

We should moderate our expectations for the future of Iraq

Since the buildup to the war in Iraq, the Bush administration has emphasized that its goal is the establishment of democracy — electing a parliament, drafting a constitution and ultimately, withdrawing coalition forces and transferring power to the new Iraqi government.

The mantra of “democratic Iraq” has been repeated by the President’s supporters and critics alike, as though the only question in establishing a democracy in Iraq is one of how, not if. The administration’s policy draws on our experience exporting democracy to post-World War II Germany and Japan and assisting post-Communist states in Central and Eastern Europe in their democratic transition.

The assumption behind the policy is that the institutional foundations of democracy are independent of culture, and thus can be established in countries where democratic institutions and civil society have been weak or altogether lacking. Germany, Japan and post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe offer examples of how nascent democratic institutions can take hold, consolidate and acquire national legitimacy.

Iraq, however, offers less reason for optimism. The scope of political re-engineering envisioned by the Bush administration is breathtaking. We are about to institutionalize democracy in a culture with which we have little in common, where religion constitutes a fundamental barrier, and where large segments of society have strong incentives not to cooperate with us. Further, we will try to democratize Iraq while we fight what amounts to a low-intensity guerrilla war. That challenge alone should give us pause.

THE ADMINISTRATION assumes that lessons learned in Europe and Asia can be applied to the combustible Middle East. This is a considerable stretch, unless we believe that cultural and religious differences are of no consequence and that ultimately institutions will always trump culture. This understanding of “transition to democracy” was at its peak in academia in the 1990s when it was applied to post-Communist democratization. But in those states the core contributing factors were the presence of emerging civil society and of legitimate political elites who supported the transition. Neither assumption applies in Iraq.

In its drive to democratize Iraq, the Bush administration seems to be borrowing heavily from the German/Japanese formula, including a military occupation by coalition forces accompanied by a gradual transfer of power to the new regime. But are the experiences of postwar Germany and Japan really relevant?

Germany and the United States share Western cultural and religious traditions. After World War II, Germany considered the continued U.S. presence a security guarantee against the growing Soviet threat, and it had

nationally recognized leaders who were able to articulate a democratic vision of the country’s future. The Germans had powerful internal incentives to cooperate with the United States and to accept the institutional transformation of their society. Last but not least, Germany had a history of nascent, if ineffective, democratic governance that predated the rise of the Nazis.

Japan’s transition to democracy was aided by the emperor’s decision to will his people to cooperate with the United States. Although the emperor renounced his divinity, he remained in place as a symbol of his nation’s cultural continuity and a direct link between Japan’s past and its future. As with Germany, Japan regarded a continued U.S. presence as vital to its national security during the Cold War.

THE SITUATION WE FACE in Iraq is radically different. We are operating in an environment that has little connection to our cultural and political heritage. Although Iraqis support the notion of democracy in the abstract, the cultural norms and values the West brings are different.

More important, religion forms a potent barrier to cooperation and acceptance. The West has been historically viewed as an intruder and a colonizer, while its technological and military supremacy has been a searing humiliation across the Arab world. We may think of ourselves as liberators, but to the Iraqis we are just as likely to appear as occupiers.

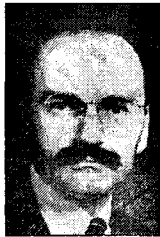
Iraq has no nationally recognized leadership that can unify various clans and religious groups. The pro-American Iraqi governing council, now in the making, has a long way to go to gain even a modicum of national acceptance.

We should reconsider our insistence on making Iraq a democracy and focus instead on improving its internal security and economic conditions. It is imperative that we contain the centrifugal religious and ethnic pressures that threaten Iraq’s integrity as a state, and time is short. By some estimates, we have perhaps two months to get it right on the ground or confront a rapidly deteriorating situation.

That means focusing on working with indigenous Iraqi clan leaders, improving internal security, training the new Iraqi police and military forces, and internationalizing occupation troops as quickly as possible to assist the U.S. and British forces who are fighting the guerrilla war.

IN THE END, an authoritarian but pro-Western and consolidated Iraq may be all that we can hope to achieve during the next five years. Such an outcome would fall short of the declared goal of bringing about democracy, but it would ensure that Iraq does not disintegrate and become a breeding ground for terrorism.

With continued Western assistance and American guidance, in perhaps 10 years the country may be in a position to move toward democracy. But if we continue to insist that democracy is the only immediately acceptable solution to Iraq’s problems, a volatile mix of religious politics, ethnic violence and irredentism will likely engulf the country once the U.S. and coalition troops have pulled out.



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