

The United States In Iraq: Unchanged Strategy – Dissolving Objectives

No one should have been surprised that general Petraeus and ambassador Crocker's presentation to the House of Representatives was scheduled for September 11, exactly six years after the fall of the World Trade Center. What was perhaps surprising was that, while the public was waiting for this report, the president had managed to hold at bay the new (and fragile) democratic majority, preventing it from using the August break to mobilize a public opinion that is clearly tired and discouraged by an adventure that has lasted more than four years. The goals that are supposed to be attained are constantly changing as the end of the war recedes from year to year. Yet it was George Bush who used the month of August to take to the offensive. Whereas his critics had compared the quagmire in Iraq to the earlier one in Vietnam, the president began to remind people that the precipitous retreat from Vietnam had added new words to the political vocabulary—*boat people* in Vietnam, *killing fields* in Cambodia. Added to the constantly repeated threat of terrorism on the home front, Bush's new use of the Vietnam analogy has to be understood as part of a longer term strategy.

In order to see what is at issue, it is useful to step back from the immediate issues. That is one advantage of writing for a foreign public: you're forced to condense your ideas, to go to the essence, and above all to avoid the polemical temptation of satisfying your emotions at the cost of clouding your judgement. That's what I did in the "op ed" that I published in *Ouest-France* on September 10th, which serves as the basis for this enlarged English version.¹ I'm

¹ *Ouest-France*, which is published in Rennes, is the largest circulation daily newspaper in France, reaching some 800,000 paid readers. It has a large number of regional editions, and appeals to a wide-ranging and more popular public than the better known Parisian press. It publishes its "op eds" (called "point de vue") on page one. The text

adding here to that argument some introductory remarks that take into account Bush's Address to the Nation of September 13; and I will conclude with some reflections on the longer-term implications of Bush's politics.

I

Bush's Address to the Nation was the eighth such speech in which he has used a televised speech to explain the political choices he has made concerning Iraq. His first speech (of March 19, 2003) announced the invasion, which he said was justified by the threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD's) in the hands of a dictator. It was followed quickly (on May 1, 2003) by the proclamation of a rapid victory that would permit the reconstruction of a country in which liberty would soon triumph. A year later (on April 13, 2004), conditions had worsened; now the speech had to deny that there was in fact a civil war in Iraq while again promising the inevitable progress of democratic freedom. In the meanwhile, in November 2004, George Bush was re-elected in spite of the doubts that were increasing among the public. The candidate waged a voluntarist campaign in which he used the threat of terrorist attacks along with a series of vicious attacks on the democratic candidate, who was accused of being a "flip-flopper" who would be incapable of taking the strict measures necessary to prevent threats to the homeland.

The situation continued to worsen, however, and the series of Addresses to the Nation continued as well. The promise of victory was repeated in the speech of December 18, 2005, but nine months later the tone changed radically during the Congressional campaign of 2006. The president no longer stressed the reconstruction of a democratic Iraq but—five years after 9/11—he once again insisted on the specter of a terrorism that would strike us at home if we were to retreat from Iraq. But this time, the rhetoric didn't work; the democrats won both houses of

that I am translating here builds from my shorter essay, and was written for publication in the monthly journal *Esprit*, where it will appear in October.

Congress, and the president was forced to reckon with the new situation. Thus, his Speech of January 10, 2007 announced a new strategy for Iraq, while redefining what “victory” would mean. He explained that he would send reinforcements that would help the Iraqis to take control of their capital, Baghdad, giving political space for the organization of a national government. Three months later, March 19 2007, he once again appealed to the nation, repeating his hope that the 30,000 troops dispatched in the “surge” were creating the breathing space that would permit the Maliki government to reach the “benchmarks” that had been set by Congress as the condition for continued American support in the future. In the meanwhile, his message to the public was summarized in one word, “patience.”

