

The government

perspective on Iraq

John Howard

A contest

Iraq is caught in a complex and crucial contest of values and ideals. It is a contest between the majority of Iraqis who want to establish a viable democracy, and a violent and determined minority who want to install a new dictator or a Taliban-style regime. It is a contest of will as the terrorists and insurgents try to use fear and intimidation to drive the forces that support the democratisation of Iraq—the coalition forces—out of Iraq.

Ultimately, it is a contest of conviction—whether the free world is prepared to protect and encourage democratic values. Those values Australians cherish—tolerance, opportunity, security and respect for one's neighbours.

A wide range of contending forces in Iraq have demonstrated they are prepared to use violence, against both coalition forces and the Iraqi people, in order to achieve their political objectives. Their motivations and their ambitions are complex, sometimes rooted in the old divisions between Sunni and Shia, or in ethnic and tribal tensions.

The jihadist terrorists—taking their inspiration from organisations like Al Qa'eda—are driven by a bigoted and distorted ideology that is the complete antithesis of our own and, we should remember, the vast majority of Muslims. But we also need to understand that this contest in Iraq represents a critical confrontation in the war against terror. We recognise this and so do our enemies.

Why we must stay

I find it astonishing when people claim that Iraq is a diversion from the real war against terrorism. The reality is that international terrorism has invested an enormous amount in breaking the will of the coalition in Iraq. Not only are organisations associated with Al Qa'eda operating in Iraq but each and every turn of the Iraq struggle is interpreted by spokesmen for international terrorism as part of the ongoing campaign against the United States and her allies.

Whatever may have been the origins of the horrific attack in Madrid, Al Qa'eda and its associates opportunistically associated that attack with Spain's

participation in the military operation in Iraq. The terrorists have recorded Spain's subsequent decision to withdraw from Iraq in the victory column against the West.

With that in mind, it is incontestable that a failure of will in Iraq by the coalition would be seen as an enormous propaganda victory for international terrorism. This would be a victory with far-reaching consequences. Any weakening or retreat by the coalition in Iraq will not appease the terrorists. Those who imagine that respite from future terrorist attacks can be purchased by withdrawing or temporising could not be more wrong.

International terrorism is an enemy of Australia because of who we are not what we have done. Australian withdrawal from Iraq would not buy immunity from terrorist attacks. International terrorism treats weakness and retreat with contempt. Countries, and their citizens, which have suffered terrorist attacks over recent years include those who have opposed as well as those who have supported coalition action in Iraq.

It will be a heavy blow to the terrorist cause if democracy and all that it offers is successfully brought to the Iraqi people. That is why the ferocious campaign of recent times to derail not only the transfer of power on 30 June, but also the establishment of a democratic infrastructure for Iraq, has been so determined.

The terrorists know that if democracy is installed in Iraq they have lost. Iraq is the key to creating new hope for the people of the Middle East. It will be a great encouragement for them to see democracy take root in Iraq, to witness a more equal distribution of wealth, and greater opportunity for ordinary people to live peaceful and independent lives.

It was very sobering during my recent meeting with William Shawcross, the well-known commentator on international events, to be reminded that out of the seven regions of the world, the UN Development Programme found that the Middle East region had the least freedom of all—fewer civil liberties, fewer political rights and less free media. Women's lives, in particular, are more restricted than anywhere else in the world.

Sadly, the appalling abuse of Iraqi detainees in Abu Ghraib prison will have caused many in the region to

question whether democracy will make a difference. They need to see that difference in action—that the victims of abuse are not only able, but encouraged to speak out, seek redress and find justice. We share their sense of outrage. The Australian Government unreservedly condemns any abuse of prisoners of war. We remain profoundly shocked and disturbed by the terrible images of wanton acts of cruelty and degradation—behaviour which dehumanises all those involved. Australia expects the American and British forces to observe the highest standards of discipline and conduct—just as we do of our own defence force personnel. We therefore welcome the statements by President Bush and Prime Minister Blair that there will be a full investigation with those responsible being brought to account through an open and transparent process.

It is important that these reprehensible actions of a few do not, however, overshadow the careful, disciplined and courageous behaviour of the overwhelming majority of the coalition forces. Their work in Iraq is too important. Their professionalism is too admirable. The stakes are too high. We should reject the line that the moral basis of coalition action in Iraq has been destroyed by the unacceptable behaviour of some of its personnel.

