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# Exporting Democracy

*What Have We Learned from Iraq?*

The editors of *Dissent* posed the following question to several respondents: *Iraq has provoked the bitterest debate about American foreign policy since Vietnam. One rationale for the war proposed by George W. Bush's administration was that it would lead to democracy—first in Iraq and then elsewhere in the Middle East. Many people thought that this was never a serious intention, but it is probably true that some members of the administration believed that the war would make democratization possible in Iraq. Four years later, most observers would agree that this effort has failed, despite the holding of several elections. Whatever you think of the Bush administration's motives, what is to be learned from the Iraq experience about the export—and import—of democracy?*

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**Daniele Archibugi**

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THE DEMOCRATIC ideal can be presented to peoples and countries that have not yet embraced it in two entirely opposite ways: through persuasion or through coercion and force.

The European Union is a champion in persuasion, often combined with powerful economic incentives. The prospect of joining the largest market of the world has played a crucial role in stabilizing new democratic regimes in Southern European countries such as Greece, Spain, and Portugal. In more recent years, it is playing the same role in Eastern Europe. It can be hoped that the EU will achieve the same result in Turkey and—why not?—further enlargement can also be envisaged with regard to countries on the southern shores of the Mediterranean.

So far, the EU has included countries relatively likely to embrace democratic faith and institutions. European countries in the South and in the East already had a high level of social capital and good political infrastructures. But there is also something specific to the EU: it is a civilian and not a military power. People would laugh if anybody in Brussels threatened to “shock and awe.” The fact that the EU has so many different voices also implies that no single nation can fully dominate the others.

There is another reason that made the EU so appealing for those living in nondemocratic

countries: political dignity. As soon as a new member is accepted, it enjoys all the privileges of the oldest members of the club. If Turkey ever joins the EU, it will get a number of parliamentarians equal to France, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Economic muscle is still very important, but the basic principle is that each member has equal dignity.

The invasion of Iraq has made the Bush administration the champion of democratization through military force. The rhetoric used is also the opposite from that of Brussels. Rather than discuss, negotiate, and reconcile, Bush and Blair have spoken in messianic terms. They have praised liberty and democracy much more than any EU bureaucrat has ever done—and at the same time contributed to the killing of an unknown number of civilians. It is surprising how effective the power of rhetoric is, and there is no doubt that many of those who voted to reelect Bush in 2004 were influenced by his words rather than his actions.

Many Americans perceive their country as the champion of the democracy-exporting business despite the fact that since the end of the Second World War it achieved that goal through military invasion only in two small countries, Grenada and Panama. In contrast, it has failed in a long list of military-occupied countries. The record of historical failure includes (1) South Korea, where a huge U.S.

military presence did not generate a democratic government for at least three decades; (2) South Vietnam and Cambodia, where the United States did not even make an attempt to challenge communism through democratically elected governments; (3) Afghanistan, still in the middle of a vicious civil war five years after the invasion (Although the Afghan mission is conducted under a NATO umbrella, it is politically and militarily dominated by the United States. Elections were held under the supervision of foreign troops, and the results have basically followed the ethnic census.); and (4) Not even in small and supposedly easily controllable countries such as the Dominican Republic and Haiti have American troops managed to shift the political climate dramatically and irreversibly in favor of democratic governance.

In order to find clear cases of successful democratization associated with military operations we need to go back to the Second World War, when democracy was restored in Germany, Italy, and Japan thanks to the Allied Powers. But there is a fundamental difference between these cases and what has happened since. Germany, Italy, and Japan were the initiators of the war, while the United States and its allies were involved in the conflict against their will. This has not been the case since then. People in other countries do not trust, and with good reason, an agent who promises to achieve peace and democracy by means of forcible imposition and war. The conditions for democratizing Iraq were much more favorable in 1991, when Saddam Hussein initiated the war by annexing Kuwait. By defeating the aggressor, the winners had a political right to try to create an alternative political regime, at least to prevent the old regime from starting a new war. This was precisely what happened, successfully, after the Second World War.

The situation in Iraq is made much worse because the different religious communities do not trust each other—so that fair and free elections simply replicate the statistics of religious and ethnic division. But the different communities trust the occupation troops even less. Are they wrong? They have very good reasons to be suspicious about the intentions of the invaders, given the long history of misconduct

by Western powers (often forgotten in the West). Iraq is a colonial creation; in the 1980s, it was used as a tool to contain Iran in one of the dirtiest wars of the twentieth century. One million Iraqis died in this war, while the West was silent. Thanks to Western support, Saddam Hussein managed to reinforce his domestic power. After Saddam invaded Kuwait, most civilian infrastructures were destroyed by Western bombing; the only institution that managed to survive almost untouched was the Republican Guard, which immediately was used to repress internal opposition. Twelve years of Western sanctions kept the Iraqi people hostage to their own tyrant without any possibility of rebellion.

