

NOW FOR THE HARD PART: A ROLE FOR CANADA IN A DEMOCRATIC POSTWAR IRAQ

Robert P. Harrison

Canada can play good Mountie to America's bad cop in the reconstruction of a democratic postwar Iraq, writes Robert Harrison, a Montreal engineer who has lived and worked in the Arab and Islamic world. Having played no role in the war, indeed having defied strong American pressure to participate in it, Canada is seen as a disinterested party in Iraq and throughout the Mideast region. Given Canada's history of peacekeeping, a role for which American forces are not suited, and in view of the diverse languages and cultures comprising the Canadian federation, Harrison suggests Canada could play an important role, not only in keeping the peace, but in building the institutions of a democratic Iraqi federation under the auspices of the United Nations. All of this would be very much in America's interest, as well as our own, and would bridge the temporary divide of the war between our two countries.

Pour favoriser la reconstruction démocratique de l'Irak d'après-guerre, le Canada pourrait jouer en tandem avec les États-Unis le rôle du bon policier aux côtés du méchant flic américain, soutient l'ingénieur montréalais Robert Harrison, qui a vécu et travaillé dans le monde arabe et islamique. N'ayant joué aucun rôle pendant la guerre, sauf celui de défier les États-Unis qui souhaitent vivement sa participation, le Canada est considéré en Irak et dans tout le Moyen-Orient comme un protagoniste désintéressé. Étant donné son histoire de gardien de la paix — un rôle auquel les États-Unis ne sauraient aspirer — et la diversité des langues et cultures qui le caractérisent, le Canada pourrait collaborer d'importante façon au maintien de la paix en Irak mais aussi à la mise sur pied, sous les auspices des Nations unies, des institutions nécessaires à l'avènement d'une fédération irakienne démocratique. Ce double rôle irait aussi bien dans le sens des intérêts américains que des nôtres, et contribuerait à rapprocher nos deux pays que la guerre en Irak a temporairement divisés.



A few years ago I travelled the length of Egypt, north to south. Everywhere I went, I got the same reaction to my nationality: "Canada Dry!" I might as well have been from Greenland. This is *good* news. Canadians are not hated over there. We are not even on their radar screen. John Lennon said that if more leaders were like Pierre Trudeau, he would not need to worry about peace. Having been to over two dozen countries on six continents, my first-hand experience shows that this is exactly how Canada is viewed.

Canada has been defying the United States since at least 1793, when Lord Simcoe passed a law granting freedom to any American slave crossing the Canadian border. We torched the White House in 1814, and gave refuge to Sitting Bull in 1876. We stayed out of the Vietnam War, even though there were strong arguments for participating, just like in 2003: worldwide threat, namely Communism; American trade;

why-isn't-our-military-better complaints; flag waving. I doubt if anyone would question that decision now.

Canada, Norway and several other NATO countries stayed out of this war on principle. Unlike the French or Russians, Canada has no vested interest in Iraq. We are self-sufficient in oil and natural gas. In fact, our only real economic interest here is trade with the US, which we have put at risk by disagreeing with them. Bravo to Mr. Chrétien, who has shown the backbone we expect from a successor to Lester Pearson.

We can pat ourselves on the back, and chuckle at Rick Mercer, but let's not waste the good will of our American friends needlessly. No more booing their anthem, flag-burning or *moronic* comments, please. The higher moral road requires, well, higher morals. The Americans are not just trading partners and neighbours, they are our friends. Our soldiers and theirs died together on D-Day. Yes, some wars are justified.

America's diplomatic failure over Iraq is its own doing. US Supreme Court Justice Learned Hand said that leadership, to be effective, must take into account the views of others. In this regard, the Bush administration has shown great ineptitude. No doubt this will be the topic of historical debate for many years to come.

I am an engineer, from a profession obsessed with the downside. Be grateful for this trait next time you drive across a bridge. My ideas regarding Iraq stem directly from the negative aspects of this situation, which I see as three-fold. The first is bitter hatred of the US and UK in the entire region, fuelled by twenty-four-hour-a-day Al-Jazeera broadcasts of dead babies, little girls shot in the face, Allied soldiers waving machine guns at old men with canes, and other barbarities. (Ironically, the Iraqi regime expelled Al-Jazeera journalists at one point for not being fair to their side of the war.) The Arabs have long memories. This is a long-term problem.

The second is the "West Bank" of the Tigris. Now that the war is basically over, this will be a policing headache for the US, if not an all-out Northern Ireland disaster or second Palestine. It was a truism even in Roman times that conquering a people is easier than occupying them. The British have seen this coming all along, but the Americans have not, as evidenced by their naïve expectation to be greeted with flowers on day one.

The third is Canada's open defiance of the US. We told our friends it was a bad marriage, they went ahead with it anyway, and we refused to go to the wedding. What's done is done, so let us see if we cannot use the situation to both our countries' advantage by playing good Mountie to their bad cop.

