



## No Fast Exit From Iraq

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On the night after the Iraqi elections, Jon Stewart began "The Daily Show" by saying, "We did it! We had the election. And now we can say to Iraq, 'Goodbye!' " It's not just late-night television stars; everybody seems to be searching for the exit from Iraq. Dozens of Democrats -- from Ted Kennedy to Lynn Woolsey -- are demanding a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops. To be fair, there are many others, such as Joseph Biden and Hillary Clinton, who are not. But even centrist Democrats and Republicans talk about the training of Iraqi forces as the magic formula that will get us out. Perhaps feeling the pressure, Donald Rumsfeld said last week in Mosul that once the Iraqi army had been trained, "our forces, coalition forces will be able to go home." Addressing the troops, Rumsfeld added, "One day you'll see very clearly the history you made." But if this obsession with an exit continues, the history that we make in Iraq will not be worth seeing.

The situation in Iraq is gray. Partisans on either side would like to believe that it is black or white. In fact, while there are some hopeful indicators (the elections were a great day), there are also some troubling ones (the insurgency has had a great year). Things could go well, but they could also spiral down. And the easiest way to ensure that downward spin would be for the United States to pull up stakes and leave.

Does anyone really believe that America's leaving Iraq would improve the situation there? It would create a power vacuum, the insurgency would get stronger, the Shiites might retaliate against Sunni violence, setting off a civil war, and the Kurds could be tempted to secede. Iraq would then be exporting terrorism and instability. Some Americans might say, "That's fine, we'll be gone." But any withdrawal would take months, during which the violence would mount. The last U.S. forces to leave under these conditions might not get a more ceremonious exit than they did off the embassy roof in Saigon in 1975.

And even if U.S. troops are gone, chaos and civil war in Iraq will deal a body blow to U.S. interests and ideals. It's not just al Qaeda and its allies who will delight in the mayhem; all anti-American and antidemocratic forces in the region will be emboldened. Whatever you thought of the invasion, to advocate a quick exit from Iraq is neither hawkish nor dovish; it's the foreign policy of an ostrich.

Even the training of Iraqi troops is not the simple fix it is portrayed to be. Once trained, these forces will still need help battling the insurgency. They will still be ill-equipped to deter the much larger armies of neighboring Iran and Syria. And the newly trained forces will still be largely Kurdish and Shiite. A truly national army will take much longer to build.

The core requirement for stability in Iraq is a political bargain among the country's three groups. History suggests that such a deal can better be made when no one group holds absolute power. An active American -- and international -- presence can also prod Iraq to respect basic human rights and to keep its bureaucracy relatively honest, its courts independent and its oil revenue transparent -- all critical in these formative years. Of course, it's ultimately up to the Iraqis, but from Mozambique to Bosnia to East Timor, outside assistance (and pressure) has made a huge difference.

The biggest obstacle to a productive U.S. relationship with Iraq is the widespread anti-Americanism in the country. That's why some of us were so critical of the many mistakes of the occupation; they threatened to destroy the possibilities of a long-term U.S. involvement there. But I do not believe that this hostility is endemic. Polls suggest that most Iraqis have been frustrated, disappointed and enraged because the occupation failed to deliver to them basic security and a better life. If and when conditions improve, they will see the United States in a different light.

Remember those often-cited studies saying that having a large force to secure the peace is crucial in nation-building? Well, all of them point to another, perhaps even more important, requirement for success: Don't leave. During the 1990s the places the United States and its allies left -- Haiti, Somalia -- were failures. The places where they stayed -- Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor -- have been relative successes. Look at Afghanistan. It's faring decently today, but if foreigners left, it would almost certainly regress, probably into some kind of failing narco-state.

The outstanding cases of U.S. success at nation-building and democracy-making are, of course, Germany, Japan and South Korea. It is not coincidental that American forces remain in those countries to this day. That model may not be appropriate in Iraq, but we should

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approach this endeavor with a similar sense of commitment. That will help produce success, and that's the only sensible strategy, whether or not it produces an exit.

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