The public reaction to the Petraeus-Crocker report, which was supposed to present an evaluation of the results of the “surge,” was mixed. The public is tired of an engagement that doesn’t seem anywhere near its end—but which doesn’t really affect it directly, in spite of the deaths of over 3,700 soldiers (more than the total of those who died in the attacks of 9/11!), the wounding of a large number of others (of whom nearly no one speaks), and the expenditure of unbelievable amounts of money to maintain the troops, their equipment and supplies. The hearings in the House were introduced by Ike Skelton of Missouri, who made the absolutely pertinent observation that “our constitutional responsibility is to insure that the American military forces can deter and, if necessary, vanquish any threat to our interests... But the soldiers stationed in Iraq cannot be used elsewhere.”² It was downhill from there, for the most part. The next day, when he appeared before the Senate, general Petraeus was unable to slip around the crucial question—“Does the war in Iraq increase Americans’ security?” His admission that “In fact, I don’t know the answer,” never got the follow up it deserved.

² I am translating this quotation back from my French version of it, being unable to find the original.

The president's Address the following evening did not provide any answers either. The (or most of the) troops sent during the "surge" will be coming home next spring; after that there will be a new evaluation by the military commanders. That was no real surprise, since it was made necessary by material constraints on men and machinery. What was perhaps surprising was that George Bush, "the decider," felt no need to even refer to the Congressional debate on the occasion of the Petraeus-Crocker report.

II.³

In November 2006, one might have thought that the democrats' electoral victory, along with the publication of the Baker-Hamilton report, was the prelude to a reduction or pull-out of American forces in Iraq, along with the opening of a new diplomatic track. But the opposite occurred: 30,000 new troops were sent as part of the surge. The only concession made to the democrats was that the commander of American forces in Iraq, David Petraeus, and the ambassador in Baghdad, Ryan Crocker, will present to Congress this week [i.e., September 11 and 12] their report on the military and political situation.

General Petraeus became known to the public for his successes during the occupation of Mossoul in 2004. He's a skillful orator, capable of dressing his message well, strutting his medals and proud of his Princeton Ph.D. But he is not above criticism. In an op ed published in the *Washington Post* six weeks before the 2004 elections, he spoke of "tangible progress" and of a "reversal of the situation" in Iraq. One might wonder whether he has succeeded in the meanwhile in erasing the memory of this clear support of the Bush candidacy.

³ This second part of the essay translates the *Ouest-France* op-ed. The editors' title for the piece stressed the "hard realities" of Iraq. I've made some minor changes for an American public more familiar with the situation.

It is rather strange that an America that is so proud of its democracy, puts its faith in a general for making a decision of such importance.⁴ George Bush justifies that anti-political choice by saying that “this decision will be based on a cold evaluation by our military commanders rather than on a nervous reaction by the politicians in Washington.” He doesn’t mention the opinion of the American public as having any weight in the matter.

There is nonetheless a troubling precedent for this faith. I refer of course to the speech of Colin Powell at the United Nations in 2003. That seasoned general, who benefited from an impeccable reputation, was at the time the Secretary of State of George Bush. Saddam Hussein, Powell assured his listeners, possessed weapons of mass destruction that he would not hesitate to use if he was not hit first by a preventive strike. The results of Powell’s assurances are, alas, too well known to need further comment—even if all the failures in Iraq can hardly be laid at the door of the former Secretary of State, who soldiered on through the end of Bush’s first term, even while keeping his criticisms to himself.

American political leaders cannot avoid the hard realities. Even if the surge seems to be working at least in some provinces, the army is at the brink of exhaustion. For technical reasons, it will be necessary to begin to draw down the forces in Iraq next April—unless one wants to re-introduce the draft, a choice that would lead to a real anti-war movement, more like the one of Vietnam days.

During his surprise visit to Iraq at the beginning of September, Bush avoided Baghdad, preferring to visit a base in Anbar province, a region where Sunni leaders, disgusted by the extremism of the so-called Al Qaeda in Iraq, have formed an alliance with the American forces. The message he was conveying was that the future would no longer be hostage to the

⁴ In fact, while the American public might trust its generals, George Bush seems to have confidence only in those who conform to his own prejudices, dismissing contrary advice for example about the number of troops to control

incompetent leaders in Baghdad, who are too concerned with their religious quarrels and their mafioso turf wars to create a stable government. From this point of view, the Congress would no longer have any excuse to refuse the 50 billion supplementary dollars requested by the White House.

