Still Wearing Blinders in the Iraq Mission

by
James W. Skillen

Because President Bush, from the beginning, has identified the American response to the 9/11 attacks a “war on terrorism,” almost everyone, including his most severe critics, has continued to refer to that broader mission as well as the venture in Iraq as a war. As recently as December 19, 2006, the president said he was going to ask for an increase in the size of American military forces, whether or not he would decide to send more troops to Iraq. Incoming Democratic congressional leaders are urging that our military forces be withdrawn soon, because the war effort has failed. The Iraq Study Group and others urged the president to turn more of the military and security work over to the Iraqis so our troops can come home. Almost all the talk, in other words, is about military operations and whether we need to send more troops or start withdrawing the ones that are there.

It is precisely war thinking, however, that has led the president and his administration into a dire predicament that has no military solution. Properly speaking, the U.S. never did go to war with Iraq, even though the president called our military assault there part of his war on terrorism. What the U.S. did in Iraq was to destroy the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein. That act, unjust as it was as measured by every one of the just-war criteria (see my “Evaluating America’s Engagement in Iraq with Just-War Criteria,” Public Justice Report, 4th quarter, 2005), was an act of aggression that placed Iraq under American governance. In other words, from the day that Saddam Hussein and his military fled Baghdad, the American responsibility was to govern Iraq. There was no war to fight but rather good government to establish.

The American debacle in Iraq, therefore, is not that we failed to win a war; it is that we failed to establish sound government in a country whose government we destroyed. As Simon Jenkins puts it, “America withdrew from Iraq—in the sense of surrendering effective control over its destiny—when it did not reinforce its occupation two years ago.” (Sunday Times [London], 12/10/06). Shelby Steele writes that America “has not achieved hegemony in Iraq, so there is no umbrella of American power under which a new nation
might find its own democratic personality, or learn to defend itself. Americans have failed
to give ‘peace in the streets’ to the people they are asking to embrace the moderations of
democracy. Without American hegemony, [talk of] ‘drawdowns’ and ‘redeployments’ [of
American troops] are acts of outrageous moral irresponsibility, because they cede
hegemony to the forces of menace . . . .” (Wall Street Journal [Europe] 12/8-10/06.) The
president and his Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, continue to speak of their aim to
promote democracy in the Middle East, and Iraq is one of those places where they want to
succeed in such promotion. But for the U.S. to promote democracy in Iraq after it
overthrew Saddam, it would first have had to establish a sound government on the basis of
social, economic, and civic conditions that could support an effective national government.
The U.S. has done nothing of the kind.

The Bush administration imagined that if it toppled Hussein, some kind of
irresistible desire for freedom in the Iraqi people would overwhelm every evil desire,
historical enmity, and lack of experience that characterized them, and automatically
produce a functioning democracy. That is why the president allowed his defense
department to go forward with a military effort but did not authorize the State Department
to establish a fully competent, post-invasion government. Nor did he call on the American
people to be ready for a long-term and expensive investment in the governance of Iraq.
Instead, Iraq was kept largely under military command while the president sent
unprepared and incompetent administrators to paste signs and symbols of democracy on a
broken, divided, and increasingly devastated Iraq. Mark Danner, reviewing three books on
America in Iraq, writes that soon after the military invasion, “Baghdad and the other major
cities of Iraq were taken up in a thoroughgoing riot of looting and pillage . . . . The
uncontrolled violence engulfed Iraq’s capital and major cities for weeks as American
troops—140,000 or more—mainly sat on their tanks, looking on. If attaining true political
authority depends on securing a monopoly on legitimate violence, then the Americans
would never achieve it in Iraq. There were precious few troops to impose order, and hardly
any military police. No one gave the order to arrest or shoot looters or otherwise take
12/21/06.) Symbols of a transitional government, an unfinished constitution, and elections
of a nearly powerless parliament and government were advertised as the signs of a
sovereign Iraq, but even after the almost secret transfer of “sovereignty” to Iraq, the
Americans retained control of the very foundation of sovereignty, namely, the military.
And the Iraqi government has never been able to act as a real government.

