

“Good News,” Iraq and Beyond

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Not long ago, it was taken for granted that the Iraq war would be the central issue in the presidential campaign, as it was in the mid-term election of 2006. But it has virtually disappeared, eliciting some puzzlement. There should be none.

Iraq remains a significant concern for the population, but that is a matter of little moment in a modern democracy. The important work of the world is the domain of the “responsible men,” who must “live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd,” the general public, “ignorant and meddling outsiders” whose “function” is to be “spectators,” not “participants.” And spectators are not supposed to bother their heads with issues. The Wall Street Journal came close to the point in a major front-page article on super-Tuesday, under the heading “Issues Recede in ’08 Contest As Voters Focus on Character.” To put it more accurately, issues recede as candidates, party managers, and their PR agencies focus on character (qualities, etc.). As usual. And for sound reasons. Apart from the irrelevance of the population, they can be dangerous. The participants in action are surely aware that on a host of major issues, both political parties are well to the right of the general population, and that their positions that are quite consistent over time, a matter reviewed in a useful study by Benjamin Page and Marshall Bouton, *The Foreign Policy Divide*; the same is true on domestic policy (see my *Failed States*, on both domains). It is important, then, for the attention of the herd to be diverted elsewhere.

The quoted admonitions, taken from highly regarded essays by the leading public intellectual of the 20th century (Walter Lippmann), capture well the perceptions of progressive intellectual opinion, largely shared across the narrow elite spectrum. The common understanding is revealed more in practice than in words, though some, like Lippmann, do articulate it: President Wilson, for example, who held that an elite of gentlemen with “elevated ideals” must be empowered to preserve “stability and righteousness,” essentially the perspective of the Founding Fathers. In more recent years the gentlemen are transmuted into the “technocratic elite” and “action intellectuals” of Camelot, “Straussian” neocons, or other configurations. But throughout, one or another variant of Leninist doctrine prevails.

For the vanguard who uphold the elevated ideals and are charged with managing the society and the world, the reasons for Iraq’s drift off the radar screen should not be obscure. They were cogently explained by the distinguished historian Arthur Schlesinger, articulating the position of the doves 40 years ago when the US invasion of South Vietnam was in its fourth year and Washington was preparing to add another 100,000 troops to the 175,000 already tearing South

Vietnam to shreds. By then the invasion launched by Kennedy was facing difficulties and imposing difficult costs on the United States, so Schlesinger and other Kennedy liberals were reluctantly beginning to shift from hawks to doves. That even included Robert Kennedy, who a year earlier, after the vast intensification of the bombing and combat operations in the South and the first regular bombing of the North, had condemned withdrawal as “a repudiation of commitments undertaken and confirmed by three administrations” which would “gravely — perhaps irreparably — weaken the democratic position in Asia.” But by the time that Schlesinger was writing in 1966, RFK and other Camelot hawks began to call for a negotiated settlement — though not withdrawal, never an option, just as withdrawal without victory was never an option for JFK, contrary to many illusions.

Schlesinger wrote that of course “we all pray” that the hawks are right in thinking that the surge of the day will be able to “suppress the resistance,” and if it does, “we may all be saluting the wisdom and statesmanship of the American government” in winning victory while leaving “the tragic country gutted and devastated by bombs, burned by napalm, turned into a wasteland by chemical defoliation, a land of ruin and wreck,” with its “political and institutional fabric” pulverized. But escalation probably won’t succeed, and will prove to be too costly for ourselves, so perhaps strategy should be rethought.

Attitudes towards the war at the liberal extreme were well illustrated by the concerns of the Massachusetts branch of Americans for Democratic Action, in Cambridge, the liberal stronghold. In late 1967, the ADA leadership undertook considerable (and quite comical) efforts to prevent applications for membership from people they feared would speak in favor of an anti-war resolution sponsored by a local chapter that had fallen out of control (Howard Zinn and I were the terrifying applicants). A few months later came the Tet offensive, leading the business world to turn against the war because of its costs to us, while the more perceptive were coming to realize that Washington had already achieved its major war aims. It soon turned out that everyone had always been a strong opponent of the war (in deep silence). The Kennedy memoirists revised their accounts to fit the new requirement that JFK was a secret dove, consigning the rich documentary record (including their own version of events at the time) to the dustbin of history, where the wrong facts wither away. Others preferred silence, assuming correctly that the truth would disappear. The preferred version soon took hold: the radical and self-indulgent anti-war movement had disrupted the sober efforts of the responsible “early opponents of the war” to bring it to an end.

At the war’s end, in 1975, the position of the extreme doves was expressed by Anthony Lewis, the most critical voice in the New York Times. He observed that the war began with “blundering efforts to do good” — which is close to tautology within the doctrinal system — though by 1969 it had become “clear to most of the world — and most Americans — that the intervention had been a disastrous mistake.” The argument against the war, Lewis explained, “was that the United States had misunderstood the cultural and political forces at work in Indochina — that it was in a position where it could not impose a solution except at a price too costly to itself.”

By 1969, “most Americans” had a radically different view. Some 70% regarded the war as “fundamentally wrong and immoral,” not “a mistake.” But they are just “ignorant and meddling outsiders,” whose voices can be dismissed — or on the rare occasions when they are noticed, explained away without evidence by attributing to them self-serving motives lacking any moral basis.

Elite reasoning, and the accompanying attitudes, carry over with little change to critical commentary on the US invasion of Iraq today. And although criticism of the Iraq war is far greater and far-reaching than in the case of Vietnam at any comparable stage, nevertheless the principles that Schlesinger articulated remain in force in media and commentary.

It is of some interest that Schlesinger himself took a very different position on the Iraq invasion, virtually alone in his circles. When the bombs began to fall on Baghdad, he wrote that Bush's policies are "alarmingly similar to the policy that imperial Japan employed at Pearl Harbor, on a date which, as an earlier American president said it would, lives in infamy. Franklin D. Roosevelt was right, but today it is we Americans who live in infamy." It would be instructive to determine how Schlesinger's principled objection to US war crimes fared in the tributes to him that appeared when he died, and in the many reviews of his journals (which do not mention Vietnam until the Johnson years, consistent with the early version of his memoirs of Camelot).

