

Fog of war: Trouble ahead in Iraq

by [George Hunsinger](#) in the [February 10, 2004](#) issue

Contrary to what most Americans believe, the United States is in deep trouble in Iraq, and its policies are adrift. Especially ominous are problems surrounding the plan for June 30 elections. If direct elections are held, the Shi'ites, with 60 percent of the population, will prevail. If their representation is watered down by resort to closed caucuses, as the U.S. wants, the Shi'ites will turn to violence. Either way, tensions among all religious and ethnic factions are mounting. Iraq is edging closer to a civil war, and chaos could engulf the entire region.

Whether the UN can help to stabilize the situation remains unclear. Much depends on how much real independence and power it is granted.

To keep a lid on the violence, the CIA is planning a new secret police force. It will draw upon feared Mukhabarat (intelligence) operatives, the very ones who bolstered Saddam Hussein's thuggish regime. The purpose of this force seems to be to continue the occupation by other means, hardly compatible with official promises of democracy.

"The presence of a powerful secret police, loyal to the Americans, will mean that the new Iraqi political regime will not stray outside the parameters that the U.S. wants to set," said John Pike, director of Global Security, a Washington-based institute. Thus, "the new Iraqi government will reign but not rule" (*UK Telegraph*, January 4).

Meanwhile, over 500 American troops have lost their lives in Iraq, along with tens of thousands of Iraqi citizens. Less widely reported are the "thousands of U.S. soldiers . . . coming home with their faces blown off, or missing limbs, facing a lifetime in a wheelchair," writes Juan Cole, a professor at the University of Michigan. The downing of U.S. helicopters, the brazen attacks on Coalition Authority headquarters, and the continuing failure to restore basic services like water and electricity point to a deteriorating situation. "I'd say there is increasing evidence that the U.S. is not in control in Iraq," states Cole, "and that the place may well be headed toward being a failed state for the near term" (*Informed Comment*, January 18).

So far Americans have been tolerant of administration policies. "If things are going well, people aren't bothered that we haven't found weapons in Iraq," says William Schneider of the American Enterprise Institute. But if a bombing claimed a large number of American troops, or if radical Islamic Shi'ites took control, "overnight people will say, 'Wait a minute, what are we doing there?'" (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, January 17).

Erosion of support would not be surprising, given the way that the case for the invasion is crumbling. What antiwar critics insisted before the war has been confirmed at every turn. Within the course of one week in January, the Bush administration had to face the following:

- David Kay resigned after his inspection team, with nine months to search and a budget of \$600 million, failed to turn up any Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (*New York Times*, January 8).
- The Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute issued a sharply critical report stating that the war on Iraq was a distraction from America's real security interests and that it had brought the U.S. Army "near the breaking point" (*Washington Post*, January 13).

- The *Washington Post* published an extensive front-page report headlined “Iraq’s Arsenal Was Only on Paper.” Since the first gulf war, illegal weapons “never got past the planning stage” (January 7).

- A study was released by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace stating that “administration officials systematically misrepresented the threat from Iraq’s WMD and ballistic missile program” by treating possibilities as fact and “misrepresenting inspectors’ findings in ways that turned threats from minor to dire” (*Boston Globe*, January 9).

- George Bush’s former Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill revealed that the president took office fully intending to invade Iraq. In January and February of 2001, at the first meetings of the National Security Council, Bush asked his advisors to find a pretext (CBS News interview, January 11).

The O’Neill revelations are the most serious. Invading another country without provocation and without legitimate authority (in this case, explicit authorization from the UN Security Council) is the textbook definition of aggressive war, violating both international law and the historic just-war tradition. According to the Nuremberg Tribunal, a war of aggression is “the supreme international crime, differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole” (Judgment of the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, September 30-October 1, 1946).

Whether America’s churches can rise to the occasion of moral responsibility in our current crisis is a matter of utmost urgency. If the fog of war is not soon lifted from our hearts and minds, we might expect to face additional wars that are equally grievous and illegitimate.