Now that it appears increasingly necessary for American domestic reasons to turn
over military and security responsibilities to the Iraqis, we pretend that more training of
Iraqi troops will prepare them to keep a lid on violence and hold the country together. But
if there were any grounds for that expectation, why has it not been fulfilled already after
nearly three years of American military action? Part of the reason, of course, is that no
matter how well trained the military forces are, they have to serve some government or
become the government themselves. They have to trust that their work will lead to a goal
they seek. But Iraq has no government that can command a national military, no
government that can be trusted by both Sunni and Shia. Consequently, the Iraq Study
Group’s report to President Bush is almost devoid of meaning, says Peter Galbraith. “The panel’s most publicized recommendation is for U.S. combat troops to be mostly withdrawn by 2008 with the remaining forces training and supporting the Iraqi Army and police. This seems to assume that Iraq’s police and army are, or can be, neutral guarantors of public safety. In fact, they are Shiite or Sunni, and combatants in a civil war.” (International Herald Tribune, 12/8/06). Shia militias, which are not under the control of the Iraqi army, are responsible, says Danner, “for much of the death-squad killing in Baghdad. Unfortunately, the militias—in particular, the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organization—remain a vital part of the unity government’s political infrastructure. This inconvenient but fundamental political fact renders much of the Bush administration’s rhetoric about its present strategy in Iraq almost nonsensical” (“Iraq,” 96). The current government of Iraq, like the constitution we encouraged them to adopt, is little more than a cover for a vacuum for which we are responsible but don’t want to recognize.

Iraq is now being torn apart by a civil war not because the American military has been defeated by terrorists or by Iraq’s military. Iraq is a failed state because the United States sent its military forces to overthrow an unjust government, but then did not replace that government by a more just one. “There is no government in Iraq,” writes Jenkins, “not the Americans or the British or the Iranians or the Syrians, let alone Nouri al-Maliki’s regime, which barely rules its own office. The concept of Iraq as a coherent political entity offering Washington choices of action is nonsensical.” Destroying Iraq’s government and failing to govern it justly in the last (nearly) three years are evils that the American government and American people must admit to and repent of. And beyond that we need to repent of blaming the Iraqi’s for our failures, as many American blamers are now doing. On November 29, Senator Jack Reed (D-R.I.) demanded “‘immediate and tangible’ actions by Maliki,” stipulating that “‘the critical issue is what the Iraqi government is going to do to keep their government together, quell the violence and provide the services to the people that a government should and must provide.’” (Washington Post, 11/30/06.) And Thomas Donnelly, at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said, “‘Ultimately, just like success rests with the Iraqis, so does failure. We’ve made a lot of mistakes, but we’ve paid a huge price to give the Iraqis a chance at a decent future.’” (Washington Post, 11/29/06.)

It is too late for the U.S. to turn to Iran and Syria for help in bringing good government to Iraq, even if the Sunnis, Kurds, and Shiites wanted their help. It is too late for a new peace effort between Israel and Palestine to make a difference in Iraq in the next few years. Andrew Garfield argues that while the Iraq Study Group report “explicitly states that the United States’ ability to influence events [in Iraq] is diminishing,” the report “then makes recommendations that could only be carried out if the U.S. possessed much greater influence. [The report] also emphasizes that it is a realistic plan, but many of the things it would demand—national reconciliation, e.g.—can’t be delivered. The Report thus becomes part of the problem, not a solution.” (Trudy Kuehner, “Briefing on Iraq Study Group Report”—12/8/06 email report from the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia)
Some kinds of blunders, errors, misadventures, and unjust uses of force cannot be overcome or reversed by a follow-up use of the same weapons, tactics, and strategies that caused the failure in the first place. The decline of American prestige, influence, and position in the world is real and our contribution to the destruction of Iraq is a large part of the reason for that decline. There is no set of quick pragmatic steps the U.S. can take to reverse this decline. What we Americans need is similar to what Iraq now needs: we need sound and trustworthy government for both domestic and international affairs. Future elected presidents and members of Congress will need to win the trust and confidence of the American people and of people and governments in other countries. That will take years and years of good government and wise decision making on our part. Can we expect that to occur? Are the American people ready to pay serious attention to the responsibilities of government and to demand wise and just actions from it? That remains to be seen.