

## **Analysis: Iraq's Cincinnatus option**

**By ARNAUD DE BORCHGRAVE, UPI Editor at Large**

WASHINGTON, Feb. 27 (UPI) -- The late Peter Ustinov once remarked, "Terrorism is the war of the poor and war is the terrorism of the rich." The trouble in Iraq is that the poor have more staying power than the rich. The insurgency in Baghdad has gone to ground and doesn't plan to resurface until Gen. David Petraeus' lightning \$6 billion surge of U.S. and Iraqi troops have swept through the capital and declared "mission accomplished."

With Iranian backing and thousands of tons of arms and ammo cached in Saddam Hussein's salad days, the insurgency can keep going for several more years. The United States cannot. So last weekend a gathering of the transatlantic mandarins of the "Realpolitik" clan gathered in Washington, albeit off the record, to dispense sage advice on an honorable exit from Iraq --and a geopolitical compromise that would obviate a military showdown with Iran.

Realpolitik is a policy of political realism, or the politics of the real world rather than politics based on theoretical, moral, or idealistic concerns. Which is a tall order in Iraq as the rationale for the invasion was a blend of all three.

With Ahmad Chalabi -- once described by his neocon friends as the best hope for democracy in Iraq, and now closer to Tehran than Washington -- moving back into the Iraqi political imbroglio, the realists see this as the institutionalization of corruption at the top. Chalabi is now supposed to serve as the intermediary between Baghdad residents and Iraqi and U.S. security forces whose main function is to assess how much compensation the U.S. should pay for damages caused to homes and automobiles by Petraeus' surge.

Chalabi is also in charge of "de-Baathification," an organization that has fired scores of thousands of Sunni civil servants -- adding to both the ranks of the unemployed and the insurgency. More recently, Chalabi claimed he had reversed course and taken back 14,000 Sunni civil servants. He also pledged when all is said and done more will have been said than done as only 1,500 former Baathists would be permanently excluded from government employment.

It was Muqtada al-Sadr, the anti-American head of the Shiite Mahdi Army militia, now lying low for the duration of the surge, who instructed Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to create a post on adjudicating "reparations" owed by the Americans. At least that's

what Maliki's entourage told some Iraqi reporters.

The realists now say the entire U.S.-built "democratic" infrastructure is rotten to the core. Ministers and former ministers absconded with millions of dollars. There is still no proper accounting for the over \$30 billion a year derived from some two million barrels of oil pumped daily. There is also the unaccounted for \$12 billion in \$100 bills the U.S. trucked in behind the original invasion force to get the country moving again.

One Iraqi-born Iraqi expert among the "real politik"-ers said, not for attribution, there is only one way to save democracy in Iraq and that is by temporarily suspending it and getting a strongman to take over and declare martial law. "This potential Ataturk," he explained, "would have to be a former general known for his competence rather than his subservience to Saddam Hussein. There must be such a popular and friendly general that U.S. or Arab intelligence agencies know about. He could be in prison or in Syria or Beirut or even London. He might even be a general now in the insurgency underground. But he must be a man who understood all the details of the hidden persuaders of Saddam's control apparatus. His job would be to impose martial law and to get everything moving again through dictatorial edict and action. He should be given \$5 billion to \$10 billion to dispense as he sees fit to get the job done."

The Bush administration once considered the strongman solution (known as the Cincinnatus option, named after one of the heroes of early Rome five centuries BC, and a model of Roman virtue and simplicity) but rejected it. Potential candidates were presumably too strong -- or too weak.

The kind of action this prominent ex-Iraqi realist had in mind would "suspend or jail corrupt officials. Electricity should not only be brought back to Saddam levels but to uninterrupted 24/7 power. Oil revenue would have to be centralized under strict control and revenues allocated for urgent needs, such as health, hospitals, garbage collection and so forth." Insurgents would be given a week to surrender their weapons, or face execution if captured. In return, the martial law government would guarantee them a job.

What we call democracy in Iraq today is a parody; it's a kleptocracy. It cannot be reformed, this prominent Iraqi internationalist argued, and a coup by a non-sectarian strongman would be welcomed by most Iraqis who say life was less stressful with fewer hardships under Saddam Hussein.

Iraq needs a Kemal Ataturk ("father of all Turks"), the dictator that seized control of the dying Ottoman Sultanate in 1923, and single handedly cajoled and browbeat his country into the modern Western mold. His puritanical blend of secularism abolished the caliphate, closed religious schools, banned veils and fezes, purged Turkish of its Arabic alphabet. Three times since 1960, the army, as the guarantor of Ataturk's legacy, seized power to defend Turkey against terrorism of both the far left and far right.

If Bush concludes he cannot risk a freshly minted "Save Democracy" campaign in Iraq as Republican and Democratic presidential hopefuls jostle for position at the starting gate, the entire experiment will flop and U.S. troops will come home to a failed mission. The line of least resistance is to kick the can down the presidential road, leaving an exit deal to the next administration. But the Democrats will ensure this won't happen.

The practitioners of geopolitics, in their small offline huddles this past weekend, agreed the time had come for Bush to swallow his pride and accept a royal invitation to hold a tripartite summit in Riyadh -- with Iran.

The geopolitical realists said off the record the time had come for the three principal powers of the Gulf -- Iran, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. -- to hold a regional summit on Gulf security. Saudi King Abdullah would do the inviting. The only two invitees would be Bush and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, the man who holds the real power over hothead Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. All three have the biggest stakes in Gulf security.

The administration's poker chips would be diplomatic recognition of Iran and a non-aggression treaty, in return for Iran abandoning its nuclear weapons option. On a scale of one to 10, the chances of President Bush agreeing are minus zero.

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