Helping Iraq build a democratic future represents not only a challenge but also an important opportunity for the whole region. That is why, irrespective of views held as to the wisdom of the original campaign against Saddam Hussein, it is overwhelmingly in the interests of not only the coalition but the cause of freedom around the world that the forces opposed to democracy in Iraq are overcome.

During my recent visit to Baghdad, I discussed the current situation with representatives of the Iraqi Governing Council. They asserted strongly that the majority of Iraqi people want a democratic future. But I was also reminded that that future hangs in the balance as events are passing through a critical phase. Iraq is poised between the establishment of a new democratic order and the resurgence of chaos and tyranny.

There is a job to be done in Iraq. My view remains that Australia should be contributing to that effort—if anything it has been strengthened and reinforced by the experience of my recent visit. I am more determined than ever that Australia should stay the distance and finish the tasks for which we have taken responsibility.

Why we went

We could spend a great deal of time revisiting the merits or otherwise of Australia's military commitment as part of the coalition of the willing. I do not intend to revisit in detail the events surrounding that decision. I would remind those who now want to rewrite history, however, that disagreement then centred on how the international community should respond to Iraq's continued non-compliance with UN resolutions. In the lead-up to coalition action, there was never any argument about the existence of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction.

The Australian government remains steadfast in our view that it was the right decision, taken in the long-term national interests of this country. The firm stand taken by the coalition against Saddam Hussein has contributed already, in my view, to some very significant improvements both for Iraq and for global security.

As a result of the coalition's action, Iraq is no longer ruled by a loathsome and homicidal dictator, and potentially hundreds of thousands of lives have been saved. Understandable anger at abuse and other wrongdoing by some coalition personnel should not result in our forgetting that, if the advice of last year's critics of coalition action had been taken, Saddam Hussein and his regime would still be brutalising Iraq.

Through its actions in Iraq the coalition has sent a clear signal to other rogue states and terrorist groups alike. The world is prepared to take a stand against actual and potential proliferators of weapons of mass destruction. This has already had some resonance. There is little doubt that the firm stand taken against Iraq has influenced countries such as Libya to give up weapons of mass destruction. I am not arguing that it was the sole motivating factor but I think it certainly conditioned the circumstances that resulted in Libya's change of heart.

But regardless of the positions people might have held in relation to the coalition's actions against Saddam Hussein, it is time to recognise that the situation in Iraq has moved on. Iraq, along with the caves of Afghanistan, the hills of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, and the haunts of Jema'ah Islamiyah in South East Asia, is now the front-line in the global fight against Islamist terrorism.

Violence and brutality, often against innocent civilians, are being used as a deliberate tactic in the ongoing campaign to undermine Iraq's hopes of representative government and a free society. If they succeed it will send out a very bad message not only through the Middle East but around the world. It will dishearten those who struggle for democracy and give confidence to repressive regimes and terrorists everywhere.

Friends and allies

If we lose heart, if we abandon our friends, if we choose to give the wrong signal to the terrorists, this will not only make the world a less safe place but also damage the reputation of this country around the world. We must remember it is in times of adversity that the value of friendship is most keenly felt, and it is in times of adversity and challenge that that friendship is tested.

Our presence in Iraq is read as an important and valued demonstration of Australia's support for her allies (not least the United States and the United Kingdom who continue to carry the major share of the burden). It is often forgotten, however, that close friends and partners of Australia in the Asia Pacific region, such as Japan, Korea and the Philippines, are also valued members of the coalition.

Our alliance with the United States was, unapologetically, a factor in the decision to join the

coalition. And it should be a factor in any consideration of our continued participation in the coalition. For Australia, there is nothing comparable to be found in any other relationship—nothing more relevant indeed to the challenges of the contemporary world.

Our view on Iraq is not, however, dictated by the United States. It is determined by consideration of Australia's national interest. This consideration has led us to the same conclusions as the Bush Administration: a stable democratic Iraq is important for world security and stability. Given the commonality of values and interests, it should come as no surprise that we have reached the same conclusions. Alliances are two-way processes and where we are in agreement—where we recognise a commonality of interest, we should not leave it to the United States to do all the heavy lifting just because it is the world's superpower. To do so would undermine the most important security relationship we have.

