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Freedomland

Petraeus and Crocker pretend Iraq is a state. Everyone goes along.

By William S. Lind

IN THE SECOND WEEK in April, the world's most elaborate kabuki theater, Washington, offered a stunning performance. America's two consuls for Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus and Amb. Ryan C. Crocker, gave Congress and the world their appreciation of the situation in that unhappy country. Senators and congressmen listened with rapt attention. The three presidential candidates, aka the three blind mice, postured and preened in the great men's presence. The press hung on every word. Analysts and columnists parsed their meaning.

As with theater, none of it was real.

Both Crocker and Petraeus spoke of Iraq as if it were a state. Crocker referred to "The passage of the 2008 [Iraqi] budget, with record amounts for capital expenditures, [which] ensures that the federal and provincial governments will have the resources for public spending." He spoke of "the development of Iraq's Council of Representatives as a national institution." He cautioned that "there is still very much to be done to bring full government control to the streets of Basra." In a similar vein, General Petraeus repeatedly referred to Iraqi Security Forces, noting, "An increasingly robust Iraqi-run training base enabled the Iraqi Security Forces to grow by over 3,000 soldiers and police over the past 16 months." He assured Congress, "Iraq's security ministries are steadily improving their ability to execute their budgets."

The members of the Senate and House committees before whom the consuls testified played their parts in turn. They questioned the witnesses carefully, as committee members usually do, within the framework of their statements. No one seems to have inquired whether that framework exists, other than as a beautiful dream.

Beautiful dreams are the stuff of theater, but strategy must be based in the real world.

The defining reality in Iraq is that there is no state. Because there is no state in Iraq, there is also no government. Orders issued in Baghdad have no impact because there are no state institutions to carry them out. Government institutions such as parliament and positions such as cabinet minister have no substance. Power comes from having a relationship with a militia, not a government office. The "Iraqi Security Forces" are groups of Shi'ite militias, which exist to fight other militias. They take orders from militia leaders, not the government. Government revenues are slush funds for militia leaders to pay their militiamen. The whole edifice Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus described exists only as a figment of the Bush administration's imagination.

Couldn't a single member of Congress have found the courage to say, "Excuse me, consul, but you have no clothes"?

Ironically the reality behind the kabuki was revealed even as the show

went on, in the Iraqi city of Basra. There, Iraqi "Prime Minister" Nouri al-Maliki impulsively ordered an offensive by the Iraqi "army" against the Mahdi Army militia of Muqtada al-Sadr. In effect, he tried to act like the head of a real state. Since he isn't, the result was a fiasco. The Iraqi "army" fell apart, as militias usually do when given unwelcome orders. Iraqi "soldiers" and "police" went over or went home, in considerable numbers. Reportedly, the fight ended with the Mahdi Army controlling more of Basra than it did at the beginning. Mr. al-Maliki, desperate for a ceasefire, had to agree in advance to any conditions al-Sadr wanted to impose.

At root, the problem here is one conservatives have traditionally been sensitive to, namely the meaning of words. "Government," "parliament," "army," and "police" only have meaning in the context of a state. Where there is no state, the words have no meaning. Statements such as those given to Congress and the American public by General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker become what logical positivists call pseudo-statements.

In answer to a question before one of the committees, General Petraeus gave a particularly vivid example of how words disconnected from reality can deceive. (In this case the deception is no doubt self-deception.) He said, "We've got to continue. We have our teeth into the jugular, and we need to keep it [*sic*]

there.” In a column in the April 13 *Washington Post*, David Broder wrote, “The general clearly likes that phrase, because he used it twice more during his visit to The Post.”

In Fourth Generation war, non-state opponents, such as those we face in Iraq and Afghanistan, have no jugular. They have no single point of vulnerability an opponent can hit to bring them down. (They may have such critical vulnerabilities internally, but only they can hit them, as al-Qaeda in Iraq seems to have done in alienating its Sunni base.) For outside forces such as ourselves, Fourth Generation war is war of the capillaries. What we have our teeth into in Iraq is a jellyfish.

