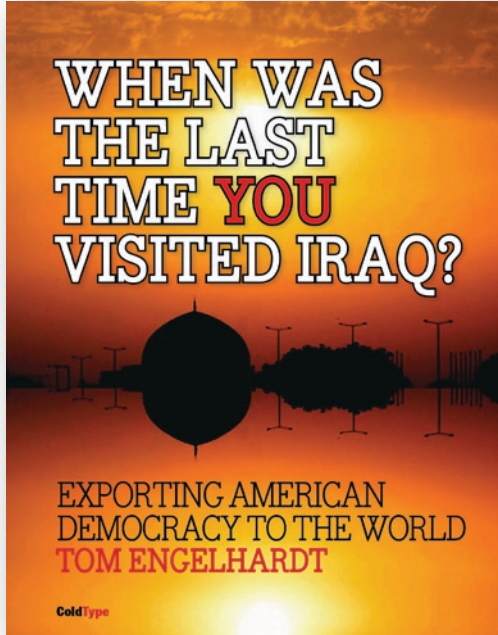


# WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU VISITED IRAQ?



EXPORTING AMERICAN  
DEMOCRACY TO THE WORLD  
**TOM ENGELHARDT**



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Recently, I wrote about a crew of pundits and warrior-journalists eager not to see the U.S. military leave Iraq. That piece appeared on the op-ed page of the Los Angeles Times (and in longer version at TomDispatch.com) and then began wandering the media world. One of its stops was the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*.

From a military man came this emailed response: “Read your article in *Stars and Stripes*. When was the last time you visited Iraq?”

A critique in 15 well-chosen words. So much more effective than a long, angry email, and his point was interesting. At least, it interested me. After all, as I wrote back, I’m a 65-year-old guy who has never been anywhere near Iraq and undoubtedly never will be. I have to assume that my emailer had spent time there, possibly more than once, and disagreed with my assessments.

First-hand experience is not to be taken lightly. What, after all, do I know about Iraq? Only reporting I’ve been able to read from thousands of miles away or analysis found on the blogs of experts like Juan Cole. On the other hand, even from thousands of miles away, I was one of many who could see enough, by early 2003, to go into the streets and demon-

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strate against an onrushing disaster of an invasion that a lot of people, theoretically far more knowledgeable on Iraq than any of us, considered just the cat’s meow, the “cakewalk” of the new century.

It’s true that I’ve never strolled down a street in Baghdad or Ramadi or Basra, armed or not, and that’s a deficit, if you want to write about the American experience in Iraq. It’s also true that I haven’t spent hours sipping tea with Iraqi tribal leaders, or been inside the Green Zone, or set foot on even one of the vast American bases that the Pentagon’s private contractors have built in that country. (Nor did that stop me from writing regularly about “America’s ziggurats” when most of the people who visited those bases didn’t consider places with 15-20 mile perimeters, multiple bus lines, PXs, familiar fast-food franchises, Ugandan mercenary guards, and who knows what else, to be particularly noteworthy structures on the Iraqi landscape and so, with rare exceptions, worth commenting on.)

I’m certainly no expert on Shiites and Sunnis. I’m probably a little foggy on my Iraqi geography. And I’ve never even seen the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. On the other hand, it does occur to me that a whole raft of American pundits, government officials, and military types, who

have done all of the above, who have spent time up close and personal in Iraq (or, at least, in the American version of the same), couldn't have arrived at dumber conclusions over these last many years.

So, first-hand experience, valuable as it may be for great reporters like, say, Anthony Shadid of the *Washington Post* and now the *New York Times*, or Patrick Cockburn of the British *Independent*, can't be the be-all and end-all either. Sometimes being far away, not just from Iraq, but from Washington and all the cloistered thinking that goes with it, from the visibly claustrophobic world of American global policymaking, has its advantages. Sometimes, being out of it, experientially speaking, allows you to open your eyes and take in the larger shape of things, which is often only the obvious (even if little noted).

I can't help thinking about a friend of mine whose up-close and personal comment on U.S. military commanders in Afghanistan was that they were trapped in an American-made box, incapable of seeing beyond its boundaries – of, that is, seeing Afghanistan. Let me be clear: I have no doubt that *being there* is generally something to be desired. But if you take your personal blinders with you, it often hardly matters where you are. Thinking about my *Stars and Stripes* reader's question, the conclusion I've provisionally come to is this: It's not just where you go, it's also how you see what's there, and no less important *who* you see, that matters – which means that sometimes you can actually see more by going nowhere at all.