**H**OW COULD anybody expect that ordinary Iraqi citizens would trust an Anglo-American army to build a regime able to serve their interests? Here we can draw a pragmatic lesson on exporting democracy: the population of the target country should have a prior trusting relationship with the invaders. If it has none, the outcome is more likely to be insurgency or civil war than democratic development.

I have drawn positive lessons from earlier experiences of foreign intervention in a forthcoming book, *A World of Democracy: The Cosmopolitan Perspective* (Princeton University Press). The main lesson I would like to emphasize here is a negative one: democracy cannot and should not be exported through military means; the attempt is ethically contradictory and politically ineffective. Because democracy promotion has become a rhetorical tool to cover up U.S. strategic interests, it is handicapping attempts to expand democracy by persuasion and political and economic collaboration. After the Iraq disaster, the best place for America's democratizing troops for the next quarter century is . . . America.

We know that American citizens have paid a high price for the adventure in Iraq—the lives of more than three thousand soldiers and between one and two trillion dollars, according to Joseph Stiglitz's and Linda Bilmes's estimates. But the Iraqi population has paid a much higher price: as many as 655,000 Iraqis may have died since hos-

ilities began in March 2003, according to a study by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, published in the *Lancet*.<sup>\*</sup> In order to avoid a repetition of the same tragedy in other parts of the world, I propose the introduction of a principle of reparations: every time a powerful country intervenes in a weaker country with the aim of improving the conditions of the latter, and then grossly fails to achieve

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<sup>\*</sup>[www.jhsph.edu/publichealthnews/press\\_releases/2006/burnham\\_iraq\\_2006.html](http://www.jhsph.edu/publichealthnews/press_releases/2006/burnham_iraq_2006.html)

the declared objective, the powerful country has to pay reparations to the weaker country. Perhaps this would induce the American people to be more cautious about whom they elect to the White House. ●

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## Ofra Bengio

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FOUR YEARS AFTER the war for democracy in Iraq began, it is evident that the project has failed dismally. Many analysts attribute this to flawed implementation. Although there is no denying that there were gross mistakes, the failure had much more to do with conceptual flaws and total lack of comprehension of, or worse still, disregard for Iraq's history and its problems. Had the project's architects taken these into account, they would not have opted to make Iraq the model democracy for the Arab world, even if only for lip service.

The most severe conceptual flaw was the belief that democracy can be imposed by force by an outside power. The successful German and Japanese cases after the Second World War were completely irrelevant models for Iraq, where a combination of historical, political, social, and cultural factors doomed the American project from the start. It was Great Britain that attempted first to establish Western-style democracy in Iraq, beginning in the 1920s. This experiment, which was identified with Christian imperialism, failed and left severe scars in the Iraqi collective memory. Iraqis remained suspicious of any similar projects emanating from the West. Even with all the best intentions, the new American project could only have aroused, at least among some significant parts of the population, deep-seated fears of a new imperialism disguised by slogans of democracy.

Another conceptual flaw was the idea that one of the worst totalitarian regimes in the world could be transformed overnight into a democracy. This vision of radical change did not take into account the fact that in Iraq civil society was nonexistent. There were no competing parties to the Baath Party; no nongovernmental organizations to speak of; and, worst of all, the fragile middle class, which should have carried out democratic transformation, was dwindling due to ongoing wars, long years of sanctions, and the regime's socioeconomic policies. Other difficulties included the lack of a strong industrialized economy and a long history of political violence.

Complicating the picture further was the fact that the change was not the result of long-term internal evolution (as was the case in the Soviet Union, for example), but an abrupt act by an outside force. Consequently, when the Baath Party was ousted from power in April 2003, there were no organized domestic forces (except for the Kurds) capable of filling the vacuum and stabilizing the chaotic situation, a sine qua non for the functioning of any normal polity, let alone democracy.

Islamic extremism received a significant boost after the fall of the Baath, and this made matters even worse. Islamist forces, both Shias and Sunnis, were held in check by Saddam Hussein, and now they came out forcefully. The problem is not that Islam is in itself incompatible with democracy, but that its tradi-