But there is another striking fact that challenges Bush's plans: the construction of the American embassy in Baghdad. This enormous project will be roughly the size of Vatican City; it will contain 21 buildings on some 104 acres of land, including 619 one-bedroom apartments, a gym and swimming pool facility, as well as (American) restaurants. The whole complex will be surrounded by a wall that will be 16 feet deep. And of course, given the state of the infrastructure in Iraq, the embassy will generate its own water and electricity. The cost of this immense project is to be roughly 592 million dollars.

There is no need to underline the effect that the construction of this massive abode for the American proconsuls in the region will have not only on Iraqis but on their neighbors. One does not construct such a fortress without intending to stay for a good length of time.

Yet one can ask what use an embassy built with the intention of acting in a centralized country will have in present-day Iraq. Given that American diplomats cannot leave the infamous Green Zone without armed escorts, how will they be able to follow and help along the process of decentralisation that Bush is now proposing. It is well known that a large part of the civilian aid sent to Iraq does not reach its intended recipients due to the lack of security. In addition, closed behind their thick walls, American diplomats will hardly be able to practice a kind of public diplomacy that would permit the opening of communications among the Iraqi factions.

Whatever the Petraeus report proposes, and whatever the decisions made by a Congress that is run by a (very small) democratic majority, that embassy is the symbol of the lack of a

Iraq offered by among others the former commander of US forces, general Shinseki. I'll return to this below.

coherent politics. Perhaps someone should remind Bush of the advice given by Vermont senator George Aiken to Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam war: Declare victory and leave!

III.

Rather than follow the wise advice of his various advisers and study commissions, the president who calls himself solipsistically the Decider, will follow his own adventure as far and as long as he can. But he now openly accepts the fact that the Iraq affair “will continue beyond my presidency.” This is a remarkable admission. How many times did he promise victory, and how many times did he find rhetorical means to put off its achievement? Indeed, the term “victory” was replaced in his recent speech by the term “success,” which he used thirteen times during that 15 minute allocution. In effect, the president is admitting his weakness; he wipes clean his hands of the future, and passes to his successor the necessity to fulfill Colin Powell’s so-called “Pottery Barn imperative”: you broke it, you pay for it...

Once again, George Bush justified his political decision by appealing to the authority of the armed forces experts, accepting general Petraeus’ request to wait another six months before evaluating again the results of the surge. He didn’t speak at all about the political failures of the Iraqi government, nor of the daily life of the civilian population in a country that is increasingly wounded and divided. All that he wants to do, apparently, is to put off the point at which final decisions must be made. One might wonder whether, somewhere in that soul which is so convinced of the justice of his cause, he harbors the hope that a miracle will redeem his wild bet. Perhaps that’s why he repeated several times the phrase, “it is never too late...” But psychology cannot replace political analysis. George Bush is what he is, but the presidency—and above all the future of the republican party—are not identical with him.

Two other interpretations of the president's strategy are worth considering. The first builds on the analogy with Vietnam. If Bush, after denying its relevance for so long, began to use the comparison to his own advantage during the summer vacation, the reason is not that he suddenly feels pity for the potential victims of an American withdrawal. (In fact, the American treatment of both internal and external refugees is disgraceful, and the fact that no provision has been made for visas for Iraqis who have worked with the Americans is scandalous.) What more likely happened is that the president's political advisers pointed out to him that the republican party had drawn credit and credibility by appealing to the myth that the domestic opposition is to blame for the withdrawal of an army that was in the process of defeating the Vietcong. They used the old story of the knife-in-the-back wielded by a fifth column (the *Dolchstosslegende* that was so effective for the right wing forces in Germany after World War I) to discredit their opponents.⁵ In this way, Bush's republican advisors seem to be assuming that despite the nearly inevitable defeat in 2008, they will have well prepared their revenge in 2012—and are all the more assured of success insofar as there are no simple solutions to the Iraqi imbroglio.

This first interpretation assumes that a democrat elected in 2008 would withdraw quickly and without hesitation from Iraq.⁶ But, within this framework, it becomes important to consider the implications of that gigantic embassy that is being built in Baghdad. It is strange that neither the media nor the politicians have talked about it. It's as if no one is willing to admit the symbolic, and real, weight of that edifice. The America that it represents has become a sort of

⁵ The militant web-left, organized by *Moveon.com* has sadly lent its credibility to this maneuver by publishing a full page ad in the *New York Times*, denouncing general *Betray-us*—a rather sophomoric play on the name of general Petraeus. The right immediately took advantage of this gift that accredits its own scenario.