The card castle of illusions that is built when meaningless words are used becomes a base for poor strategic decisions. That reality, too, revealed itself as the kabuki played on in Washington. The failure of Mr. al-Maliki’s “big push” into Basra presented American forces in Iraq with a problem. To win, we must see a state re-emerge. That means we should stay out of the way of anyone with the potential to re-create a state. Muqtada al-Sadr is at or near the head of that list. The al-Maliki “government” isn’t even on it.

So what did we do? We went to war against al-Sadr on behalf of al-Maliki, of course. Our military leadership cannot grasp one of the most basic facts about Fourth Generation war, namely that the splintering of factions makes it more difficult to generate a state. Should we have the bad luck to destroy the Madhi Army and thereby “win” this fight—which continues with the usual mindless and counterproductive airstrikes on Basra and Sadr City in Baghdad—we will move not toward but farther away from seeing a state re-emerge in Iraq.

Nor will faulty strategy remain confined to Iraq. Faced with the contradiction between the beautiful dream of a new Iraqi state and the reality on the ground, the Bush administration has

turned to an old explanation: the devil is doing it. As Petraeus and Crocker repeatedly told Congress, the devil is Iran.

The violence of Petraeus’s language is at times striking. Speaking of the Shi’ite militias that dared oppose our recent offensive against them—the buzzword for them is Special Groups—Petraeus said “the flame-up also highlighted the destructive role Iran has played in funding, training, arming, and directing the so-called Special Groups. ... Unchecked, the Special Groups pose the greatest long-term threat to the viability of a democratic Iraq.” The wanted posters for Osama bin Laden, it seems, are being pasted over with ones for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Always better to go after someone you can bomb than someone you can’t find.

Petraeus did not just mention Iran once and pass on. The theme of Iran *perfidie* came up again and again:

Iran has fueled the violence [in Iraq] in a particularly damaging way. ... Together with the Iraqi Security Forces, we have also focused on the Special Groups. These elements are funded, trained, armed, and directed by Iran’s Qods Force. ... It was these groups that launched Iranian rockets and mortar rounds at Iraq’s seat of government. ... External actors, like Iran, could stoke violence in Iraq. ... A failed state in Iraq would pose serious consequences ... for the effort to counter malign Iranian influence. ... It is clearly in our national interest ... to help Iraq resist Iranian encroachment on its sovereignty...

Those who have ears, let them hear. If the main reason for the problems in Iraq is Iran, what does the United States need to do? The lead editorial in the *Washington Post* on the Sunday following the consuls’ testimony answered the question: “It nevertheless is inevitable

that Iran’s proxies in Iraq, Gaza, and Lebanon will have to be countered in part by military force...”

And so the illusion of a state in Iraq will have to be buttressed with another war to excise the devil that stands between America and “victory.” The price of war with Iran could well include the army we now have in Iraq.

What should we do? First, we must understand what “winning” in Iraq means. It does not mean that Iraq becomes an American satellite. That remains the goal of the Bush administration and the neocons, but it is not and never was attainable.

Winning in Iraq simply means that a state re-emerges there. The rise of a new state in Iraq means defeat for al-Qaeda and other non-state entities, who are our real enemies. States don’t like competition, and real states do not permit non-state entities to exist on their territory (unless they are actually proxies the state plans to use against other states).

Second, we must accept the now well-proven fact that we cannot re-create a state in Iraq. We have tried for five years and we have nothing to show for it beyond 4,000 dead, tens of thousands wounded, and an empty treasury. The problem is legitimacy. Any state institutions we create or overtly support will not be accepted by the Iraqi people as legitimate. That is generally true of governments created and installed by foreign occupiers. The local response is, “Vichy ptui.”

A new state can only arise in Iraq independently of our efforts and indeed opposed to foreign occupation. We have to get out of the way and let it happen. It may not. There is no guarantee. There is, however, a guarantee that we cannot make it happen, so getting out of the way is the more promising road to victory. Strategy dictates that we come home, not as an acknowledgement of defeat but as a final bid to win.

