

Creating a Nation Out of Paper

The drafters of the Iraqi constitution have been granted one more week to complete the document in which the administration has invested our hopes for a united and

democratic Iraq. So then we can come home with “Mission Accomplished.”

Pardon my pessimism, but failure seems assured. For a constitution does not create a nation. A nation creates a constitution. And a nation of Iraq, to which those 25 million people give primary allegiance, love, and loyalty, does not exist. The Iraqis are Shia, Kurds, Sunnis, Turkmen, and their primordial bonds are blood and soil, mosque and “the mystic chords of memory.”

No constitution can create a nation where a nation does not already exist. It will fall apart as the Czechoslovakia created at the Paris peace conference of 1919 fell apart in 1939, and, recreated after World War II, fell apart again after 1989. Ethnicity and faith tore asunder an arranged marriage of the nation-builders Wilson and Lloyd George.

While our Constitution created the government of the United States, America already existed in the hearts of her people before Hamilton and Madison went to Philadelphia. Even before our Constitution was ratified, John Jay had written in Federalist 2, “Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people ... descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs, and who ... fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war, have nobly established their general liberty and independence.”

Do such bonds exist today among Iraqis whose country was held together,

before March 2003, by a Sunni-dominated Baath Party and the secret police of Saddam Hussein?

From Ottoman days, the Iraqis have been held together by force and fear. Now that the Americans have smashed the state, party, and police who held them together, why should they stay together? Do Kurds in Kirkuk have more in common with Shi’ites in Najaf than their cousins in Turkey? Do Ayatollah Sistani’s Shias have more in common with Turkmen and Tikritis than their fellow Shia in Iran?

To see the future of Iraq, look at our own history. Though a common ancestry, language, faith, manners, customs, memories, and institutions united us in 1787, again and again we sought to dissolve our Union. New England sought to secede during Madison’s War of 1812, South Carolina over the “Tariff of Abominations,” and old John Quincy Adams urged disunion rather than bring the slave-holding Texans in. After November 1860, seven Southern states seceded rather than be ruled by a high-tariff abolitionist Republican Party headed by a railroad lawyer who represented the money power of the North.

It was the neoconservatives who planned this war for years and seized on 9/11 to persuade an untutored president to launch it. George W. Bush was assured it would be “a cakewalk,” that we would be welcomed as the liberators of Baghdad, that democracy would take root and spread to Damascus, Tehran, Riyadh, and across the Islamic world. He would be the Churchill of his

generation. They were all going to make history.

And they have certainly done that.

That Bush came to believe in a world democratic revolution seems evident. His is the zeal of the convert. As testimony to his sincerity, he has made democracy the altarpiece of his presidency. As Iraq and the world democratic revolution go, so goes the Bush presidency. The only question remaining is: will he be remembered as a Reagan or a Carter?

But did the neocons ever believe in such utopianism? Or were they cynically manipulating Wilsonian ideals—with their appeal to liberals—to mask a hidden agenda: their own power and its endless exercise?

Kevin Phillips once famously said, “a neoconservative is more likely to be a magazine editor than a bricklayer.” Another friend, Jon Utley, notes that, as so few of the neocons are businessmen or military men, they rarely consider the consequences should their ideas prove wrong. Editors seldom pay the cost in destroyed careers, lost fortunes, ruined reputations, long casualty lists, and lost wars for the failed policies they promote.

Prediction: even if the new constitution finesses the issues of the Koran as the source of law and sovereignty for Kurds and Shias, even if the provinces embrace it and its passes in October, it will not unite this disparate people. For it is but a contract, a piece of paper, and Islamic men are not people of parchment. When the commands of that constitution collide with what is best for Shia, Sunni, or Kurd, they will cast it aside and stand for family, faith, and clan.

You cannot create a nation out of paper. ■

[past the peak]

End of the Binge

The exhaustion of our energy supply may end affluence as we know it.

By James Howard Kunstler

AMONG THE STRANGE delusions and hallucinations gripping the body politic these days is the idea that the so-called global economy is a permanent fixture of the human condition. The seemingly unanimous embrace of this idea in the power circles of America is a marvelous illustration of the madness of crowds, for nothing could be farther from the truth.

The global economy is, in fact, nothing more than a transient set of trade and financial relations based on a particular set of transient, special sociopolitical conditions, namely a few decades of relative world peace between the great powers along with substantial, reliable supplies of predictably cheap fossil fuels. The result, as far as America is concerned, has been an extended fiesta based on suburban comfort, easy motor-ing, fried food in abundance, universal air conditioning, and bargain-priced imported merchandise acquired on promises to pay later—a way of life described by Vice President Cheney as “non-negotiable.”

Of particular concern ought to be the 12,000-mile-long merchandise supply lines from Asia that American retailers such as Wal-Mart depend on and from which American “consumers” (as opposed to citizens, i.e., people with duties, obligations, and responsibilities) get most of their household goods these days. Wal-Mart now gets 70 percent of its products from China.

This fragile calculus plays out against a background of rapidly escalating and increasingly desperate strategic maneuvering around the global oil-production peak and its implications. Peak oil, for short, would unseat the relative peace and cheap-energy basis of our current global arrangements. It is already beginning to happen. Yet most of the discussion about the boon of globalism, especially the virtual cheerleading of *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, is occurring in complete disregard of the gathering peak-oil crisis. The Left and Right are both equally guilty of epic cluelessness.

Even among those who have heard the term, peak oil is generally misunderstood. It’s not about running out of oil. It’s about the remorseless decline in production following the all-time worldwide peak and a desperate competition to control the remaining supplies, which happen to be inequitably distributed in a few select regions of the world. The U.S. happens to be one of them, but we are into the twilight of our own supplies. We began production back in 1859, ramped up over many decades to a peak of over 10 million barrels a day in 1970, and have now fallen off to under 5 million barrels a day of conventional crude—with the numbers headed yet more steeply down. We have 28 billion barrels of conventional crude left, and we burn through more than 20 million barrels a day or 7

billion barrels a year. Of that, we import nearly three quarters of the total. The math isn’t very reassuring.

Commentators such as Daniel Yergin, author of *The Prize*, a history of the oil industry, and now head of Cambridge Energy Research Associates, a PR firm serving the major oil companies, like to point to North America’s substantial supplies of tar sands (they’re up in Canada) and oil shale (it isn’t really oil but a hydrocarbon precursor called kerogen). The main catch is that these unconventional sources will yield oil only at high prices, while the procedures for getting them impose additional severe environmental costs including massive water pollution. (In the case of the Rocky Mountain oil shales, the water necessary for processing them in marketable quantities isn’t even available.)

Two other linked delusions also tend to queer the public discussion. One is that technology will rescue us from energy scarcity, which is based on the idea that technology can be substituted for energy, that they are virtually interchangeable. This is just a plain misunderstanding of reality. Technology and energy are not the same thing. One does not run without the other. Linked to this is the notion that alternative energy sources—coal, natural gas, solar and wind power, hydrogen, nuclear fission and fusion, bio-fuels, and even some long shots like zero-point energy (ZPE)—will bail us out.