That Iraq is "a land of ruin and wreck" is not in question.. There is no need to review the facts in any detail. The British polling agency Oxford Research Bureau recently updated its estimate of extra deaths resulting from the war to 1.3 million – that's excluding Karbala and Anbar provinces, two of the worst regions. Whether that is correct, or the true numbers are much lower as some claim, there is no doubt that the toll is horrendous. There are several million internally displaced. Thanks to the generosity of Jordan and Syria, the millions of refugees fleeing the wreckage of Iraq, including most of the professional classes, have not been simply wiped out. But that welcome is fading, for one reason because Jordan and Syria receive no meaningful support from the perpetrators of the crimes in Washington and London; the idea that they might admit these victims, beyond a trickle, is too outlandish to consider. Sectarian warfare has devastated the country. Baghdad and other areas have been subjected to brutal ethnic cleansing and left in the hands of warlords and militias, the primary thrust of the current counterinsurgency strategy developed by General Petraeus, who won his fame by pacifying Mosul, now the scene of some of the most extreme violence.

One of the most dedicated and informed journalists who has been immersed in the shocking tragedy, Nir Rosen, recently published an epitaph entitled "The Death of Iraq," in *Current History*. He writes that "Iraq has been killed, never to rise again. The American occupation has been more disastrous than that of the Mongols, who sacked Baghdad in the thirteenth century" – a common perception of Iraqis as well. "Only fools talk of 'solutions' now. There is no solution. The only hope is that perhaps the damage can be contained."

Though the wreckage of Iraq today is too visible to try to conceal, the assault of the new barbarians is carefully circumscribed in the doctrinal system so as to exclude the horrendous effects of the Clinton sanctions – including their crucial role in preventing the threat that Iraqis would send Saddam to the same fate as Ceasescu, Marcos, Suharto, Chun, and many other monsters supported by the US and UK until they could no longer be maintained. Information about the effect of the sanctions is hardly lacking, in particular about the humanitarian phase of the sanctions regime, the oil-for-peace program initiated when the early impact became so shocking that US Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright had to mumble on TV that the price was right whatever the parents of hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqi children might think. The humanitarian program, which graciously permitted Iraq to use some of its oil revenues for the devastated population, was administered by highly respected and experienced UN diplomats, who had teams of investigators all over the country and surely knew more about the situation in Iraq than any other Westerners. The first, Denis Halliday, resigned in protest because the policies were "geno-

cidal.” His successor, Hans von Sponeck, resigned two years later when he concluded that the sanctions violated the Genocide Convention. The Clinton administration barred him from providing information about the impact to the Security Council, which was technically responsible. As Albright’s spokesperson James Rubin explained, “this man in Baghdad is paid to work, not to speak.”

Von Sponeck does, however, speak; in extensive detail in his muted but horrifying book *A Different Kind of War*. But the State Department ruling prevails. One will have to search diligently to find even a mention of these revelations or what they imply. Knowing too much, Halliday and von Sponeck were also barred from the media during the build-up to the invasion of Iraq.

It is true, however, that Iraq is now a marginal issue in the presidential campaign. That is natural, given the spectrum of hawk-dove elite opinion. The liberal doves adhere to their traditional reasoning and attitudes, praying that the hawks will be right and that the US will win a victory in the land of ruin and wreck, establishing “stability,” a code word for subordination to Washington’s will. By and large hawks are encouraged, and doves silenced, by the good news about Iraq.

And there is good news. The US occupying army in Iraq (euphemistically called the Multi-National Force-Iraq) carries out regular studies of popular attitudes, a crucial component of population control measures. In December 2007, it released a study of focus groups, which was uncharacteristically upbeat. The survey “provides very strong evidence” that national reconciliation is possible and anticipated, contrary to prevailing voices of hopelessness and despair. The survey found that a sense of “optimistic possibility permeated all focus groups ... and far more commonalities than differences are found among these seemingly diverse groups of Iraqis.” This discovery of “shared beliefs” among Iraqis throughout the country is “good news, according to a military analysis of the results,” Karen de Young reported in the *Washington Post* (Dec. 19).

The “shared beliefs” were identified in the report. To quote de Young, “Iraqis of all sectarian and ethnic groups believe that the U.S. military invasion is the primary root of the violent differences among them, and see the departure of ‘occupying forces’ as the key to national reconciliation.” So according to Iraqis, there is hope of national reconciliation if the invaders, who are responsible for the internal violence, withdraw and leave Iraq to Iraqis.

The conclusions are credible, consistent with earlier polls, and also with the apparent reduction in violence when the British finally withdrew from Basra a few months ago, having “decisively lost the south – which produces over 90 per cent of government revenues and 70 per cent of Iraq’s proven oil reserves” by 2005, according to Anthony Cordesman, the most prominent US specialist on military affairs in the Middle East. The December 2007 report did not mention other good news: Iraqis appear to accept the highest values of Americans, which should be highly gratifying. Specifically, they accept the principles of the Nuremberg Tribunal that sentenced Nazi war criminals to hanging for such crimes as supporting aggression and preemptive war – the main charge against Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop, whose position in the Nazi regime corresponded to that of Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice. The Tribunal defined aggression clearly enough: “invasion of its armed forces” by one state “of the territory of another state.” The invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan are textbook examples, if words have meaning. The Tribunal went on to define aggression as “the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole”: in the case of Iraq, the murderous sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing, the destruction of the national culture and the irreplaceable treasures of the origins of Western civilization under the eyes of “stuff happens” Rumsfeld and

his associates, and every other crime and atrocity as the inheritors of the Mongols have followed the path of imperial Japan.

Since Iraqis attribute the accumulated evil of the whole primarily to the invasion, it follows that they accept the core principle of Nuremberg. Presumably, they were not asked whether their acceptance of American values extended to the conclusion of the chief prosecutor for the United States, US Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson, who forcefully insisted that the Tribunal would be mere farce if we do not apply its principles to ourselves.

