Mahmoud Abbas, who was responsible for the hijacking of the Achille Lauro. In addition, Iraq maintained links with the Palestinian terrorist groups responsible for "suicide bombing" attacks and Saddam famously boasted of paying \$25,000 to each family of a suicide bomber. Iraqi intelligence also carried out its own terrorist actions, notably the assassination attempt against former President Bush in Kuwait in 1993.

- All of these points were known to the public.

- The 9/11 attack compelled US policy makers to reevaluate the known dangers posed by the Saddam Hussein regime. It was clear that the terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks would have gladly killed a hundred or a thousand times the number of their 9/11 victims if they had had the means to do so. The principal strategic danger to the United States in the war on terrorism is the possibility that terrorists could get their hands on chemical, biological or nuclear weapons. That was and remains the focus of our attention.

- Given Iraq's record of hostility, aggression, WMD use and ties to terrorists – and given Saddam's frustration of a dozen years' worth of efforts by the UN, the US and others to "contain" him – President Bush concluded in light of the 9/11 attacks that it was necessary to remove the Saddam Hussein regime by force. The danger was too great that Saddam might give the fruits of his WMD programs to terrorists for use against the United States. This danger did not hinge on whether Saddam was actually stockpiling chemical or biological weapons.

- President Bush told the American people and the world that the removal of that regime would make the world safer, would free the Iraqi people and would open the way for the development of democratic institutions in Iraq that could inspire the growth of freedom throughout the Middle East. If Iraq built democratic institutions, it would not only help ensure that Iraq remains off the list of terrorism supporters, but it could help us in the crucial task of countering ideological support for terrorism. It would be of great practical benefit if Iraq became a model of moderation, freedom and prosperity. The terrorists of al Qaida and other organizations know how devastating that would be for their interests, which is why they are doing what they can to fight the Coalition in Iraq.

- It bears stressing again: What I have just summarized here was the strategic rationale for the war. Those were the considerations that moved the key US policy makers. On that basis, the President appealed for support to Congress and to the American people. On that basis, the President obtained the support of our coalition partners. As interesting as the intelligence questions are, assessing the strategic rationale for the war did not require anyone to have access to any secrets. Reasonable people did and do dispute whether that rationale justified the coalition's military action. But I think no one can properly assert that the failure, so far, to find Iraqi WMD stockpiles undermines the reasons for the war.

Strategy in Iraq

- Accordingly, the Coalition's strategic goal has been a unified Iraq that:
 - o Is on the path to democratic government and prosperity,
 - o Foreswears WMD,
 - o Does not support terrorism and
 - o Seeks to live in peace with its neighbors.

- We aim to achieve this by transferring power to a government in Iraq that will govern by compromise and consensus among the various ethnic and sectarian groups – that is, by the means used to produce the Transitional Administrative Law – rather than allow one group to oppress the others.

- The creation of such a government not only serves our strategic purposes, but it is a key to managing Iraq's current security problems. We have a security interest in Iraqis' understanding that the US and the Coalition have no desire to control, much less exploit Iraq or its resources. We want Iraqis to run their own country. Our strategy is to encourage and enable Iraqis to assume responsibility for their own affairs in all fields – security, economic and political.

- This is why the upcoming restoration of sovereign authority is so important to achieving our objectives in Iraq. I would argue that those who say that the current security problems will or should lead to a delay in the transfer of sovereign authority to the Iraqis have the analysis backwards.

- First, an early end to the occupation is essential to the political strategy for defeating the anti-Coalition forces. A sovereign Iraqi government will be better able to marginalize its extremist opponents politically while Coalition forces defeat them militarily. As the captured letter from Zarqawi to his Al Qaeda associates demonstrates, such a transformation is the worst possible scenario for those who oppose the emergence of democracy in Iraq. Zarqawi wrote: "How can we kill their cousins and sons and under what pretext, after the Americans start withdrawing? This is the democracy... we will have no pretext." The Baathists and terrorists fear the return of sovereignty to the Iraqi people, and that's why they are trying so hard to derail it.

- Second, Iraqis have shown reluctance to take responsibility if the Coalition Provisional Authority appears intent to remain in charge. This is understandable. Anybody who demonstrated leadership qualities and initiative under Saddam's tyranny, more likely than not, was quickly killed by the regime. Consequently, without the sense of urgency and accountability that a fixed deadline imposes, Iraqi leaders have been unable to resolve the difficult issues required to conduct elections and shape a new government. But when such a deadline is established, as it was with the Transitional Administrative Law, Iraqi leaders have shown that they can come up with the compromises necessary for the Interim Iraqi Government to take shape.

The Importance of Steadiness

- The situation in Iraq is not easy. There is value in thinking calmly and comprehensively about our strategy – assessing the facts, updating assumptions, reviewing the formulation of our objectives, and deciding the ways to achieve them. Strategic thinking aims to see the important connections among the ideas and events that may appear superficially to be unconnected. And it aims to think ahead many steps into the future. Strategy takes a long view from a high elevation.
- It is well known that no pre-war prediction will unfold perfectly, and that there will be setbacks that require adjustments in both objectives and courses of action. In war, plans are at best the basis for future changes. This Coalition has the benefit of leadership and strategic thinking, but it has shown also that it can be flexible as necessary.
- Examples of flexibility include:
 - Requesting a large amount of supplemental funds when it became clear that Iraqi reconstruction was going too slowly, in part because the Iraqi infrastructure proved to be in much worse shape than we expected.
 - Creating a new type of indigenous force (the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps) to fill the gap left by the Iraqi police service, many of whose members turned out not to be as well trained as we had supposed.
 - Responding to Iraqi demands for an earlier resumption of sovereignty by developing the idea of a transitional government that could take power before a permanent constitution is ratified.
 - Dropping the “caucus plan” for selecting the transitional government, when it turned out to be unpopular with Iraqis, and substituting a two-step process involving an interim government that can take power before legislative elections.
 - Revising the mechanisms for implementing the de-Baathification policy to address complaints that the appeals process was not working as intended, and to respond to the Sunni minority’s fears of marginalization.
- Throughout all these changes, we have retained the strategic objective of Iraqis stepping forward to run their own country under a proper, representative arrangement that can win broad-based support.
- A challenging mission such as Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) requires steadiness. If the basic strategy is correct, then steadiness in the face of setbacks is required. Even as tactical adjustments are made, the essence of the strategy continues to provide direction.
- Having a strategy means not being buffeted by the news of the day, not allowing fluctuating

polls to determine what we do.

· History teaches that steadiness is a gem-like trait of a war-time leader. Yet when a president is steady, as President Bush has remained throughout OIF, some folks inevitably will describe his steadiness as unapologetic stubbornness. One can only imagine what today's news media would have said about Winston Churchill in the face of his dogged refusal to change his strategy in the face of repeated setbacks! Steadiness, so long as one is willing as we have been to revisit assumptions and demonstrate tactical flexibility, is a virtue.

Conclusion

· One year after the end of major combat operations, we are still at war. As our target date for the hand-over of sovereign authority to the Iraqis draws close, we must expect that the enemies of a free Iraq will become more violent. They know that the establishment of a sovereign, credible, representative Iraqi government – a government that builds democratic institutions in Iraq – would be a major defeat for them, and they are determined not to let it happen. The struggle against them will not be easy, but they offer nothing to the Iraqi people but a renewal of oppression. The Coalition has the will, the forces, the resources and the strategy to succeed. And what we are fighting for is important and right.

Thank You

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