This last problem, I think, has been overstated. Since January, I have been working in Raleigh, North Carolina, talking to white Americans, black Americans, Methodists, Southern Baptists and even

US Marines. They are not angry with Canada. They are mad at the French, but even this has been exaggerated. Canada is not even on their radar (another example of "Canada Dry"?). And this is precisely the part of the States where you would expect a harsh reaction — the Deep South, loaded with military bases.

North Carolinians did not even boo the Canadian national anthem at the Hurricanes-Canadiens hockey game, one week after the Star Spangled Banner was booed in Montreal. I was there. They took off their ballcaps, and sang along. Perhaps it is a good thing it was not the French version.

Canadians are not hated in the Middle East. Quite the opposite, in fact. I have seen this for myself. This goodwill might turn out to be the best

Geography and history, plus a bit of happenstance, have dealt us a very good hand regarding postwar Iraq. We can make a big difference, just as we did in Suez in 1956. The trouble is that to do so, somebody will have to talk the Americans into a UN-driven approach.

thing we could possibly provide to the Americans, much more than our quite minor military support. If we play this right, we might even earn their gratitude, though I would not bet the maple orchard.

Geography and history, plus a bit of happenstance, have dealt us a very good hand regarding postwar Iraq. We can make a big difference, just as we did in Suez in 1956. The trouble is that to do so, somebody will have to talk the Americans into a UN-driven approach, bound to be a hard sell unless they have had their fill of suicide-bombers by then. There will never be peace in that territory under US and/or UK rule, even with a token UN presence. This is not Japan in 1945. Japan is an island, and was exhausted and depleted after years of war. The Arabs — all the Arabs — are just getting revved up.

Sadly, our US allies did not learn in Vietnam that you cannot bomb a people and be their friend. The British know from Northern Ireland that you cannot occupy a people and have peace. This explains the differing views of Blair and Bush regarding postwar UN involvement. How long did it take the British forces to occupy Ulster in 1968? Days. And how long has the fighting continued? Decades. It is not a coincidence that Blair invited Bush to visit Northern Ireland. It was a history lesson: soldiers do not make good policemen, as even the US Marines have pointed out since the fall of Baghdad.

So here comes the political cluster bomb. Once a relative peace has been established, the US and UK should leave the country, completely. This is for their own good. Otherwise, their personnel will be a magnet and catalyst for every crazy suicide-bomber-martyr from Algeria to Kashmir to Indonesia, making democratization impossible. The Fedayeen were just the opening act. The jubilant crowds in Baghdad were cheering the fall of Saddam, not the arrival of infidels. Hatred runs deeper in this part of the world than anywhere else.

Winning the peace is a tired cliché, but true nonetheless. Again, the British understand this all too well. They won the Boer War at great cost, only to have the Afrikaners take over South Africa again in a few short years, leading to the creation of apartheid. The occupation of Iraq is already underway. It started when the US Marine placed the Stars and Stripes on the face of Saddam's statue on April 9. The countdown is on. How long will their presence be tolerated?

As a friend to America, we should help them avoid the hazards and risks of occupying an Arab country on their own. Once the kinetic part of the mission is over, what is left is providing food and water, ensuring that hospitals have enough bandages, combating lawlessness, setting up an interim

authority, dealing with countless NGOs, supervising elections, issuing new government documents, and so forth. What interest does a superpower have in dealing with this mess? It is all risk and no benefit. Even worse, by appearing to occupy a Muslim country, the Americans run the very extreme risk of provoking another 9/11-type attack. We Canadians do not wish this upon them.

Despite our justified opposition to the war, Canada should be just as interested as the US is in creating a real confederation-style democracy in postwar Iraq, with full Kurdish and Shia representation, to serve as a showcase and model for the rest of the dictator-driven Middle East. In fact, we are in a better position to bring this about than our southern neighbours, because no one associates Canada with images of Ali Ismael Abbas.

To help prepare this article, I spent a few of hours with a Tunisian, a Syrian and a Saudi/Egyptian, picking their brains. I ran various postwar scenarios past them, and asked how they thought an Arab suicide bomber would react. Fascinating, and useful. Only trust facts from original sources — another engineering trait. Be grateful for that one next time you drive past a chemical plant.

The good news is they agreed that Canadians are perceived as disinterested neutrals, but only so long as we are not mere agents of the Americans. Also, Canada must focus on Iraq and not get dragged into the Israel-Palestine conundrum. This would be a capital mistake. That conflict has no winners, just two losers. The Arabs might pressure us to intervene on the Palestinian issue, but we must resist, at least until Iraq is sorted out. Only operate on one part of the patient at a time.

The peacekeeping side of this will be very tricky. We have to get some Muslim faces in there very quickly. Canadians or Norwegians in blue helmets will just look like yet more infidels. This could be Canada's shining moment, pulling



AP Photo

Regime Change: A US Marine sets up the stars and stripes on the face of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's statue before toppling it, in downtown Baghdad.

together a Coalition of the Willing to Keep the Peace from as many countries as possible. Half these peacekeeper countries should be Muslim.