Needless to say, US elite opinion, shared with the West generally, flatly rejects the lofty American values professed at Nuremberg, indeed regards them as bordering on obscene. All of this provides an instructive illustration of some of the reality that lies behind the famous “clash of civilizations.”

A January poll by World Learning/Aspen Institute found that “75 percent of Americans believe U.S. foreign policy is driving dissatisfaction with America abroad and more than 60 percent believe that dislike of American values (39 percent) and of the American people (26 percent) is also to blame.” The perception is inaccurate, fed by propaganda. There is little dislike of Americans, and dissatisfaction abroad does not derive from “dislike of American values,” but rather from acceptance of these values, and recognition that they are rejected by the US government and elite opinion. Other “good news” had been reported by General Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker during the extravaganza staged on 9/11. Perhaps we should call the commander “Lord Petraeus,” in the light of the reverence displayed by the media and commentators on this occasion. Parenthetically, only a cynic might imagine that the timing was intended to insinuate the Bush-Cheney claims of links between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, so that by committing the “supreme international crime” they were defending the world against terror – which increased sevenfold as a result of the invasion, according to an analysis by terrorism specialists Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, using data of the government-linked Rand corporation.

Petraeus and Crocker provided figures to show that the Iraqi government had greatly accelerated spending on reconstruction, reaching a quarter of the funding set aside for that purpose. Good news indeed – until it was investigated by the Government Accountability Office, which found that the actual figure was one-sixth what Petraeus and Crocker reported, a 50 percent decline from the preceding year.

More good news is the decline in sectarian violence, attributable in part to the success of the ethnic cleansing that Iraqis blame on the invasion; there are simply fewer people to kill in the cleansed areas. But it is also attributable to Washington’s decision to support the tribal groups that had organized to drive out Iraqi al-Qaeda, to an increase in US troops, and to the decision of the Mahdi army to stand down and consolidate its gains – what the press calls “halting aggression.” By definition, only Iraqis can commit aggression in Iraq (or Iranians, of course).

It is not impossible that Petraeus’s strategy might approach the success of the Russians in Chechnya, where fighting is now “limited and sporadic, and Grozny is in the midst of a building boom” after having been reduced to rubble by the Russian attack, C.J. Chivers reports in the New York Times, also on September 11. Perhaps some day Baghdad and Falluja too will enjoy “electricity restored in many neighborhoods, new businesses opening and the city’s main streets repaved,” as in booming Grozny. Possible, but dubious, in the light of the likely consequence of creating warlord armies that may be the seeds of even greater sectarian violence, adding to the “accumulated evil” of the aggression.

If Russians rise to the moral level of liberal intellectuals in the West, they must be saluting Putin's "wisdom and statesmanship" for his achievements in Chechnya.

A few weeks after the Pentagon's "good news" from Iraq, New York Times military-Iraq expert Michael Gordon wrote a reasoned and comprehensive review of the options on Iraq policy facing the candidates for the presidential election. One voice is missing: Iraqis. Their preference is not rejected. Rather, it is not worthy of mention. And it seems that there was no notice of the fact. That makes sense on the usual tacit assumption of almost all discourse on international affairs: we own the world, so what does it matter what others think? They are "unpeople," to borrow the term used by British diplomatic historian Mark Curtis in his work on Britain's crimes of empire – very illuminating work, therefore deeply hidden. Routinely, Americans join Iraqis in un-peoplehood. Their preferences too provide no options.

To cite another instructive example, consider Gerald Seib's reflections in the Wall Street Journal on "Time to Look Ahead in Iraq." Seib is impressed that debate over Iraq is finally beginning to go beyond the "cartoon-like characteristics" of what has come before and is now beginning to confront "the right issue," the "more profound questions":

The more profound questions are the long-term ones. Regardless of how things evolve in a new president's first year, the U.S. needs to decide what its lasting role should be in Iraq. Is Iraq to be a permanent American military outpost, and will American troops need to be on hand in some fashion to help defend Iraq's borders for a decade or more, as some Iraqi officials themselves have suggested? Will the U.S. see Iraq more broadly as a base for exerting American political and diplomatic influence in the broader Middle East, or is that a mistake? Is it better to have American troops just over the horizon, in Kuwait or ships in the Persian Gulf? Driving these military considerations is the political question of what kind of government the U.S. can accept in Iraq...

No soft-headed nonsense here about Iraqis having a voice on the lasting role of the US in Iraq or on the kind of government they would prefer.

Seib should not be confused with the columnists in the Journal's "opinion pages." He is a rational centrist analyst, who could easily be writing in the liberal media or journals of the Democratic Party like The New Republic. And he grasps quite accurately the fundamental principles guiding the political class.

Such reflections of the imperial mentality are deeply rooted. To pick examples almost at random, in December 2007 Panama declared a Day of Mourning to commemorate the US invasion of 1989, which killed thousands of poor people, so Panamanian human rights groups concluded, when Bush I bombed the El Chorillo slums and other civilian targets. The Day of Mourning of the unpeople scarcely merited a flicker of an eyelid here. It is also of no interest that Bush's invasion of Panama, another textbook example of aggression, appears to have been more deadly than Saddam's invasion of Kuwait a few months later. An unfair comparison of course; after all, we own the world, and he didn't. It is also of no interest that Washington's greatest fear was that Saddam would imitate its behavior in Panama, installing a client government and then leaving, the main reason why Washington blocked diplomacy with almost complete media cooperation; the sole serious exception I know of was Knut Royce in Long Island Newsday. Though the December Day of Mourning passed with little notice, there was a lead story when the Panamanian National Assembly was opened by president Pedro Gonzalez, who is charged by Washington with killing American soldiers during a protest against President Bush's visit two years after his invasion, charges dismissed by Panamanian courts but still upheld by the owner of the world.

To take another illustration of the depth of the imperial mentality, New York Times correspondent Elaine Sciolino writes that “Iran’s intransigence [about nuclear enrichment] appears to be defeating attempts by the rest of the world to curtail Tehran’s nuclear ambitions.” The rest of the world happens to exclude the large majority of the world: the non-aligned movement, which forcefully endorses Iran’s right to enrich Uranium, in accord with the Non-proliferation treaty (NPT). But they are not part of the world, since they do not reflexively accept US orders.

