

The waters of solidarity: On the brink of civil war

by [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [April 4, 2006](#) issue

The volatile cultural divisions and blowback inevitabilities that the Bush administration ignored on its march to war have pushed Iraq to the edge of civil war. Much of Iraq's Sunni population supports the insurgency, the Shi'ite militia movement is growing and increasingly deadly, and Iraq has become a magnet for foreign terrorists. Ironically, in the 1950s, the CIA invented the term *blowback* as a marker for the ricochet effect of its covert actions. Since then the term has come to signify the backlash and other unintended consequences of intervening in foreign countries.

For three years the U.S. has coped with a blowback nightmare in Iraq; now it is teetering on the edge of something even worse. Meanwhile the architects of the war still want to attack Iran and Syria, but find themselves enmeshed in the grim consequences of invading Iraq.

The U.S. kills an average of 2,000 insurgents per month, yet between April 2003 and April 2005 the size of the insurgency grew from approximately 5,000 to 19,000 fighters, fewer than 5 percent of whom came from outside Iraq. Officials of the Bush administration fixate on the foreign fighters, since that is a relatively straightforward military and diplomatic problem. But the American occupier, lacking inside contacts and familiarity with the cultural signals, has little idea of what to do with the 95 percent of insurgents who attack American forces from within their own neighborhoods.

The U.S. wins virtually every firefight, but it can't defeat an unknown enemy that relies on IED (improvised explosive device) attacks. The U.S. cannot get Iraqi Sunnis to spy upon or kill fellow Sunnis, and Iraqi Shi'ite informers are not effective in Sunni provinces. And in a nation of Assyrians, Chaldeans, Kurds, Sunnis, Shi'a, Turkmen, Yazidis and a mixture of foreigners, American soldiers often cannot identify the provenance of those with whom they're dealing.

Bush officials are struggling to put the best face on a nightmare they did not see coming. At the outset they expected no insurgency at all; when it began they claimed that the resistance consisted of “Baathist dead-enders” and foreign radical jihadists; then they insisted that America must assert its will and interests against a surprisingly tenacious insurgency. Now, with the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra, the goal is to prevent civil war.

For two years, Bush officials assured us that the secular Kurds in Iraq would keep the Shi’ite religious parties in check while the majority Shi’ites would curtail Kurdish nationalism. In the end something like the opposite happened, as separatist Kurds and theocratic Shi’ites cut a deal favoring their own narrow interests at the expense of the nation. The Kurds got a constitution that supports regional autonomy, and the Shi’ites got Islam in the constitution and the legal system all the way through the Supreme Court.

The Shi’ite religious parties demand that laws governing marriage, divorce and inheritance be placed under religious authority and that the Iraqi constitution bar the enactment of any law contradicting the “universal tenets” of Islam. These tenets include the system of Islamic law (shari’a) governing public and private conduct that forbids a woman to leave her house without her husband’s permission, bars Muslims from bequeathing estates to non-Muslims, forbids conversions to other religions and prescribes the death penalty for any adult male who converts from Islam to another religion.

The Kurds want little to do with the Shi’ite Arabs and even less to do with Sunni Arabs, and they demand control over Kirkuk, an oil-rich city that Saddam Hussein Arabized through forced migration. Sooner or later the Kurds will undoubtedly insist on having their own nation. The Sunnis want a strong central government that distributes all oil revenues from Baghdad. More to the point, as the only “true” Muslims in Iraq and the nation’s traditional elite, they assume their right to govern and are terrified and appalled at the prospect of a Shi’ite government that is closely allied with the Shi’ite government of Iran.

The Bush administration has pressed Shi’ite and Kurd officials not to oppress the Sunnis or take de-Baathification to a disastrous extreme. But the longer the U.S. occupies Iraq with over 100,000 troops, the more it will fuel the resentment of Iraqi Sunnis toward the Shi’ite collaborators. The Sunnis are enraged at being invaded and humiliated, having their homes destroyed and being subjected to an alien

power. There is no prospect of significant Sunni cooperation with the Shi'ites and Kurds as long as Sunnis view those groups as collaborators with, and beneficiaries of, an occupying Western invader. If the Sunnis cannot find a way to become a nonhostile minority, the nation is doomed to an interminably miserable, violent future. The same thing is true if the Shi'ite death squads are not curbed and Shi'ite leaders insist on minimizing the Sunni role in the government.

