

Where's the Iraqi voice?

Noam Chomsky

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The US occupying army in Iraq (euphemistically called the Multi-National Force-Iraq) carries out extensive studies of popular attitudes. Its December 2007 report of a study of focus groups was uncharacteristically upbeat.

The report concluded that the survey “provides very strong evidence” to refute the common view that “national reconciliation is neither anticipated nor possible”. On the contrary, 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 deYoung reports in *The Washington Post*.

The “shared beliefs” were identified in the report. To quote deYoung, “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, responsible for the internal violence, withdraw and leave Iraq to Iraqis.

The report did not mention other good news: Iraqis appear to accept the highest values of Americans, as established at the Nuremberg Tribunal — specifically, that aggression — “invasion by its armed forces” by one state “of the territory of another state” — is “the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole”. The chief US prosecutor at Nuremberg, Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson, forcefully insisted that the Tribunal would be mere farce if we do not apply its principles to ourselves.

Unlike Iraqis, the United States, indeed the West generally, rejects the lofty values professed at Nuremberg, an interesting indication of the substance of the famous “clash of civilisations”.

More good news was reported by Gen David Petraeus and Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker during the extravaganza staged on September 11, 2007. 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 last year by terrorism specialists Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank.

Petraeus and Crocker provided figures to show that the Iraqi government was greatly accelerating 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 of what Petraeus and Crocker reported, a 50 per cent decline from the preceding year.

More good news is the decline in sectarian violence, attributable in part to the success of the murderous ethnic cleansing that Iraqis blame on the invasion; there are fewer targets for sectarian killing. But it is also attributable to Washington's decision to support the tribal groups that had organised to drive out Iraqi Al Qaeda, and to an increase in US troops.

It is possible that Petraeus's strategy may 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, CJ Chivers reports in the New York Times last September.

Perhaps some day Baghdad and Fallujah too will enjoy "electricity restored in many neighbourhoods, new businesses opening and the city's main streets repaved", as in booming Grozny. Possible, but dubious, considering 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. Iraqis are not alone in believing that national reconciliation is possible. A Canadian-run poll found that Afghans are hopeful about the future and favour the presence of Canadian and other foreign troops — the "good news" that made the headlines.

The small print suggests some qualifications. Only 20 per cent "think the Taleban will prevail once foreign troops leave". Three-quarters support negotiations between the US-backed Karzai government and the Taleban, and over half favour a coalition government. The great majority therefore strongly disagree with the US-Canadian stance, and believe that peace is possible with a turn towards peaceful means. Though the question was not asked in the poll, it seems a reasonable surmise that the foreign presence is favoured for aid and reconstruction.

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 per cent favour allowing US or other foreign troops to enter Pakistan "to pursue or capture Al Qaeda fighters". Nine per cent favour allowing US forces "to pursue and capture Taleban insurgents who have crossed over from Afghanistan".

Almost half favour allowing Pakistani troops to do so. And only a little more than 80 per cent regard the US military presence in Asia and Afghanistan as a threat to Pakistan, while an overwhelming majority believe that the United States 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 per cent of Pakistanis surveyed say they side with the Taleban, with a mere three per cent expressing support for the United States," and over 80 per cent described Osama bin Laden as a guerrilla and six per cent a terrorist.

Amid the outpouring of good news from across the region, there is now much earnest debate among political candidates, government officials and commentators concerning the options available to the US in Iraq. One voice is consistently missing: that of Iraqis. Their "shared beliefs" are well known, as in the past. But they cannot be permitted to choose their own path any more than young children can. Only the conquerors have that right.

Perhaps here too there are some lessons about the "clash of civilisations".

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