

The War: What We're Missing

By John DeBlasio
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Ever since the initial planning phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom, we Americans have struggled with the single most important question about our role in Iraq: Are we occupiers or liberators?

President Bush framed the issue both ways during his news conference last Tuesday. "We're not an imperial power, as nations such as Japan and Germany can attest. We are a liberating power," he said in his opening remarks, enunciating the administration's main theme. But in response to a question, he said of the Iraqis, "They're not happy they're occupied. I wouldn't be happy if I were occupied either."

The distinction between occupation and liberation is critical. It can mean the difference between a country whose citizens throw sweets at American soldiers and one whose citizens throw rocks and plant bombs; between a country that displays thanks and one that displays charred bodies hung from a bridge. If the proper label for our role seems unclear to the Iraqis, that's because of our own confusion about whether we are occupiers or liberators, an uncertainty that has contributed to a series of mistakes and to the recent surge of anti-American sentiment there.

Legally speaking there has never been any question about our role. In October 2002, the Defense Department's general counsel ruled that, under international law, we would be responsible as an occupying force after invading Iraq. Otherwise, it would have been the job of coalition forces, as "liberators," to quickly hand over power to a legitimate government that would assume the legal responsibility for governing the country and its people. In an occupation, we would assume the legal responsibility to guarantee the security and well-being of the Iraqi people. That was also part of the premise of U.N. Resolution 1483, which lifted sanctions in Iraq and further defined our role as occupiers.

Unfortunately, U.S. planning took a different tack. Eschewing the mantle of occupier, we prepared instead for the postwar period by zeroing in on the potential for humanitarian catastrophes instead of the administrative and security issues that became paramount following the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime. As a result, U.S. forces were unprepared when, following "liberation," the Iraqi people tore into their own neighborhoods.

As civil order broke down and a vacuum of leadership developed, many Iraqis took advantage of the chance to chase the local Baath Party "beneficiaries" out of their homes, settle scores with a religious foe (the murder of moderate Shiite cleric Abdul-Majid Khoei, for example, the day after Baghdad fell) or loot everything that wasn't tied down. I arrived in April to help set up a Jordanian field hospital in Iraq and none of us present could believe the magnitude of what we were witnessing. Entire government buildings and compounds were dismantled piece by piece, destruction couched as celebration.

As "liberators," U.S. forces weren't assigned to stop such incidents, at least initially. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld called the looting an expression of freedom. Coalition forces didn't police looters or declare martial law in those chaotic days, but they should have, given the responsibilities that international law required of an occupation force. Sporadic looting continues today, hindering our ability to make measurable, legitimate progress.

The allocation of U.S. resources also was tailored to fit a mission seen as liberation rather than occupation. Our entire military effort in Iraq was initially built around crushing Saddam's armed forces and then cruising into what is known in the Pentagon as Phase IV, or post-hostility reconstruction. The mix of American forces consisted of armor and heavy infantry rather than light infantry and security forces. Furthermore, the initial postwar administrative apparatus, the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA), lacked the resources to execute a mission of the scale it faced. Thus Phase IV never reached large parts of Iraq.

Unrealistic timetables also had their origins in the misconceptions about liberation. When retired general Jay Garner, the original administrator of Iraq, finished a news conference in Kuwait in late March 2003 by suggesting that the coalition would transfer power to an interim Iraqi government by June 2003 -- almost a year ago now -- he was

The Washington Post

doing more than reading the party line. That was actually the plan. Garner intended to march into Baghdad, grab the keys from the closet in the Republican Palace, hand them over to returning Iraqi exiles and let them run the country.

U.S. attitudes toward Iraqi security forces were colored by the liberation construct. After the invasion, Iraq's own intelligence forces and army dissolved into the woodwork; we didn't develop a real Iraq security plan for at least another two months. It should have been ready before the invasion. At the behest of our selected band of expatriate Iraqi and Kurdish leaders (Ahmed Chalabi, Jalal Talabani and Massoud Barzani), the United States initiated a stringent de-Baathification policy that swept most of the senior leadership from civil service. When we realized that our selected Iraqi leadership had nothing to take over and no real following, the plan to act as "liberators" died and instead we became "reluctant occupiers."

At that point, former ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, along with a staff of neophyte nation-builders, morphed into the Coalition Provisional Authority. Only then did U.S. leaders, both in Washington and Iraq, begin to fully appreciate the scale of our role as occupiers. Yet we remained timid in rebuilding the foundation for the future government of Iraq. Many edicts and orders were issued; for the most part, they were not controversial.

One of the exceptions: The Nov. 15, 2003, agreement to set a schedule for giving control to the Iraqis, including a June 30 date for a formal handoff of sovereignty. That document forced both parties to realize that Iraqis would have to accept responsibility for running the country by a firm deadline. Now we stand just 73 days away from that transition. The new government will include the same people we originally expected to take power, only now they've had a year to use their ministerial posts to build relationships and constituencies. They should be better prepared. And while Iraqi security forces performed badly during the recent violence, new and better-trained Iraqi military officers will graduate from programs in Jordan in June. They will be ready to take charge. Besides, an Iraqi government will never take hold if it continues to rely on the coalition's occupation forces to run the country.

Now that we have had to confront the stark fact that we've been occupiers, the danger is that we will maintain too much power. To make the transition from occupation to liberation means, on a tactical level, gradually handing responsibility over to Iraqis, with whom it should reside. From a practical standpoint, there must be a real change in the way decisions are made. We have to allow the Iraqis enough room to lead. If after June 30 we continue to do things just as before, we will have gained nothing other than the press clipping.

Our objective over the next 73 days should be fairly simple. We need to clear the field of significant obstacles so that Iraqis can take power, and then allow them the freedom to lead when the takeover is official. Clearing obstacles means imprisoning the insurgent Shiite leader Moqtada Sadr and other officials of his movement, and acting against Sunni extremists in and around Fallujah. Both actions are long overdue.

What we shouldn't do is overreact to the recent, highly publicized events. It would be a mistake to add more troops and create a continuing unhealthy reliance on coalition forces. In fact, we should probably scale down our involvement in providing security and running the government. With 140,000 coalition forces in Iraq, we don't have enough manpower to provide security for 25 million Iraqis. Nor can we, with 3,000 members of the CPA, run a government across 18 provinces. Our role should be to provide political and technical guidance and military quick-reaction forces, to ensure that the inevitable Iraqi political infighting does not spin out of control. In other words, we should be doing the exact opposite of what so many senators, generals and administration officials are now recommending, that we should send more troops; we should be disengaging and allowing the Iraqis to take over.

To modify the date of transition and not force Iraqi citizens to assume their responsibilities would be a huge step backward. Should we not stick to our June 30 transition date, it would represent a significant failure. We must stand by the Nov. 15 agreement and insist that our Iraqi partners do the same. Then June 30 will be as much our independence day as theirs.

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