

Occupational hazards: The U.S. debate over Iraq's future

by [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [May 3, 2003](#) issue

The intellectuals and policymakers who want America to maintain its “unipolar” dominance in the world agreed that the U.S. needed to overthrow the Baathist regime in Iraq. For the most part, they emphasized the threat of Saddam’s (alleged) weapons of mass destruction and their own hope of transforming Middle East.

But they never agreed on what a liberated Iraq should look like, and now their disagreements are showing. The unipolarists divide into three main schools of thought, two of which are strongly represented in the Bush administration. The third has provided much of the Bush administration’s rhetoric about building democracy in the Middle East.

The first group is the hypernationalists who emphasize military power and geopolitics, give short shrift to diplomacy, and care mostly (or solely) about the economic and security interests of the U.S. and Israel. Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld, John Bolton, Dick Cheney and Richard Perle belong to this group, and it is the dominant force in the Bush administration.

The second group is more concerned about diplomacy and securing the support of the United Nations. Led by Colin Powell and various State Department officials, especially at the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, this group emphasizes political realism, warning that democracy-building in a place like Iraq would be dangerous and wasteful.

Though Powell fits awkwardly into the unipolarist movement, he has made key political and intellectual contributions to it. After the cold war ended, he devised the Powell Doctrine, which calls for the use and threatened use of overwhelming military force. He also provided the rationale for increased military spending (to fight two wars at once). And in 1992, Powell told the House Armed Services Committee, “I want the United States to be the bully on the block.” But Powell is also the leader of the faction that resists ideology and unilateral aggressiveness.

The third group is the democratic globalists, who contend that exporting democracy should be one of the central purposes of American foreign policy and that the U.S. should commit itself to the very expensive and ambitious task of building American-style democracies throughout the Middle East. This group views itself as being more principled and idealistic than the hypernationalists and realists; prominent democratic globalists include Peter Beinart, Joshua Muravchik and Lawrence F. Kaplan.

The democratic globalists want the U.S. to organize a brief occupation of Iraq, strongly support exile leader Ahmed Chalabi and his Iraqi National Congress, purge Saddam's regime and army, and build a democratic society with national elections. Both groups are wary of Ayatollah Muhammed Bakr al-Hakim, an Iranian-backed contender better known to Iraqis. To the democratic globalists and most hypernationalists, the models for a democratic Iraq are Japan and Germany after World War II.

But Iraq is more like Yugoslavia than Japan. It was a state cobbled together in the aftermath of World War I. Even a decade of American occupation in Iraq might serve simply to delay the inevitable wars of secession and ethnic conflict. The ruling Sunnis make up only 17 percent of the population, and Sunni tribalism is utterly brutal, having produced Saddam Hussein. The Kurds make up 23 percent of the population, and they want their own country, together with the Turkish Kurds. Some 60 percent of the country is Shi'ite, and while Iraqi Shi'ites have an edgy relationship with the Persian Shi'ites of Iran—Iraq's most hated enemy—they are nonetheless linked ideologically and religiously. Most Iraqi Shi'ites have bitterly opposed both Saddam and the United States, and in Lebanon the Shi'ite "party of God," Hezbollah, has urged Arabs to fight the Americans as the greater of two evils. All of this stands in the way of the democratic globalists' vision of a brief U.S. occupation of Iraq.

The strategy favored by democratic globalists and most hypernationalists terrifies the realists at the State Department because it would deliver Iraq to the Shi'ite majority or a coalition of Shi'ites and Kurds, and it ignores the immense difficulties of building a Western-style democracy in a country that has no civil society, is wracked with ethnic conflicts, and features an economy based on oil exports.

For the past decade the State Department and CIA have been feuding with the Iraqi National Congress. State Department officials have made disparaging remarks about INC leaders and have refused to support INC initiatives. They don't trust Chalabi,

who was found guilty of bank fraud by a Jordanian court in 1992 after the collapse of Petra Bank, which he founded; Chalabi was sentenced, in absentia, to a 22-year prison term. State Department officials also believe that Chalabi is too much of a dandy and too much of an outsider to be credible as a political leader in postwar Iraq; he has not lived in Iraq since 1956.

More important, the State Department does not want to create in Iraq a powerful Shi'ite ally of the Iranian government (this stance rules out majority rule by the Shi'ites), and it opposes a federal structure with regional autonomy (this rules out the Lebanon model). Diplomats prize stability, and Powell has declared that stability in the Middle East will not be aided by allowing Iraq to be "fragmented into separate Sunni, Shia, and Kurd political entities."

Brent Scowcroft, a realist from the first Bush administration, says that if the U.S. tries to impose a democratic system on Iraq, it will fuel an explosion of sectarian violence and perhaps civil war.

"I'm a skeptic about the ability to transform Iraq into a democracy in any realistic period of time," he remarked. "What's going to happen the first time we hold an election in Iraq and it turns out the radicals win? What do you do? We're surely not going to let them take over." Scowcroft admonished that "what's likely to happen is that the meanest, toughest ones will rise to the top, at least for a couple of generations."

Scowcroft and other conservative realpolitikers worry that the ideologues have taken over, while those in Powell's circle share similar misgivings. For their part, the democratic globalists believe that there is still too much old-style realism in the Bush administration.

The democratic globalists have provided political cover for the unipolarist cause, presenting it as a struggle for world democracy, but they are worried that the Bush administration's rhetoric about democracy is hollow. A federal structure with some degree of regional autonomy for the Sunnis, Shi'ites and Kurds would be democratic, they argue, but a centralized unitary state would not be. Democracy means coming to terms with Chalabi and the Shi'ite majority, not imposing a Sunni figurehead to provide political cover for a long-term American occupation. Lawrence F. Kaplan warns: "Behind the State Department's hand-wringing lurks a narrow realpolitik, brought to us by the same Metternichs who in the name of 'stability' insisted that we

not upset the Iraqi order a decade ago.”

The democratic globalists fear that Bush is preparing to repeat his father’s betrayal of democracy in Iraq, this time in the name of fighting for it. Administration officials are talking about democracy but planning a long-term American occupation in which retired Lieutenant General Jay Garner heads the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, the State Department fills the education and trade offices, and the Pentagon makes the remaining departmental appointments.

The Bush administration clearly doesn’t have its act together on the all-important question of what to build in Iraq, but to the extent that a clear picture exists, it consists of a strong central state under U.S. control that throttles the democratic oppositionist groups, gives a minimal role to the United Nations, relies on mid-ranking officials of Saddam’s regime, and awards rebuilding contracts to U.S. companies.