We might tarry for a moment to ask whether there is any solution to the US-Iran confrontation over nuclear weapons. Here is one idea: (1) Iran should have the right to develop nuclear energy, but not weapons, in accord with the NPT. (2) A nuclear weapons-free zone should be established in the region, including Iran, Israel, and US forces deployed there. (3) The US should accept the NPT. (4) The US should end threats against Iran, and turn to diplomacy.

The proposals are not original. These are the preferences of the overwhelming majority of Americans, and also Iranians, in polls by World Public Opinion, which found that Americans and Iranians agree on basic issues. At a forum at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies when the polls were released a year ago, Joseph Cirincione, senior vice president for National Security and International Policy at the Center for American Progress, said the polls showed “the common sense of both the American people and the Iranian people, [who] seem to be able to rise above the rhetoric of their own leaders to find common sense solutions to some of the most crucial questions” facing the two nations, favoring pragmatic, diplomatic solutions to their differences. The results suggest that if the US and Iran were functioning democratic societies, this very dangerous confrontation could probably be resolved peaceably.

The opinions of Americans on this issue too are not regarded as worthy of consideration; they are not options for candidates or commentators. They were apparently not even reported, perhaps considered too dangerous because of what they reveal about the “democratic deficit” in the United States, and about the extremism of the political class across the spectrum. If public opinion were to be mentioned as an option, it would be ridiculed as “politically impossible”; or perhaps offered as another reason why “The public must be put in its place,” as Lippmann sternly admonished.

There is more to say about the preference of Americans on Iran. Point (1) above, as noted, happens to accord with the stand of the large majority of the world. With regard to point (2), the US and its allies have accepted it, formally at least. UN Security Council Resolution 687 commits them to “the goal of establishing in the Middle East a zone free from weapons of mass destruction and all missiles for their delivery and the objective of a global ban on chemical weapons” (Article 14). The US and UK have a particularly strong commitment to this principle, since it was this Resolution that they appealed to in their efforts to provide a thin legal cover for their invasion of Iraq, claiming that Iraq had not lived up to the conditions in 687 on disarmament. As for point (3), 80 percent of Americans feel that Washington should live up to its commitment under the NPT to undertake “good faith” efforts to eliminate nuclear weapons entirely, a legal commitment as the World Court determined, explicitly rejected by the Bush administration. Turning to point (4), Americans are calling on the government to adhere to international law, under which the threats of violence that are voiced by all current candidates are a crime, in violation of the UN Charter. The call for negotiations and diplomacy on the part of the American unpeople extends to Cuba, and has for decades, but is again dismissed by both political parties.

The likelihood that functioning democracy might alleviate severe dangers is regularly illustrated. To take another current example, of great importance, there is now justified concern

about Russian reactions to US aggressive militarism. That includes the extension of NATO to the East by Clinton in violation of solemn pledges to Gorbachev, but particularly the vast expansion of offensive military capacity under Bush, and more recently, the plans to place “missile defense” installations in Eastern Europe. Putin is ridiculed for claiming that they are a threat to Russia. But US strategic analysts recognize that he has a point. The programs are designed in a way that Russian planners would have to regard as a threat to the Russian deterrent, hence calling for more advanced and lethal offensive military capacity to neutralize them (see George Lewis and Theodore Postol, “European Missile Defense: The Technological Basis of Russian Concerns,” *Arms Control Today*, Oct. 2007). A new arms race is feared.

Recent polls under the direction of strategic analysts John Steinbrunner and Nancy Gallagher “reveal a striking disparity between what U.S. and Russian leaders are doing and what their publics desire,” and again indicate that if these countries were functioning democracies, in which the ignorant and meddlesome outsiders had a voice, the increasingly fragile US-Russian strategic relationship could be repaired, a matter of species survival in this case.

In a free press, all of these matters, and many more like them, would merit regular prominent headlines and in-depth analysis.

Having brought up Iran, we might as well turn briefly to the third member of the famous Axis of Evil, North Korea. The official story right now is that after having been forced to accept an agreement on dismantling its nuclear weapons facilities, North Korea is again trying to evade its commitments in its usual devious way – “good news” for superhawks like John Bolton, who have held all along that they understand only the mailed fist and will exploit negotiations only to trick us. A *New York Times* headline reads: “U.S. Sees Stalling by North Korea on Nuclear Pact” (January 19); the article by Helene Cooper details the charges. In the last paragraph we discover that the US has not fulfilled its pledges. North Korea has received only 15% of the fuel that was promised by the US and others, and the US has not undertaken steps to improve diplomatic relations, as promised. Several weeks later (Feb. 6), in the *McClatchey* press Kevin Hall reported that the chief US negotiator with North Korea, Christopher Hill, confirmed in Senate Hearings that “North Korea has slowed the dismantling of its nuclear reactor because it hasn’t received the amount of fuel oil it was promised.”

As we learn from the specialist literature, and asides here and there, this is a consistent pattern. North Korea may have the worst government in the world, but they have been pursuing a pragmatic tit-for-tat policy on negotiations with the United States. When the US takes an aggressive and threatening stance, they react accordingly. When the US moves towards some form of accommodation, so do they. When Bush came into office, both North Korea and the US were bound by the Framework Agreement of 1994. Neither was fully in accord with its commitments, but the agreement was largely being observed. North Korea had stopped testing long-range missiles. It had perhaps 1–2 bombs worth of plutonium, and was verifiably not making more. After 7 Bush years of confrontation, North Korea has 8–10 bombs and long-range missiles, and it is developing plutonium. The Clinton administration, Korea specialist Bruce Cumings reports, “had also worked out a plan to buy out, indirectly, the North’s medium and long-range missiles; it was ready to be signed in 2000 but Bush let it fall by the wayside and today the North retains all its formidable missile capability.”