⁶ It will certainly be necessary to act quickly in order to have time to regain popular favor before the next elections. The next president might succeed at this insofar as he (or she) can play on the really existing divisions within the army between those who, like Petraeus, think that in the long run victory is possible, and those who recognize that the military machine is exhausted and that it needs time in order to rebuild itself to be ready to confront eventual challenges in the future. As mentioned above, the army is not monolithic—although the idea that a critical left politics should lean on it for support is no more “democratic” than the use that Bush has made of Petraeus.

new Rome, an imperial republic that is forced to make geo-political choices that conflict with the values that are the very foundation of its power. The classic historical experience is being repeated. Every high school graduate knows the famous Funeral Oration that Pericles delivered at the end of the first year of the long Peloponnesian War in praise of the Athenian democracy. But that student probably never read the final discourse of the great man of Athenian democracy. Speaking to a people who were tired of a war that seemed to go on and on, Pericles warned his fellow citizens: “What you hold is, to speak frankly, a despotism; perhaps it was wrong to take it, but to let it go is unsafe.”⁷ One might well say that Pericles was holding up a mirror to Americans who are too idealistic to recognize the “hard realities” in Iraq.

Many commentators speak of the ideological hegemony of the neo-conservatives who have become crusaders for democracy. But that description hardly fits men like Dick Cheney or Donald Rumsfeld. They are realists, used to the practice of geo-politics and indifferent to the importance of values. For a long time, I refused to accept the reductive notion that the invasion of Iraq was motivated by petroleum interests.⁸ I still think that there were other motivations for the American action, certain of which remain valid.⁹ Nonetheless, I keep coming back to that imposing embassy that brings back to mind once again the fate of the classical republics. Our leaders are not comparable to Pericles—although certain of them may think of themselves as

⁷ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book II, 63 (Livingston translation).

⁸ There was a tell-tale sign, nonetheless. The original title of the invasion was to be “Operation Iraqi Liberty,” but someone at the Pentagon seems to have noted that the resulting acronym would be OIL. As a result, we are living still with “Operation Iraqi Freedom.” It might be noted that in his recent autobiography, Allen Greenspan, who presided for 18 years over the Federal Reserve, did not feel the need to justify his flat statement that he is sad to recognize that it was politically difficult to admit what everyone knew: the war in Iraq concerns above all oil.

⁹ Namely: the refusal of a dictatorship that had more than a passing resemblance to totalitarianism, and above all the hope for democratization in a country with a strong middle class tradition could serve as the basis for the emergence of an active civil society. I made that argument as the debate about the invasion was heating up in the spring of 2003. C.f., “Sortir la gauche de la critique morale,” published in *Esprit* and translated in the German bi-monthly *Kommune*, both 2003. Unfortunately, after four years of occupation, civil war and mafias disguised as religious sects, that middle class is either in (internal or external) exile or else simply crushed by the rude life-conditions in which it finds itself. I’ve reconsidered the “democratization” argument in a review essay on “Paul Berman’s Generational *Bildungsroman*” in *Constellations*, Volume 14, No. 3, September 2007, pp. 445-453.

Caesars—but they seem to have recognized that the future of the *Pax Americana* depends on controlling a crucial geo-political region. But what they have not recognized is that they are playing all-or-nothing. And that it will be necessary, if things go badly, that they be able to find support from a public that recognizes its own values in their adventure.

George Bush's Address to the Nation of September 13 was in fact aimed at only a small part of that nation—the “moderate” republicans who would be tempted to join with the democrats to oppose a presidential veto of a more realistic strategy in Iraq. This tactical goal was easily achieved since the democrats are divided, and will remain divided as long as the primaries continue to tempt one or another candidate or group to up the ante rather than discuss a longer term strategy.¹⁰ No doubt Bush's (non)political way of kicking the can down the road will be accepted, even though it proposes simply the continuation of an impossible task.

But there remains that residence of the American proconsuls being constructed in Baghdad. What will be its future? And that of Iraq? And that of our republic?

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(Translated by the author from the French original)

¹⁰ It is probably this situation that explains why the public shows more confidence in the judgement of the military than it does in the politicians, in spite of the strong tradition of civilian control.