The lack of maneuvering room in this conflict was on display during the Samarra bombing. On February 20, U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad criticized Shi'ite leaders for excluding the Sunnis and supporting the government death squads. The next day Shi'ite leaders furiously replied that Khalilzad had maligned them and the security establishment; incredibly, some of them also claimed that the U.S. sided with the Sunnis against the Shi'a. The following day the Golden Mosque was destroyed. By the day after that, while the country erupted in revenge killings, some Shi'ite leaders were charging that Khalilzad's remarks were a chief cause of the attack.

Iraq cannot get to a decent outcome if the Sunnis do not decide that the well-being of their own children is more important than revenge. And Iraq cannot get to a decent outcome if the Shi'ite militia groups and death squads continue to proliferate. There are now more than a thousand of them, and all three of the major Shi'ite factional movements have militias. The problem of Shi'ite death squad violence is so serious that it threatens to become a rationale for an unending American occupation.

The blowback against the occupation is escalating. Foreign terrorists in Iraq are thriving on the chaotic aftermath of the war, the lack of a stable government and police force, and the intense Sunni desire for revenge against the invaders and collaborators. They swim in a sea of disorder and alienated hostility, and the foreign occupation constantly refuels their frustration. They flourish in a failed state. As long as the Sunnis feel humiliated by a foreign occupier and threatened by Shi'ite rivals who employ death squads and collaborate with the invader, they will tolerate, protect and support the foreign jihadists.

The U.S. needs to rethink its role in refueling this violence. As long as it occupies Iraq, the Shi'ites will be viewed in the Sunni provinces as collaborators, and Sunni leaders will have to fear that any cooperation they extend to the occupier will brand them as traitors. When the occupiers pull back, the foreign jihadists will face

enemies on every side. No one will want them; the Sunni militants will have no further use of them and the foreign fighters will be hunted by Western and Arab security forces.

There are no good options for the U.S., which made a terrible mistake in invading in the first place. But American policymakers must recognize that our presence in Iraq is making a civil war inevitable.

The aggressively interventionist ideology that guides the Bush administration and the neoconservative wing of the Republican Party goes by several names: unipolarism, global dominion, American Greatness, liberal imperialism, full-spectrum dominance. Beginning as an especially militant form of anticommunism, it morphed into a vision of global empire after communism collapsed. It trades on the historic American myths of innocence, exceptionalism and manifest destiny, and offers a vision of what the United States should do with its unrivaled global power. In its most rhetorically seductive versions, it conflates the expansion of American power with the dream of universal democracy.

Before 9/11 the chief guardians of this ideology fantasized about overthrowing half a dozen Muslim or Arab governments. After 9/11 they demanded it, brandishing lists of governments and groups that had to be smashed. The neocons are known for overreaching and for pushing American policy in their direction. They “overreached” on Iraq for years. Having gotten their way, they have established a huge precedent that creates double-or-nothing dilemmas in Syria and Iran, and they are relentless in pressing the matter.

Some neocons call the global war on terror World War IV—counting the cold war as number three—and all of them insist that the U.S. did not overreach in Iraq. In their view, the problem is that the U.S. invaded Iraq without enough troops and backed away from installing a pro-American regime drawn from the Iraqi National Congress. For the neocons, 9/11 ended the debate about accepting an imperial self-understanding. Americans, they say, must give up denying that they have an empire and accept the burden of coping with anti-imperial blowback. If the situation in Iraq doesn’t improve or gets even worse, Iran is double or nothing. If things get better in Iraq, it becomes the showcase example of what needs to be done in Iran and Syria.

The unipolarist vision of “full spectrum dominance” was a staple of neoconservatives, the defense industry and Pentagon literature long before the

second Bush administration, but that administration holds the distinction of being the first to commit the United States to a doctrine of perpetual war. After 9/11 Bush and his advisers announced that the best way to eliminate radical Islamic terrorism is to smash sovereign governments in the Middle East. This prescription fit their vision of a world order shaped in America's image.

Richard Perle and David Frum, explaining why America needs the Bush team to remain in power, have declared: "We have offered concrete recommendations equal to the threat, and the soft-liners have not, because we have wanted to fight, and they have not." Their apocalyptic militarism fits their sense of a threatened American civilization. Americans grasp, say Perle and Frum, that it would be a terrible error to merely "minimize" or "manage" the evil of radical Islamism. Only a global war that eliminates the radical Islamists will suffice: 'There is no middle way for Americans: It is victory or holocaust.'" Like Perle and Frum, Bush and Cheney have no answer to the inevitability of anti-imperial blowback except to call Americans to stay the course through a full-scale world war. If the choices are victory or holocaust, the answer is perpetual war. If millions of Muslims are inflamed or humiliated at seeing their countries invaded by the United States or bullied by American power, too bad.