The reasons for Bush’s achievements are well understood. The Axis of Evil speech, a serious blow to Iranian democrats and reformers as they have stressed, also put North Korea on notice that the US is returning to its threatening stance. Washington released intelligence reports about

North Korean clandestine program; these were conceded to be dubious or baseless when the latest negotiations began in 2007, probably, commentators speculated, because it was feared that weapons inspectors might enter North Korea and the Iraq story would be repeated. North Korea responded by ratcheting up missile and weapons development.

In September 2005, under international pressure Washington agreed to turn to negotiations, within the six-power framework. They achieved substantial success. North Korea agreed to abandon “all nuclear weapons and existing weapons programs” and allow international inspections, in return for international aid and a non-aggression pledge from the U.S., with an agreement that the two sides would “respect each other’s sovereignty, exist peacefully together and take steps to normalize relations.” The ink was barely dry on the agreement when the Bush administration renewed the threat of force, also freezing North Korean funds in foreign banks and disbanding the consortium that was to provide North Korea with a light-water reactor consortium. Cumings alleges that “the sanctions were specifically designed to destroy the September pledges [and] to head off an accommodation between Washington and Pyongyang.”

After Washington scuttled the promising September 2005 agreements, North Korea returned to weapons and missile development and carried out a test of a nuclear weapon. Again under international pressure, and with its foreign policy in tatters, Washington returned to negotiations, leading to an agreement, though it is now dragging its feet on fulfilling its commitments.

Writing in *Le Monde diplomatique* last October, Cumings concludes that “Bush had presided over the most asinine Korea policy in history. These last years, relations between Washington and Seoul have deteriorated drastically. By commission and omission, Bush trampled on the norms of the historic US relationship with Seoul while creating a dangerous situation with Pyongyang.”

Charges against North Korea escalated in September 2007, when Israel bombed an obscure site in northern Syria, an “act of war,” as at least one American correspondent recognized (Seymour Hersh). Charges at once surfaced that Israel attacked a nuclear installation being developed with the help of North Korea, an attack compared with Israel’s bombing of the Osirak reactor in Iraq in 1981 – which, according to available evidence, convinced Saddam Hussein to initiate his nuclear weapons program. The September 2007 charges are dubious. Hersh’s tentative conclusion after detailed investigation is that the Israeli actions may have been intended as another threat against Iran: the US-Israel have you in their bombsights. However this may be, there is some important background that should be recalled.

In 1993, Israel and North Korea were on the verge of an agreement: Israel would recognize North Korea, and in return, North Korea would end any weapons-related involvement in the Middle East. The significance for Israeli security is clear. Clinton ordered the deal terminated, and Israel had no choice but to obey. Ever since its fateful decision in 1971 and the years that followed to reject peace and security in favor of expansion, Israel has been compelled to rely on the US for protection, hence to obey Washington’s commands.

Whether or not there is any truth to current charges about North Korea and Syria, it appears that the threat to the security of Israel, and the region, could have been avoided by peaceful means, had security been a high priority.

Let us return to first member of Axis of Evil, Iraq. Washington’s expectations are outlined in a Declaration of Principles between the US and the US-backed Iraqi government last November. The Declaration allows US forces to remain indefinitely to “deter foreign aggression” and for internal security. The only aggression in sight is from the United States, but that is not aggression, by definition. And only the most naive will entertain the thought that the US would sustain the

government by force if it moved towards independence, going too far in strengthening relations with Iran, for example. The Declaration also committed Iraq to facilitate and encourage “the flow of foreign investments to Iraq, especially American investments.”

The unusually brazen expression of imperial will was underscored when Bush quietly issued yet another signing statement, declaring that he will reject crucial provisions of congressional legislation that he had just signed, including the provision that forbids spending taxpayer money “to establish any military installation or base for the purpose of providing for the permanent stationing of United States Armed Forces in Iraq” or “to exercise United States control of the oil resources of Iraq.” Shortly before, the New York Times had reported that Washington “insists that the Baghdad government give the United States broad authority to conduct combat operations,” a demand that “faces a potential buzz saw of opposition from Iraq, with its deep sensitivities about being seen as a dependent state.” More third world irrationality.

In brief, Iraq must agree to allow permanent US military installations (called “enduring” in the preferred Orwellism), grant the US the right to conduct combat operations freely, and ensure US control over oil resources of Iraq while privileging US investors. It is of some interest that these reports did not influence discussion about the reasons for the US invasion of Iraq. These were never obscure, but any effort to spell them out was dismissed with falsification and ridicule. Now the reasons are openly conceded, eliciting no retraction or even reflection.

Iraqis are not alone in believing that national reconciliation is possible. A Canadian-run poll found that Afghans are hopeful about the future and favor the presence of Canadian and other foreign troops – the “good news,” that made the headlines. The small print suggests some qualifications. Only 20% “think the Taliban will prevail once foreign troops leave.” Three-fourths support negotiations between the US-backed Karzai government and the Taliban, and more than half favor a coalition government. The great majority therefore strongly disagree with US-Canadian stance, and believe that peace is possible with a turn towards peaceful means.

Though the question was not asked, it is reasonable to surmise that the foreign presence is favored for aid and reconstruction. More evidence in support of this conjecture is provided by reports about the progress of reconstruction in Afghanistan six years after the US invasion. Six percent of the population now have electricity, AP reports, primarily in Kabul, which is artificially wealthy because of the huge foreign presence. There, “the rich, powerful, and well connected” have electricity, but few others, in contrast to the 1980s under Russian occupation, when “the city had plentiful power” – and women in Kabul were relatively free under the occupation and the Russian-backed Najibullah government that followed, probably more so than now, though they did have to worry about attacks from Reagan’s favorites, like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who got his kicks from throwing acid in the faces of young women he thought were improperly dressed.