Getting the Americans to leave will be an enormous challenge. Canadians have no hope of persuading them. Even the British will have a hard time convincing their *coalition* ally to pull out sooner rather than later. Strangely, the British seem to think

that *they* are going to play the international bridge building role in postwar Iraq. Sorry, chaps, but you have been disqualified by Arab television footage of dead children in Basra.

In the late 1990s I lived in kwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. There is a strong parallel between post-Saddam Iraq and post-apartheid South Africa. Canada played a key, and low-key, role in democratizing this nation at the other

end of the planet. This is not surprising, given our staunch opposition to apartheid over the years, notably under Brian Mulroney. Among other things, we assisted them in creating a new constitution that was based on our own. South Africa faced similar challenges to those of the new Iraq, most notably in preventing the Zulus from splitting off to form a separate country — just like the Kurds. Dealing nonviolently with Quebec separatism has given our country a unique insight into such issues.

One controversial issue will be the role of the former Ba'ath functionaries and party members in the new government. Obviously the top leadership has to go, and will probably face war crimes charges to boot. But what about the thousands upon thousands of Sunni Muslims who were part of the old regime? Righteous indignation says to exclude them. Common sense, and an intelligent desire to reduce the risk of internal conflict in the future, demand that they get their say and play a role in the new government. This will be a moral dilemma to some people, especially those with a good-guy/bad-guy mindset.

We are still waiting for a Marshall Plan from the Americans. My contention is that this is irrelevant. The UN must take on this role, period. After all, Iraq is an oil-rich country. Baghdad resembles Cairo or any other relatively advanced Third-World city. This is not the wilds of Afghanistan. Historically, this is the point of origin for civilization itself, the home of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and the Tower of Babel, though the usefulness of this fact is debatable. Nevertheless, there is a deep and genuine Arab pride about their culture and role in world civilization, and this is what galls them about Western encroachment into their region. Good old Canadian values could really help here, just as they did during the Suez crisis.

As for reconstruction contracts, there is no crystal ball. This is already a political headache for Blair, and will likely turn into a bigger one

for Bush. To the victors go the spoils? Maybe not in this case. This will be the Mother of all Contract Bidding, with France, Russia, Japan and Germany entering the fray. Canada would be deluding itself to expect any great part of it, although a successful Pearson-type role in preventing a postwar disaster would help our case enormously. To help the world out of this crisis, Canada needs to accomplish the following tasks. Fortunately we are not alone, but it will not be easy.

First, Canada should try to arrange for Kofi Annan to “select” four countries to spearhead the UN effort. These could be Canada, the country that invented peacekeeping; Norway, the country that gives out the Nobel Peace Prize, and also stayed out of this war on principle; Egypt, the largest Arab country and a leader in the region, but not a neighbour of Iraq; and Malaysia, a non-Arab Muslim country not located in the Middle East.

This Quad has two Western countries and two Islamic countries. This balance is critical. The Iraqis in particular, and the Arabs in general, must not see the UN as a mere extension of American policy. From the American viewpoint, this is as acceptable as you are going to get, with two of the four being what they perceive as belonging to the “good guys”, and no French, Germans or Russians. Recent statements by Norway’s prime minister make it clear that they would probably favour such an approach.

Speaking of which, we should use our francophone connections to their maximum, and try to persuade France to butt out. This will be easier said than done. The same goes for Russia, otherwise the Americans will never go for it. Hopefully, these two countries could be persuaded to support the Quad idea as an acceptable, non-American compromise. Canada could kick-start the process by offering the same money and personnel that we would have contributed to the war itself, had we not wisely stayed out of it.

Which brings us to the most difficult task. The British must convince the Americans to leave Iraq as soon as is practicable, once the military mission is complete. None of their personnel can be physically present in postwar Iraq. This applies to the rest of their C-list coalition as well. Tony Blair will, I believe, be very persuasive in this regard, given his first-hand knowledge of occupation in Northern Ireland. Will he succeed? Who knows? That part is truly out of our hands.

Another excellent reason for the Americans to leave quickly is that they now have Iran surrounded, with ground forces to the west, in Iraq, and to the north in Afghanistan, plus aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf. Syria is likewise vulnerable under this WW IV scenario. The temptation to use this temporary advantage will be formidable.

If this non-Security-Council-driven approach works, Canada will be in an excellent position to contribute to the reconstruction and democratization of Iraq. Such a transition will not occur overnight — just look at South Africa. The biggest risk is that Iraq slips back into despotism. This would be a process, not an event, accompanied by major growing pains. But at least Canada would be in the loop.

Given that the US has already created an Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, and a blueprint for an Interim Iraqi Authority, the above plan probably sounds unrealistic. Extreme political pressure, however, will soon be brought to bear on the American approach from the Muslim world and the Europeans and, not inconsequentially, the British. Canada has an historic opportunity to offer a compromise that is in the best interests of both Iraq and the United States.

Rob Harrison's career as a chemical engineer has taken him to six continents. A McGill graduate, he is completing a Ph.D. in chemical process integration at École Polytechnique de Montréal. He is currently a visiting scholar at North Carolina State University, in Raleigh.