

Rebuilding Iraq: The US as Imperial Power or Global Partner

by William Hartung

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As US and British troops consolidated their control in Iraq, Bush administration officials continued to send conflicting signals about who will play the key role in rebuilding Iraq post-Saddam. Will it be a secretive regime dominated by the Pentagon, or will the White House internationalize rebuilding by bringing in the United Nations and mending fences with allies like France and Germany?

As usual, Secretary of State Colin Powell has played the good cop, suggesting that the administration was prepared to engage in "pragmatic dialogue" to determine the United Nations' role in the rebuilding and stabilization of Iraq. National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice has taken a starkly different tack, arguing that "it would only be natural to expect that after having participated and having liberated Iraq, coalition forces, having given life and blood to liberate Iraq, that the coalition would have the leading role" in shaping the post-war regime.

Rice's rhetoric is disingenuous-the troops who are giving their lives to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime will have as little to say about the future of Iraq as the rest of us. Under the "unilateralist" rebuilding model favored by Rice, Donald Rumsfeld and other administration hardliners, the future of Iraq will be largely decided by the chicken hawks back in Washington. Right-wing ideologues like Vice President Dick Cheney, who has never seen a wartime shot fired, will be running the show-not the men and women who risked their lives in battle.

But the larger problem with a "made in the USA" approach to rebuilding Iraq is that it will not produce the desired result-a stable, democratic nation. As Gen. Gordon Sullivan (Ret.), the head of the Association of the United States Army, recently noted, the choices facing the Bush administration mirror, on a smaller scale, the problems faced by the United States in Europe during the 1940s, when the Roosevelt administration had to decide which countries would be "dealt in" on shaping the postwar settlement.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the commander of US forces in Europe, believed strongly that post-war planning should involve not only countries like the United States, the Soviet Union and United Kingdom, who were providing the bulk of the military forces needed to drive back Hitler's armies, but also allies like France, whose forces were mostly restricted to liberating their own nations with major US assistance. Eisenhower felt that involving a broader range of allied nations in post-war planning would lead to a more stable, prosperous and legitimate governing structure for Europe as it moved forward from the horrors of war and fascism.

Similarly, in Iraq, internationalizing the rebuilding process is the best way to ensure post-war stability. That means putting as much of the rebuilding effort as possible under UN auspices, as quickly as possible-from aid delivery, to decisions on which companies will get reconstruction contracts, to selecting an interim government, to training new Iraqi military and police forces, to setting out the steps needed to create a new constitution and elect a legitimate government.

The Council on Foreign Relations has endorsed a number of these steps in its recent report on rebuilding Iraq, suggesting that a multilateral process would be the best way to spread the costs of rebuilding and to ensure that a post-Saddam regime has maximum international legitimacy. Even British Prime Minister Tony Blair-Bush's most enthusiastic coalition partner-understands this and has made UN cooperation the lynchpin of his post-war rebuilding proposal.

Some anti-war activists have expressed unease about a major UN role in post-war Iraq, suggesting that it would throw a cloak of legitimacy over what they view as an illegal military action. Those concerns must be counter-balanced by the realities on the ground.

Massive needs-economic, humanitarian and security-will emerge in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Saddam Hussein.

The international community-including anti-war elements in the United States-can't afford to "take a pass" and stand back from the process of meeting these urgent demands, whatever their cause may be (Saddam's reign of terror or the added hardship caused by the US invasion). It must demand widespread, full internationalization of the rebuilding process. It must treat the unilateralist nature of the intervention itself as an aberration not to be repeated.

A democratic, internationalized rebuilding process is the best option for the long-suffering Iraqi people, but it is also the best option for meeting long-term US security interests. A new regime brought to power under UN auspices will have far more legitimacy than one perceived as a puppet installation run by Donald Rumsfeld and his merry band of aggressive unilateralists. A multinational peacekeeping force will be far less likely to become a target of international terror groups than a large US-dominated occupation force. And a process in which Iraqi oil resources are used to rebuild the country through open bidding processes will create far more goodwill than a secretive rebuilding plan that gives contracts only, or primarily, to well-connected US companies like Halliburton (Vice President Cheney's former company) and Bechtel.

Nothing embodies the Bush administration's shortsightedness and moral bankruptcy more than employing former Army Lt. Gen. Jay Garner as the head of the Pentagon's rebuilding effort for Iraq. Not only does Garner have interests in companies like SY Technologies, which stand to profit from the war in Iraq, but he is a longtime associate of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs. Although it claims to be non-partisan, JINSA has close ties to the right-wing Likud party, and has long supported "regime change" in Iraq while denigrating the Camp David peace process as an inappropriate way to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

If the Bush administration were to consciously set out to pick a person most likely to raise questions about the legitimacy of the post-war rebuilding process, they could not have selected a better man for the job than Jay Garner.

In contrast, if they truly want a stable, democratic Iraq, they should send Mr. Garner packing and start immediate bargaining to bring the United Nations-and anti-war allies like France, Germany and Russia-into the center of the rebuilding process.

How Iraq is rebuilt will determine whether the United States will use its immense power to act as a quasi-imperial power, or as a responsible global partner. It will say a great deal about whether this is the last unilateralist war for regime change launched by the Bush junta, or the first in a series of "wars without end" to reshape the globe.

The stakes in this debate are too high to leave to the Bush Administration. People who care about common security for all need to act now.

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