### An Iraqi Tragedy

When American officials, civilian or military, open their eyes and check out the local landscape, no matter where they've landed, all evidence indicates that the



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first thing they tend to see is themselves; that is, they see the world as an American stage and those native actors in countries we've invaded and occupied or where (as in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen) we conduct what might be called semi-war as so many bit players in an American drama. This is why, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, military commanders and top officials like Secretary of Defense Robert Gates or National Security Advisor James Jones continue to call so unselfconsciously for putting an Iraqi or Afghan "face" on whichever war is being discussed; in other words, to follow the image to its logical conclusion, putting an Iraqi or Afghan mask over a "face" that they recognize, however inconveniently or embarrassingly, as American.

This is why American officials regularly say that "Afghans are in the lead," when they aren't. This is why, when you read newspaper descriptions of how the U.S. is giving Afghan President Hamid Karzai the "leading role" in deciding about the latest military offensive or pushing such-and-such an official (with his U.S. or western "mentors" in the wings) to take the lead in some action that seems to have been largely planned by Americans, the Afghans sound like so many puppets (which doesn't mean that they are) – and this doesn't embarrass Americans in the least.

Generally speaking, the American post-9/11 language of power ostensibly aimed at building up the forces Washington supports in Muslim lands invariably sounds condescending. *They* are always peripheral to *us*, even when they are being urged or prodded to be at the center of the action. This is why their civilians who come in harm's way are referred to as "collateral damage," an inconceivable way to describe American civilians in harm's way. This is why, from Vietnam to today, in the movies

## WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU VISITED IRAQ?

that are made about our wars, even the anti-war ones, Americans invariably hog center stage, while you usually have to keep a careful watch to find passing evidence of those we are fighting against – or for. This was why, 40 years ago, Vietnam was regularly referred to here, whether by hawks or doves, as an “American tragedy,” not a Vietnamese one – and why the same thinking applies to Afghanistan and Iraq today.

This is why, using imagery that might have come out of the mouths of nineteenth century colonialists, American officials long talked patronizingly about teaching the Iraqi “child” to pedal the “bike” of democracy (with us, as global parents, holding onto the bike’s seat). This is the context within which even a president wondered when to take off “the training wheels.”

This is evidently why, today, the introduction of “democracy” to Iraq is considered an American gift so precious that it somehow makes up for anything that’s happened in the last seven years. This is why, for instance, in a piece about the recent Iraqi elections headlined “It’s Up to Iraqis Now. Good Luck!” pundit Tom Friedman could write this sentence about the “U.S. project in Iraq”: “Former President George W. Bush’s gut instinct that this region craved and needed democracy was always right.”

This is why, in honor of those same Iraqi elections, *Newsweek* could feature a “Victory at Last” cover showing George W. Bush striding from the scene on the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln where he gave his infamous “major combat operations in Iraq have ended” speech under a White-House-produced banner reading “Mission Accomplished.” And then, under the eerie headline, “Rebirth of a Nation,” with its American movie resonances, that



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magazine’s correspondents could write: “And yet it has to be said and it should be understood – now, almost seven hellish years later – that something that looks mighty like democracy is emerging in Iraq. And while it may not be a beacon of inspiration to the region, it most certainly is a watershed event that could come to represent a whole new era in the history of the massively undemocratic Middle East.”

Like Afghanistan before it, Iraq is now largely the “forgotten” war, and if this is “victory,” then here’s a little of what’s been forgotten in the process, of what Friedman suggests he’d prefer to leave future historians to sort out: that the American invasion led to possibly hundreds of thousands of Iraqi deaths; that literally millions of Iraqis had to flee into exile abroad and millions more were turned into internal refugees in their own country; that the national capital, Baghdad, was significantly ethnically cleansed in a brutal Shiite-Sunni civil conflict; that the country was littered with new “killing fields”; that a devastating insurgency roiled the land and still brings enough death and terror to Baghdad to make it one of the more dangerous places on the planet; that a soaring unemployment rate and the lack of delivery of the most basic services, including reliable electricity and potable water, created nightmarish conditions for a vast class of impoverished Iraqis; that the U.S., for all its nation-building boasts, proved remarkably incapable of “reconstructing” the country or its oil industry, even though American private contractors profited enormously from work on both; that a full-scale foreign military occupation left Americans on almost 300 bases nationwide and in the largest embassy on the planet; that American advisors remain attached to, and deeply embedded in, an Iraqi military that still lacks a credible air

force and is unlikely to be able to operate and resupply itself on its own for years to come.

### The Pride of Us

In other words, as bad as Saddam Hussein was (and he was a megalomaniac monster), what followed him was a staggering catastrophe for Iraq, even if Americans no longer care to give it much thought. Against the charnel house that Friedman would prefer to leave to history, however, stands one counterbalancing factor, the gift of “democracy” (even if, as was true in the Afghan election of 2009, the present election in Iraq is now dogged by claims of fraud from all sides). Democracy remains, it seems, the pride of us.