These matters were discussed at the time by Rasil Basu, UN Development Program senior advisor to the Afghan government for women’s development (1986–88). She reported “enormous strides” for women under the Russian occupation: “illiteracy declined from 98% to 75%, and they were granted equal rights with men in civil law, and in the Constitution... Unjust patriarchal relations still prevailed in the workplace and in the family with women occupying lower level sex-type jobs. But the strides [women] took in education and employment were very impressive...In Kabul I saw great advances in women’s education and employment. Women were in evidence in industry, factories, government offices, professions and the media. With large numbers of men killed or disabled, women shouldered the responsibility of both family and country. I met a woman who specialized in war medicine which dealt with trauma and reconstructive surgery for

the war-wounded. This represented empowerment to her. Another woman was a road engineer. Roads represented freedom – an escape from the oppressive patriarchal structures.”

By 1988, however, Basu “could see the early warning signs” as Russian troops departed and the fundamentalist Islamist extremists favored by the Reagan administration took over, brushing aside the more moderate mujahideen groups. “Saudi Arabian and American arms and ammunition gave the fundamentalists a vital edge over the moderates,” providing them with military hardware used, “according to Amnesty International, to target unarmed civilians, most of them women and children.” Then followed much worse horrors as the US-Saudi favorites overthrew the Najibullah government. The suffering of the population was so extreme that the Taliban were welcomed when they drove out Reagan’s freedom fighters. Another chapter in the triumph of Reaganite reactionary ultra-nationalism, worshipped today by those dedicated to defaming the honorable term “conservative.”

Basu is a distinguished advocate for women’s rights, including a long career with the UN during which she drafted the World Plan of Action for Women and the draft Programme for the Women’s Decade, 1975–85, adopted at the Mexico City Conference (1975) and Copenhagen Conference (1980). But her words were not welcome in the US. Her 1988 report was submitted to the Washington Post, New York Times, and Ms. magazine. But rejected. Also rejected were Basu’s recommendation of practical steps that the West, particularly the US, could take to protect women’s rights.

Highly relevant in this connection are the important investigations by Nikolai Lanine, a former soldier in the Russian army in Afghanistan, bringing out the striking comparisons between Russian commentary during the occupation and that of their NATO successors today.

These and further considerations suggest that Afghans really would welcome a foreign presence devoted to aid and reconstruction, as we can read between the lines in the polls.

There are, of course, numerous questions about polls in countries under foreign military occupation, particularly in places like southern Afghanistan. But the results of the Iraq and Afghan studies conform to earlier ones, and should not be dismissed.

Recent polls in Pakistan also provide “good news” for Washington. Fully 5% favor allowing US or other foreign troops to enter Pakistan “to pursue or capture al Qaeda fighters.” 9% favor allowing US forces “to pursue and capture Taliban insurgents who have crossed over from Afghanistan.” Almost half favor allowing Pakistani troops to do so. And only a little over 80% regard the US military presence in Asia and Afghanistan as a threat to Pakistan, while an overwhelming majority believe that the US is trying to harm the Islamic world.

The good news is that these results are a considerable improvement over October 2001, when a Newsweek poll found that “Eighty-three percent of Pakistanis surveyed say they side with the Taliban, with a mere 3 percent expressing support for the United States,” while over 80 percent described Osama bin Laden as a guerrilla and 6 percent a terrorist.

Events elsewhere in early 2008 might also turn out to be “good news” for Washington. In January, in a remarkable act of courageous civil disobedience, tens of thousands of the tortured people of Gaza broke out of the prison to which they had been confined by the US-Israel alliance, with the usual timid European support, as punishment for the crime of voting the wrong way in a free election in January 2006. It was instructive to see the front-pages with stories reporting the brutal US response to a genuinely free election alongside others lauding the Bush administration for its noble dedication to “democracy promotion,” or sometimes gently chiding it because it was

going too far in its idealism, failing to recognize that the unpeople of the Middle East are too backward to appreciate democracy – another principle that traces back to “Wilsonian idealism.”

This glaring illustration of elite hatred and contempt for democracy is routinely reported, apparently with no awareness of what it signifies. To pick an illustration almost at random, Cam Simpson reports in the Wall St Journal (Feb. 8) that despite the harsh US-Israeli punishment of Gaza, and “flooding the West Bank’s Western-backed Fatah-led government with diplomatic and economic support [to] persuade Palestinians in both territories to embrace Fatah and isolate Hamas,” the opposite is happening: Hamas’s popularity is increasing in the West Bank. As Simpson casually explains, “Hamas won Palestinian elections in January 2006, prompting the Israeli government and the Bush administration to lead a world-wide boycott of the Palestinian Authority,” along with much more severe measures. The goal, unconcealed, is to punish the miscreants who fail to grasp the essential principle of democracy: “Do what we say, or else.”

The US-backed Israel punishment increased through early 2006, and escalated sharply after the capture of an Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, in June. That act was bitterly denounced in the West. Israel’s vicious response was regarded as understandable if perhaps excessive. These thoughts were untroubled by the dramatic demonstration that they were sheer hypocrisy. The day before the capture of Corporal Shalit on the front lines of the army attacking Gaza, Israeli forces entered Gaza City and kidnapped two civilians, the Muammar brothers, taking them to Israel (in violation of the Geneva Conventions), where they disappeared into Israel’s prison population, including almost 1000 held without charge, often for long periods. The kidnapping, a far more serious crime than the capture of Shalit, received a few scattered lines of comment, but no noticeable criticism. That is perhaps understandable, because it is not news. US-backed Israeli forces have been engaged in such practices, and far more brutal ones, for decades. And in any event, as a client state Israel inherits the right of criminality from its master.

The US-Israel attempted to organize a military coup to install their favored faction. That was also reported frankly, considered entirely legitimate, if not praiseworthy. The coup was preempted by Hamas, which took over the Gaza Strip. Israeli savagery reached new heights, while in the West Bank, US-backed Israeli operations carried forward the steady process of taking over valuable territory and resources, breaking up the fragments remaining to Palestinians by settlements and huge infrastructure projects, imprisoning the whole by takeover of the Jordan Valley, and expanding settlement and development in Jerusalem in violation of Security Council orders that go back 40 years to ensure that there will be no more than a token Palestinian presence in the historic center of Palestinian cultural, commercial, and social life. Non-violent reactions by Palestinians and solidarity groups are viciously crushed with rare exceptions. And scarcely any notice. Even when Nobel laureate Mairead Corrigan Maguire was shot and gassed by Israeli troops while participating in a vigil protesting the Separation Wall – now better termed an annexation wall – there was apparently not a word in the English-language press, outside of Ireland.

