

# How Empires End

Responding to the call of Pope Urban II at Claremont in 1095, the Christian knights of the First Crusade set out for the Holy Land. In 1099, Jerusalem was captured.

As their port in Palestine, the Crusaders settled on Acre on the Mediterranean.

There they built the great castle that was overrun by Saladin in 1187 but retaken by Richard the Lionheart in 1191. Acre became the capital of the Kingdom of Jerusalem and stronghold of the Crusader state, which fell in a bloody siege by the Mameluks in 1291. The Christians who had not fled were all massacred.

The ruins of Acre are now a tourist attraction.

Any who have visited this site, the last outpost of Christendom in the Holy Land before General Allenby marched into Jerusalem in 1917, cannot—on reading of the massive U.S. embassy rising in Baghdad—but think of Acre.

At a cost of \$600 million, with walls able to withstand mortar and rocket fire and space to accommodate 1,000 Americans, this mammoth embassy, the largest on earth, will squat on the banks of the Tigris inside the Green Zone.

But a decade hence, will the U.S. ambassador be occupying this imperial compound? Or will it be like the ruins of Acre?

What raises the question is a sense that the United States, this time, is truly about to write off Iraq as a lost cause.

The Republican lines on Capitol Hill are crumbling. Starting with Richard Lugar, one GOP senator after another has risen to urge a drawdown of American forces and a diplomatic solution to the war.

But how can U.S. diplomats win at a conference table what 150,000 American troops cannot secure on a battlefield?

Though Henry Kissinger was an advocate of this unnecessary and unwise war, he is not necessarily wrong when he warns of “geopolitical calamity.” Nor is Ryan Crocker, U.S. envoy in Iraq, necessarily wrong when he says a U.S. withdrawal may be the end of the American war, but it will be the start of bloodier wars in Iraq and across the region.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari also warns of the perils of a rapid withdrawal: “The dangers vary from civil war to dividing the country to regional wars. ... the danger is huge. Until the Iraqi forces and institutions complete their readiness, there is a responsibility on the U.S. and other countries to stand by the Iraqi government and the Iraqi people to help build up their capabilities.”

In urging a redeployment of U.S. forces out of Iraq and a new focus on diplomacy, Lugar listed four strategic goals: Prevent creation of a safe haven for terrorists. Prevent sectarian war from spilling out into the broader Middle East. Prevent Iran’s domination of the region. Limit the loss of U.S. credibility through the region and world as a result of a failed mission in Iraq.

But how does shrinking the American military power and presence in Iraq advance any of these goals?

Long-time critics of the war like Gen. William Odom say it is already lost and fighting on will only further bleed the country and make the ultimate price even higher. The general may be right in saying it is time to cut our losses. But we should take a hard look at what those losses may be.

It is a near certainty the U.S.-backed government will fall, and friends we leave behind will suffer the fate of our Vietnamese and Cambodian friends in 1975. As U.S. combat brigades move out, contractors, aid workers, and diplomats left behind will be more vulnerable to assassination and kidnapping. There could be a stampede for the exit and a Saigon ending in the Green Zone.

The civil and sectarian war will surely escalate when we go, with Iran aiding its Shia allies and Sunni nations aiding the Sunnis. A breakup of the country seems certain. Al-Qaeda will claim it has run the American superpower out of Iraq and take the lessons it has learned to Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States. The Turks, with an army already on the border, will go in to secure their interests in not having the Kurdish PKK operating from Iraq and in guaranteeing there is no Kurdistan. What will America do then?

Here at home, the argument over who is responsible for the worst strategic debacle in American history will be poisonous.

With a U.S. defeat in Iraq, American prestige would plummet across the region. Who would rely on a U.S. commitment for its security? Like the British and French before us, we will be heading home from the Middle East.

We are about to witness how empires end. ■

# Richardson Fails Up

His appearance on “Meet the Press” was widely mocked as the worst on the Sunday talk-show circuit in living memory. His debate performances have been

unimpressive, except when they have been embarrassing. His policy knowledge is superficial, and his positions are clearly opportunistic. Bill Richardson has never had it so good.

Despite his many mistakes and his coming from a state with few electoral votes and fewer big donors, he has managed to turn in a respectable second quarter, raising \$7 million. And he comes close to tying John Edwards in third place in the Democratic presidential field. Clearly, obscurity has its advantages.

On paper, Richardson looks like the sort of well-traveled, experienced candidate that political parties seek. It would appear, as one of his comical campaign commercials suggested, that he has almost too much experience for the job. He hails from a Mountain West state that has been closely divided in recent presidential elections, potentially offering Democrats the chance to put a red-state governor on their ticket. As the only Hispanic candidate running, he theoretically has an advantage with a growing Hispanic voting bloc. He was even briefly considered for the second place on the Democratic ticket in 2004.

The story behind his “consideration” is a good example of Richardson’s success in promoting an image of himself as an experienced statesman without having the qualifications to back it up. After making his desire known to the Kerry campaign, he withdrew from the process soon after.

There is a good reason Richardson would not be interested in extensive attention to his career. Easily elected to

Congress in 1980 in a redrawn, heavily Democratic district in northern New Mexico, Richardson did not distinguish himself until the Clinton years when he became what the president jokingly referred to as “undersecretary for thugs” because of his penchant for negotiating with disreputable regimes for the release of prisoners. As U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Richardson mostly just kept the seat warm between Madeleine Albright’s departure and the start of Richard Holbrooke’s tenure.

As secretary of energy, Richardson received his biggest public humiliation. “You’ve squandered your treasure,” Sen. Robert Byrd memorably told him during an oversight hearing looking into the security breaches at Los Alamos National Labs. While Richardson was only one in a line of incompetent administrators at DOE, the failures on his watch were all the more egregious since they concerned the loss or mishandling of sensitive nuclear weapons data.

But thanks to such “experience,” Richardson continues to be reasonably competitive, drawing as much as 12 percent support in recent Iowa polling. If more realized just how meaningless the governor’s deceptively long resume is, and if they understood what an easy political environment New Mexico is for him, no strategists and certainly no voters would give him the slightest chance.

The greatest Richardson myths are his value to the Democratic ticket and the significance of his re-election in 2006 as proof of his cross-party appeal. While New Mexico often follows the national

mood in presidential elections, it is unlike any of its neighbors in its politics, culture, and demographics. For a so-called red state, the local Republicans basically represent a permanent minority. Though re-elected with a hefty 69 percent of the vote, Richardson was initially running against a virtual non-candidate, J.D. Damron, whom the state Republicans replaced halfway through the election year because he refused to campaign actively. The replacement, former state party chairman John Dendahl, had a poor reputation in the state as the GOP’s hatchet man and had only a couple months to put together a campaign organization.

Second only to Mitt Romney in shameless conversions, Richardson has moved from a reliable DLC centrist on foreign policy and a supporter of the Iraq invasion to the most ardent—and most uninformed—antiwar Democrat of the top four. Pressed on the Iraq War supplemental in March, he confessed to not knowing about the substance of the legislation: “I’m just not familiar with the supplemental. Which one is that?” Despite portraying himself as the lone major candidate competent enough to withdraw all American forces from Iraq, he has abandoned his support for the Feingold-Reid amendment, which would have cut off funds for the war next March. More recently, he supported then opposed the failed Senate immigration bill, all the while giving the impression that he had never understood most of its provisions.

Richardson has discovered an effective strategy for coming from nowhere to being a credible challenger for the Democratic nomination: tout past experience despite present incompetence. It has worked for him before. ■