We understand, as do our other allies, that the United States is the only country that actually has the power to change the world for the better. That is what they are trying to do in Iraq. Surely even the most passionate opponents of our involvement in the Iraq war, even the greatest sceptics about the American alliance, can see that right at the moment, when the threat posed by terrorism is so potent, we should be aligning ourselves strongly with countries like America and Britain, and other proven friends and allies. In this context, the actuality of our presence in Iraq is very important.

Not symbolism

I felt very privileged to spend ANZAC Day this year with the Australians currently serving in Iraq and to be able to convey to them, personally, the thanks and good wishes of the Australian community. They are engaged in very important, dangerous work and our recognition and support are very important to them.

There was nothing symbolic about the attitude and demeanour of the men and women I met on ANZAC Day—they take their role seriously and so does the government. Surely no thinking person could describe the crew of the HMAS *Stuart*, for instance, as merely symbols as they fished American personnel out of the water following the suicide attacks on Iraqi oil refineries last March. I am sure the staff of the Australian diplomatic mission in Baghdad do not regard the detachment of ADF personnel assigned to their protection as symbolic. To view the ADF presence as symbolic is not only factually inaccurate—it is insulting.

The current situation

While in Baghdad, I also had the opportunity to talk to Ambassador Paul Bremer, the Coalition Provisional Authority Administrator, and American field commanders, about the reconstruction effort and the current security environment. The recent outbreak of

violence has been very serious but we do need to keep a sense of proportion. We have to remember that while the situation has deteriorated in certain areas, it has improved and continues to improve in others.

The coalition is making progress in restoring order in those areas affected by violence. This lawlessness is not indicative of a mass uprising. Media reports of widespread loss of control across central and southern Iraq are, in fact, an exaggeration and misreading of a complex situation. The north of the country remains relatively peaceful and most of the south is now reasonably stable.

But violence and brutality are deliberate tactics in the campaign to undermine Iraq's hopes of representative government and a free society. We must expect that the insurgent and terrorist groups, including foreign Islamist militants and jihadists, former regime elements, disaffected Sunni nationalists and political opportunists, will continue to use violence in a bid to disrupt the political transition and reconstruction.

The fight against the insurgents and illegal militias is not easy. They have shown complete contempt for Iraqi civilians. They routinely launch their attacks from mosques, schools and markets—using innocent people as cover and knowingly exposing them to danger. As so brutally demonstrated in Basra—a busload of children on their way to school are of no account provided the target is hit. Civilians are, in the dreadful language of terror, the 'soft targets'.

But despite these serious security challenges, significant progress has been made over the last year to rebuild Iraq. The coalition has made steady progress in restoring basic services and infrastructure and reviving the Iraqi economy. Electricity, water, telephone and sanitation are gradually being restored to pre-war levels or above. Peak power production is greater than it was before the war, as well as being much more equitably distributed. Six major water-treatment plants have been rehabilitated. More than 15,000 mobile telephones are sold each week—under Saddam Hussein mobile phones were outlawed. Total telephone subscriptions have now passed the one million mark—20 per cent higher than under Saddam Hussein's regime.

All the universities are open and 2500 schools have been rehabilitated throughout the country. All 240 hospitals as well as 1200 health clinics are operating. More than three million Iraqi children under the age of five have been immunised against preventable disease. Public-health spending is now close to 60 times greater than under the Hussein regime—when it was virtually non-existent. Some 255 municipal councils have been established since July 2003. The Central Criminal Court is operating. Iraq has a single unified currency for the first time in 15 years.

Crude oil production is already around pre-war levels. The difference now is that the benefits flow directly to the Iraqi people. The Coalition has also invested in 18,000 reconstruction projects, providing thousands of jobs for local Iraqis as well as infrastructure for their

future. Inflation is stable at around 20 per cent after the terrible hyperinflation experienced during Saddam Hussein's regime. Real GDP is forecast to recover by 30 per cent in 2004. Another very positive sign is the return of government ministries to Iraqi authority, including the Ministry of Agriculture, an area where Australia is making a significant contribution.