Israel’s settlement and development programs on the West Bank, including occupied East Jerusalem, are flagrantly illegal, in violation of numerous Security Council resolutions and the authoritative judgment by the International Court of Justice on the Separation Wall, with the agreement of US Justice Buergeenthal in a separate declaration.

Criminal actions by Palestinians, such as Qassam rockets fired from Gaza, are angrily condemned in the West. The far more violent and destructive Israeli actions sometimes elicit polite clucking of tongues if they exceed approved levels of state terror. Invariably Israel’s actions – for

which of course the US shares direct responsibility – are portrayed as retaliation, perhaps excessive. Another way of looking at the cycle of violence is that Qassam rockets are retaliation for Israel's unceasing crimes in the West Bank, which is not separable from Gaza except by US-Israeli fiat. But standard racist-ultranationalist assumptions exclude that interpretation.

International humanitarian law is quite explicit on these matters. Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1950 states that “No protected person may be punished for an offence he or she has not personally committed. Collective penalties and likewise all measures of intimidation or of terrorism are prohibited. Reprisals against protected persons and their property are prohibited.” Gazans are unambiguously “protected persons” under Israeli military occupation. The Hague Convention of 1907 also declares that “No general penalty, pecuniary or otherwise, can be inflicted on the population on account of the acts of individuals for which it cannot be regarded as collectively responsible” (Article 50). Furthermore, High Contracting Parties to the Geneva Convention are bound to “respect and to ensure respect for the present Convention in all circumstances,” including of course the Israel and the US, which is obligated to prevent, or to punish, the serious breaches of the Convention by its own leaders and its client. When the media report, as they regularly do, that “Israel hopes [reducing supplies of fuel and electricity to the Gaza Strip] will create popular pressure to force the Hamas rulers of Gaza and other militant groups to stop the rocket fire” (Stephen Erlanger, NYT, Jan. 31), they are calmly informing us that Israel is in grave breach of international humanitarian law, as is the US for not ensuring respect for law on the part of its client. When the Israeli High Court grants legitimacy to these measures, as it has, it is adding another page to its ugly record of subordination to state power. Israel's leading legal journalist, Moshe Negbi, knew what he was doing when he entitled his despairing review of the record of the courts *We were like Sodom* (Kisdom Hayyinu).

International law cannot be enforced against powerful states, except by their own populations. That is always a difficult task, particularly so when articulate opinion and the Courts declare crime to be legitimate.

In January, the Hamas-led prison break allowed Gazans for the first time in years to go shopping in nearby Egyptian towns, plainly a serious criminal act because it slightly undermines US-Israeli strangulation of these unpeople. But the powerful quickly recognized that these events too could turn into “good news.” Israeli deputy defense minister Matan Vilnai “said openly what some senior Israeli officials would only say anonymously,” Stephen Erlanger reported in the *New York Times*: the prison-break might allow Israel to rid itself of any responsibility for Gaza after having reduced it to devastation and misery in 40 years of brutal occupation, keeping it only for target practice, and of course under full military occupation, its borders sealed by Israeli forces on land, sea and air, apart from an opening to Egypt (in the unlikely event that Egypt would agree).

That appealing prospect would complement Israel's ongoing criminal actions in the West Bank, carefully designed along the lines already outlined to ensure that there will be no viable future for Palestinians there. At the same time Israel can turn to solving its internal “demographic problem,” the presence of non-Jews in a Jewish state. The ultra-nationalist Knesset member Avigdor Lieberman was harshly condemned as a racist in Israel when he advanced the idea of forcing Arab citizens of Israel into a derisory “Palestinian state,” presenting this to the world as a “land swap.” His proposal is slowly being incorporated into the mainstream. *Israel National News* reported in April that Knesset member Otniel Schneller of the governing party Kadima, “considered to be one of the people closest and most loyal to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert,” proposed a plan

that “appears very similar to one touted by Yisrael Beiteinu leader Avigdor Lieberman,” though Schneller says his plan would be “more gradual,” and the Arabs affected “will remain citizens of Israel even though their territory will belong to the [Palestinian Authority and] they will not be allowed to resettle in other areas of Israel.” Of course the unpeople are not consulted.

In December, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, the last hope of many Israeli doves, adopted the same position. An eventual Palestinian state, she suggested, would “be the national answer to the Palestinians” in the territories and those “who live in different refugee camps or in Israel.” With Israeli Arabs dispatched to their natural place, Israel would then achieve the long-sought goal of freeing itself from the Arab taint, a stand that is familiar enough in US history, for example in Thomas Jefferson’s hope, never achieved, that the rising empire of liberty would be free of “blot or mixture,” red or black.

For Israel, this is no small matter. Despite heroic efforts by its apologists, it is not easy to conceal the fact that a “democratic Jewish state” is no more acceptable to liberal opinion than a “democratic Christian state” or a “democratic white state,” as long as the blot or mixture is not removed. Such notions could be tolerated if the religious/ethnic identification were mostly symbolic, like selecting an official day of rest. But in the case of Israel, it goes far beyond that. The most extreme departure from minimal democratic principles is the complex array of laws and bureaucratic arrangements designed to vest control of over 90 percent of the land in the hands of the Jewish National Fund, an organization committed to using charitable funds in ways that are “directly or indirectly beneficial to persons of Jewish religion, race or origin,” so its documents explain: “a public institution recognized by the Government of Israel and the World Zionist Organization as the exclusive instrument for the development of Israel’s lands,” restricted to Jewish use, in perpetuity (with marginal exceptions), and barred to non-Jewish labor (though the principle is often ignored for imported cheap labor). This radical violation of elementary civil rights, funded by all American citizens thanks to the tax-free status of the JNF, finally reached Israel’s High Court in 2000, in a case brought by an Arab couple who had been barred from the town of Katzir. The Court ruled in their favor, in a narrow decision, which seems to have been barely implemented. Seven years later, a young Arab couple was barred from the town of Rakefet, on state land, on grounds of “social incompatibility” (Scott Peterson, Washington Post, Dec. 20, 2007), a very rare report. Again, none of this is unfamiliar in the US. After all, it took a century before the 14th amendment was even formally recognized by the courts, and it still is far from implemented.