In the opening phase of the neocon World War IV against Islamofascism, the U.S. invaded Iraq with help from stalwart allies like Ahmad Chalabi, whose efforts materially assisted in the creation of the vibrant democracy currently sheltered in Baghdad's Green Zone. Chalabi was a wheeler-dealer and manipulator, a felon and intelligence fabricator lurking behind an unprepossessing exterior. But at least he was the real thing. As the neocons now move toward war against Iran, they have essentially fabricated a persona to serve as their new Iranian man, a self-described political prisoner and the hope for Iran's future. He is Amir Abbas Fakhraivar, a man with a website and good friends named Richard Perle and Frank Gaffney. Jim Woolsey has described Fakhraivar as a "young hero," while Michael Ledeen calls him a "unifying figure." He arrived in Washington in April 2006, speaking pretty good English, apparently a requirement for would-be nation-builders.

Nearly all the evidence for Fakhraivar's dissidence comes from the Michael Ledeen-linked Student Movement Co-ordination Committee for Democracy in Iran, based in Addison, Texas. He claims to have been imprisoned for his embrace of democracy, but genuine Iranian dissidents say they have never heard of him. He claims to have written three books, but no one can locate a copy of any of them. He and his family give various accounts of his encounters with the Iranian police and prison system. Fakhraivar improbably reports that he was allowed to make international calls to the U.S. while in jail and even made a video featuring himself and his mother. In spite of an alleged "shoot to kill" order on him, he survived being on the run for 10 months in Iran and then proceeded to the airport and caught a commercial flight to Dubai, where Perle was waiting. An obliging American Enterprise Institute quickly set him up as president of the aptly named Iran Enterprise Institute, which shares office space with the neocon Foundation for the Defense of Democracies. Since that auspicious launch, Fakhraivar has been feted at AEI-sponsored lunches with top policymakers, has been to the White House, and has briefed Congress. Of President Bush, he has declared, "all the [Iranian] youngsters support him and love him." He has called for U.S. action to "help or enhance the [Iranian] people to rise up."

Recent efforts to get Fakhraivar a senior position at the Voice of America Persian Service have stalled because the service chief, Sheila Gandji, believes him to be incompetent. A number of neocon blogs have attacked Gandji as a tool of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Congress has also climbed on board the Fakhraivar express. Republican Sen. Tom Coburn has held up the nomination of Tom Glassman as the State Department's undersecretary for public diplomacy because of VOA's alleged anti-American, pro-Iranian bias. Ironically, Glassman is an alumnus of AEI. Coburn has demanded the review of thousands of hours of VOA Farsi transcripts, at enormous expense, threatening to stop approval of Glassman until he is satisfied or until Gandji is fired, whichever comes first.

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Third, we must face the fact that a real Iraqi state is likely to be close to Iran. The solution is not to bomb Iran but to settle our differences—what diplomats call a rapprochement. Tehran has offered us a general settlement on quite generous terms. We should take them up on it. If the U.S. and Iran are no longer enemies, the fact that a new Iraqi state is allied with Iran is not a problem.

It goes without saying that none of this will happen in the remainder of George W. Bush's term. More likely is an attack on Iran, intended to foreclose on these options. McCain represents the replacement of Commodus with Caligula. Clinton II would probably bring back the same inept foreign policy crowd of Clinton I. Obama? You can write whatever you want on a blank slate, which is the basis of his appeal. The political landscape is a desert, as is usually the case toward the end of a republic. Perhaps the House of Hanover will take us back.

What is certain is that the present course in Iraq traps us in a maze with no exit. According to Broder, General Petraeus suggested to the *Post's* editorial board that we should focus "less on an exit strategy from Iraq and more on an engagement strategy."

Better advice was offered by Hussein Jabar, an Iraqi man on the street interviewed for an article in the April 10 *Washington Post*:

For five years, the Americans have not done anything for the Iraqis. What do they think they can do for us in one more year?

I am so sick and tired of all this. We just want the Americans to go, and we will try to fix things ourselves. ■

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