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So it’s a war - now what? [1]

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Two days ago I wrote about Iraq’s civil war, which looks more and more as though it has already begun. This begs the question, what should we – the Americans – do about it? Before the US invaded Iraq Colin Powell spoke of what he called the “Pottery Barn rule”: you break it, you bought it. If the United States overthrew Iraq’s government it had a moral responsibility to put the country back together again. As hard as it may be to believe, versions of this mindset (not all of them benign) have governed much of what the United States has done, or at least what US officials think they have done and are doing, in Iraq. So what can, or should, the US now do to help make things better and, hopefully, keep them from getting any worse?

First we need to abandon what one might call the strict constructionist view of the Pottery Barn rule. Helping make things better does not always require action on our part. In fact, with the passage of time “nothing” is increasingly the best thing we can do in many situations. An American need to ‘fix’ things, rather than giving Iraqis the tools to do the job themselves lies at the root of many of our worst mistakes over the past 21 months.

First, then, we need to move ahead with this month’s elections knowing full well that they will be far from perfect. At this stage postponing the vote will do nothing but embolden the insurgents (who will, with some justification, see any delay as a victory) and anger the Shia who have waited patiently for their moment to assume power.

Next, we have to live with the results of the elections. This is going to be hard, because heavy-handed behind-the-scenes lobbying seems to be second-nature for US diplomats and no one in Washington is especially thrilled by the prospect of a Shia-led government dominated directly or indirectly by clerics. In fact, such a government may be a good thing or a bad thing in the long run but constantly acting as though it will be a disaster is likely to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Once the new government is in place we need to reduce both the number and the visibility of our troops. It is true that Iraq’s security forces are not now capable of securing much of anything, but the new government will gain popular legitimacy only to the extent that it is seen to be in control of its own territory and not a puppet of the United States. The trick will be to back the government in a way that neither turns it into our quisling nor us into its mercenaries (I never said this was going to be easy).

Then we need to tell Iraq’s neighbors that they need to help. Real help, not half-hearted rhetorical help. Money from the Gulf States. Training assistance from Egypt and Jordan. Properly controlled borders from Syria and Iran. Iran aside none of Iraq’s neighbors are happy with the idea of a Shiite-dominated government. They need to live with it. They won’t like the government’s ties to America. They need to live with that too. If something resembling a

democracy really does emerge in Iraq over time they probably won't like that either. Tough. This is where they need to be told that their own rhetoric about sovereignty, regional cooperation and solidarity with the Iraqi people needs to be taken seriously. It won't hurt to reminded them that a huge failed state in what is now Iraq threatens them more than it threatens anyone else.

Finally, and most importantly, we need to be upfront and honest about what we are doing. Don't dissemble. Let our deeds complement our words, rather than showing them to be hollow. Our leaders need to stop touting Iraq as a marvelous success story when even my six year old daughter can see it is not. There has been a tendency in recent years to confuse public diplomacy with public relations. The two are related, but they are not the same thing. Realizing that, above all, would be an excellent start.

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