For Palestinians, there are now two options. One is that the US and Israel will abandon their unilateral rejectionism of the past 30 years and accept the international consensus on a two-state settlement, in accord with international law – and, incidentally, in accord with the wishes of a large majority of Americans. That is not impossible, though the two rejectionist states are working hard to render it so. A settlement along these lines came close in negotiations in Taba Egypt in January 2001, and might have been reached, participants reported, had Israeli Prime Minister Barak not called off the negotiations prematurely. The framework for these negotiations was Clinton’s “parameters” of December 2000, issued after he recognized that the Camp David proposals earlier that year were unacceptable. It is commonly claimed that Arafat rejected the parameters. However, as Clinton made clear and explicit, both sides had accepted the parameters, in both cases with reservations, which they sought to reconcile in Taba a few weeks later, and apparently almost succeeded. There have been unofficial negotiations since that have produced similar proposals. Though possibilities diminish as US-Israeli settlement and infrastructure

programs proceed, they have not been eliminated. By now the international consensus is near universal, supported by the Arab League, Iran, Hamas, in fact every relevant actor apart from the US and Israel.

A second possibility is the one that the US-Israel are actually implementing, along the lines just described. Palestinians will then be consigned to their Gaza prison and to West Bank cantons, perhaps joined by Israeli Arab citizens as well if the Lieberman-Schneller-Livni plans are implemented. For the occupied territories, that will realize the intentions expressed by Moshe Dayan to his Labor Party cabinet colleagues in the early years of the occupation: Israel should tell the Palestinian refugees in the territories that “we have no solution, you shall continue to live like dogs, and whoever wishes may leave, and we will see where this process leads.” The general conception was articulated by Labor Party leader Haim Herzog, later President, in 1972: “I do not deny the Palestinians a place or stand or opinion on every matter...But certainly I am not prepared to consider them as partners in any respect in a land that has been consecrated in the hands of our nation for thousands of years. For the Jews of this land there cannot be any partner.”

A third possibility would be a binational state. That was a feasible option in the early years of the occupation, perhaps a federal arrangement leading to eventual closer integration as circumstances permit. There was even some support for similar ideas within Israeli military intelligence, but the grant of any political rights to Palestinians was shot down by the governing Labor Party. Proposals to that effect were made (by me in particular), but elicited only hysteria. The opportunity was lost by the mid-1970s, when Palestinian national rights reached the international agenda, and the two-state consensus took shape. The first US veto of a two-state resolution at the Security Council, advanced by the major Arab states, was in 1976. Washington’s rejectionist stance continues to the present, with the exception of Clinton’s last month in office. Some form of unitary state remains a distant possibility through agreement among the parties, as a later stage in a process that begins with a two-state settlement. There is no other form of advocacy of such an outcome, if we understand advocacy to include a process leading from here to there; mere proposal, in contrast, is free for the asking.

It is of some interest, perhaps, that when advocacy of a unitary binational state perhaps had some prospects, it was anathema, while today, when it is completely unfeasible, it is greeted with respect and is advocated in leading journals. The reason, perhaps, is that it serves to undermine the prospect of a two-state settlement.

Advocates of a binational (one-state) settlement argue that on its present course, Israel will become a pariah state like apartheid South Africa, with a large Palestinian population deprived of rights, laying the basis for an civil rights struggle leading to a unitary democratic state There is no reason to believe that the US, Israel, or any other Western state would allow anything like that to happen. Rather, they will proceed exactly as they are now doing in the territories today, taking no responsibility for Palestinians who are left to rot in the various prisons and cantons that may dot the landscape, far from the eyes of Israelis travelling on their segregated superhighways to their well-subsidized West Bank towns and suburbs, controlling the crucial water resources of the region, and benefiting from their ties with US and other international corporations that are evidently pleased to see a loyal military power at the periphery of the crucial Middle East region, with an advanced high tech economy and close links to Washington.

Turning elsewhere, major polls are not such good news for conventional Western doctrine. Few theses are upheld with such passion and unanimity as the doctrine that Hugo Chavez is a

tyrant bent on destroying freedom and democracy in Venezuela, and beyond. The annual polls on Latin American opinion by the respected Chilean polling agency Latinobarometro therefore are “bad news.” The most recent (November 2007) had the same irritating results as before. Venezuela ranks second, close behind first-place Uruguay, in satisfaction with democracy, and third in satisfaction with leaders. It ranks first in assessment of the current and future economic situation, equality and justice, and education standards. True, it ranks only 11th in favoring a market economy, but even with this flaw, overall it ranks highest in Latin America on matters of democracy, justice, and optimism, far above US favorites Colombia, Peru, Mexico and Chile.

Latin America analyst Mark Turner writes that he “found an almost total English speaking blackout about the results of this important snapshot of [Latin American] views and opinions.” That has also been true in the past. Turner also found the usual exception: there were reports of the finding that Chavez is about as unpopular as Bush in Latin America, something that will come as little surprise to those who have seen some of the bitterly hostile coverage to which Chavez is subjected, in the Venezuelan press as well, an oddity in this looming dictatorship. Editorial offices have been well aware of the polls, but evidently understand what may pass through doctrinal filters.

Also receiving scant notice was a declaration of President Chavez on Dec. 31, 2007, granting amnesty to leaders of the U.S.-backed military coup that kidnapped the president, disbanded parliament and the Supreme Court and all other democratic institutions, but was soon overturned by a popular uprising. That the West would have followed Chavez’s model in a comparable case is, to put it mildly, rather unlikely.

Perhaps all of this provides some further insight into the “clash of civilizations” – a question that should be prominent in our minds, I think.

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Noam Chomsky
“Good News,” Iraq and Beyond
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