Even many who never supported George W. Bush’s “democracy agenda” now seem to take some pride in this. (Let’s leave aside for a moment the fact that the Bush administration arrived in Iraq with remarkably undemocratic plans for the country and was thwarted only by the unwavering insistence of the revered Shiite cleric Ali Sistani on a one-person, one-vote election.)

Here’s a prosaic passage on the recent elections from a *Wall Street Journal* report, which managed to sum up a hopeful, if hesitant, American consensus. Journalist Margaret Coker wrote:

“The election to choose a new 325-seat parliament is considered a key step in Iraq’s transition to stability and a harbinger of whether U.S. troops will be able to begin their planned withdrawal this summer. Both the vote itself and the protracted wait for results have been relatively free of violence, adding to hopes that Iraq’s democracy is maturing.”

There, of course, is that “kid” again, maturing, even if still under our tutelage. The question remains, however: Is



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he stable enough to stay on that bike so American troops can let go of the seat and withdraw fully? And if that still-immature democratic Iraq fails to grow up? Rest assured, it will be the fault of the Iraqis. They just didn’t mature fast enough – an unfortunate American tragedy, which would leave us no choice but to garrison the country into the indefinite future.

Of course, in all of this, there are staggering levels of hypocrisy – in the fact that we were for Saddam before we were against him. In the fact, as well, that from Iran (1953) and Guatemala (1954) to Chile (September 11, 1973) and Pakistan (2008), the U.S. has, in instance after instance, regularly fostered and supported military juntas, strong men, and dictators, while holding off or overthrowing democracies not to our taste or not in what Washington defined as our interests.

Perhaps stranger yet, the democracy that we actually have in the United States – and so assumedly can offer as our ultimate apology for invading and occupying other countries – is rarely subjected to analysis in the context of the glorious urge to export the same. So let’s just stop for a moment and think a little about the American urge to be thrilled that, despite every disaster, against all odds, our grand accomplishment lies in bringing American democracy to Iraq.

### The Rectification of Names

Democracy, like terrorism, is a method, a means to an end, not an end in itself. Nobody is ruled by elections, anymore than any organization is run by terror or has terror as its ultimate goal. If this obvious point had been accepted in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the absurdity of the idea of a “global war on terror” or “on terrorism” would have been self-evident, as would a global war to deliver “democracy”

## WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU VISITED IRAQ?

to far-away peoples.

Democracy, after all, is a way to determine and then express the majoritarian will of a people, a way to deliver power to “the people” or, more important, for those people to take possession of it themselves. It’s the sort of thing that, by its nature, is hard to import from great distances, especially when, in our case, the delivery system to be exported seems strikingly deficient. And keep in mind that the “people” exporting that system to Iraq were largely incapable of seeing Iraqis as actors in their own democratic drama. They were incapable, that is, of imagining the nature of the lives they wanted to shape and change.

In a sense, that was hardly less true when they looked homeward. After all, the glorious democracy they trumpeted to the world bore little relation to the *Pax Republicana* headed by an imperial presidency (complete with a cult of executive power) that they dreamed of installing in Washington for generations to come.

Given the nature of American democracy today – the first billion-dollar presidential election, the staggering levels of lobbying and influence peddling that go with it, the stunning barrages of bizarre advertising, the difficulty of displacing incumbents in Congress, the increasingly corporate-owned and financed campaigns, a half-broken Congressional system, a national security state with unparalleled powers and money, and so on – why all the effort to take it to Iraq? Why measure Iraqis against it and find them lacking? After all, in 2000, our presidential election went to the non-majoritarian candidate, thanks to decisions made by Supreme Court justices appointed by his father. If



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this had happened in Nigeria, Afghanistan, or perhaps Iraq, we would know just what we were dealing with.

The fact is we have no word adequate to describe what, at the national level, we still persist in calling “democracy,” what we regularly ask others to admire to the skies or bow down before. The other day, at *TPM Café*, Todd Gitlin termed our system a “semi-democracy.” That, at least, represents an honest start.

In imperial China, when a new dynasty arrived on the scene, the emperor performed a ritual called the “rectification of names” in the belief that the previous dynasty had fallen in part because reality and the names for it had ceased to correspond. We in the United States undoubtedly now need such a ceremony. We certainly need a new term for our own “democracy” before we’re so quick to hold it up as the paragon for others to match.

We also need to rethink our language when it comes to the U.S. military undertaking “nation building” in distant lands – as if countries could be constructed to our taste in just the way that KBR or Dyn-corp construct military bases in them. We need to stop our commanders from bragging about our skill in creating a “government in a box” on demand for our Afghan friends, when our government at home is largely boxed in and strikingly dysfunctional.

So, no, I have never been to Iraq, but yes, I’ve been here for years, watching, and I can see, among other things, that the American mirror, mirror on the wall which shows us ourselves in such beautiful, Disneyesque detail, has a few cracks in it. It looks fragile. I’d think twice about sending it abroad too often.

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