And if Americans shrink from waging World War IV, the victims of 9/11 must be reinvoked. President Bush keeps telling Americans that prevailing in Iraq is an imperative response to the 9/11 attacks. Never mind that Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11. On the rare occasions when Bush addresses the blowback problem, he replies that Islamic radicals started the war, not the U.S.: "We didn't ask for this global struggle, but we're answering history's call with confidence and a comprehensive strategy."

For millions of Arab Muslims, however, the American military has been in their homeland for decades, especially since 1990. Bush stresses that Islamic radicals are motivated by the ideology of "militant jihadism" or "Islamofascism," but that explanation exaggerates the ideological factor and ignores the U.S. role in inflaming and humiliating Arab Muslims. By disowning any moral responsibility, the U.S. misconstrues the most relevant and immediate cause of suicide terrorism—the presence of Western military power in the Middle East.

According to the University of Chicago political scientist Robert Pape's *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, the terrorists fighting the U.S. in Iraq have

the same primary motive as suicide terrorists in Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Kashmir and elsewhere: to drive a foreigner from territory that the terrorists view as their homeland. Pape's database covers suicide bombings in the world from 1980 to 2004. He found that in every major suicide-terrorist campaign, the prime motive was to compel a democratic state to withdraw its military forces. In only a tiny fraction of cases were Islamic terrorists motivated primarily by their adherence to Islamic fundamentalist ideology. Almost every targeted nation was a democracy at the time of the attack (France, the U.S., India, Israel, Russia, Sri Lanka, Turkey and England), thus every suicide-terrorist campaign aimed to expel a democratic power.

In the case of al-Qaeda, the stationing of tens of thousands of American combat troops on the Arabian peninsula from 1990 to 2001 increased the statistical likelihood of attacks against Americans by ten to 20 times. Iran and Sudan produced a great deal of West-hating Islamic ideology, but no suicide terrorists. The suicide bombers come from territories in which campaigns of resistance to foreign military interventions have been organized by large militant organizations.

Pape's data suggest that if one wants to reduce incidents of suicide terrorism, it would be more effective to reduce the imprint of America's military force than to pursue a strategy of smashing Arab or Muslim dictatorships and killing all Islamic radicals. In other words, the very presence of the American military in the Middle East is causing the terrorism that troops are sent to eliminate. Osama bin Laden begins nearly all his pronouncements by asserting that the U.S. strives to control the homelands of Islamic nations in the Persian Gulf and that Muslims in these lands are compelled to expel America and its allies.

Having sparked a firestorm of blowback resistance and terrorism in Iraq, the U.S. may be on the verge of doubling its trouble by going against Iran. Reuel Marc Gerecht, a prominent neocon and former Middle East specialist for the CIA, contends that bombing Iran is the "only option that passes the pinch test" and that the U.S. also needs to attack Syria. Like many neocons he believes that Syria would be easy and Iran much less so. In his view, the only reason not to attack Iran is that the potential for blowback there is comparable to the situation in Iraq. But that kind of argument, he says in the *Weekly Standard*, "takes us back to the pre-9/11 world, where we preempted ourselves because of our fear of our enemies' potential nastiness."

In October 2005 it was revealed that two months before the invasion of Iraq, Bush told Tony Blair that he wanted to “go beyond Iraq” in confronting or taking down regimes that facilitate the spread of illicit weapons. He named North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran. Bush’s mention of North Korea was not surprising, given its “axis of evil” status; but his inclusion of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, always delicately treated in public by the administration, was very surprising; as for Iran, three years after the invasion of Iraq, double-or-nothing time may be approaching.

Iranian leaders mistakenly believe that \$60-per-barrel oil and America’s turmoil in Iraq will protect them from paying an unacceptable price for their nuclear ambitions. But at the Pentagon the war plans are already completed. Former intelligence officials confirm that a decision has been made to hit Iran in some way. One of them told journalist Seymour Hersh: “We’re not dealing with a set of National Security Council option papers here. They’ve already passed that wicket. It’s not *if* we’re going to do anything against Iran. They’re doing it.” Meanwhile U.S. troops have clashed with Syrian forces along the Syrian/Iraqi border on several occasions, sometimes crossing into Syria. Ambassador Khalilzad explains: “Our patience is running out with Syria. Syria has to decide what price it’s willing to pay in making Iraq success difficult. And time is running out for Damascus to decide on this issue.”

Global war is a perpetual project, and its logic may soon unfold in Iran or Syria. Meanwhile an anniversary of war has just passed in Iraq, where the Sunni insurgents are not strong enough to win, but are too strong to lose. Unless the U.S. rethinks what it is doing there, it faces a long, miserable and murderous road ahead in ancient Mesopotamia.