Moreover, Iraq now has a growing and robust independent media, which is absolutely essential for the development and maintenance of a healthy democracy. Even the harshest critic of the coalition's activities would find it difficult to argue against the fact that, in large parts of Iraq, the situation is better than it was twelve months ago and measurably better than it was under Saddam Hussein.

What is the outlook for Iraq

In April, the Iraqi Governing Council adopted a landmark Transitional Administrative Law, protecting the basic human rights of all Iraqis and laying out the roadmap for an elected Iraqi government. After 35 years of ruthless oppression and misrule, Iraq will have free elections and a representative government. The Iraqi interim government will be installed on 30 June 2004. It will be replaced in January 2005 by an Iraqi transitional government with broader powers, which in turn will be replaced by a new Iraqi Government following a referendum on a constitution and fresh national elections scheduled for the end of 2005.

The United Nations special envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi actively consulted a wide range of Iraqi groups to develop workable arrangements for the interim government. A new UN Security Council resolution expresses the support of the international community for the new political arrangements. In this context, we also strongly support the role of the United Nations in helping prepare elections for a transitional and then a permanent Iraqi administration.

In referring to this role for the United Nations, I note calls by the Leader of the Opposition for the coalition to withdraw from Iraq and be replaced by, and I quote, 'a UN force that has strong involvement of Arab states'. This suggestion ignores the facts. The multinational force in Iraq, composed of over thirty countries led by the United States, is already fully sanctioned by the UN Security Council. There are strong international precedents for this approach

It is quite unrealistic to suggest that this arrangement should now be replaced by a UN 'blue helmet' operation. Such an operation would depend on voluntary contributions but there is no sign of the required willingness on the part of a wider range of countries, including Arab States, to contribute peacekeepers to a UN force. Nor is it at all certain that the Iraqis would welcome the presence of armed forces from neighbouring countries.

Even when the Iraqi interim government is in control there is still likely to be a pressing need for a continued coalition presence. Iraq will continue to depend on

coalition forces to provide security and respond to threats of violence and terrorism. As General Abizaid of US Central Command has acknowledged, it will take time to establish credible and capable Iraqi security forces.

Progress is being made. Close to 200,000 Iraqi security personnel are already on duty and recent polling indicates that the general public's confidence in the Iraqi security forces is increasing rapidly. I am proud that Australia is assisting to build those forces.

No one imagined that the task would be easy. And perhaps the task is harder than we first thought. In the euphoria that followed the toppling of Saddam Hussein, some hoped that Iraq's post-war transition could be accomplished relatively quickly. The reality is that the transition period has been, and will continue to be, difficult and more difficult than we might have hoped.

The next few months in Iraq will be critical both politically and militarily if the timetable for transition to democracy is to be achieved. It is likely that the violence will increase as extremists, the supporters of the old regime and political opportunists try desperately to disrupt the process.

Nevertheless, 30 June 2004 represents an important milestone on the road to Iraqis controlling their social, economic and political future.

What are Australia's objectives

One of Australia's key objectives in Iraq is to help achieve the stability needed to establish and support democratic institutions and processes. While the coalition forces currently provide the bulk of security, and will need to do so for some time, we know that this role will be assumed by a properly trained Iraqi military and police as soon as is practicable. That is why Australian Defence Force personnel are in Iraq helping to train Iraqi army and navy personnel. That is why Australian Federal Police officers will assist in the training of Iraq's new police force.

We also want to contribute to Iraq's economic rehabilitation. We have focused our effort on areas where we have particular expertise—agriculture, economic management, governance capacity building, donor coordination and human rights investigations. Australian advisers are working directly with Iraqis to build their capacity to take responsibility for long-term agricultural policy planning and providing expertise in agricultural research.

We have helped to re-establish the Ministry of Agriculture, set up a payments system for the 2003 harvest and used our experience to help Iraqi farmers bring in the bumper Summer grains harvest. Australian experts have also been deployed to help rehabilitate water and sanitation services, emergency services, oil production, update Iraqi law—including economic and commercial law, assist in the preparation of a credible budget—the first in 30 years, and provide expertise for the criminal investigation into human rights abuses during Saddam Hussein's rule.

Our ADF Air Traffic Control Detachment has also played an important role in ensuring one of Iraq's essential infrastructure installations—the Baghdad airport functions effectively. This year's budget included continued funding of our involvement in Iraq until 30 June 2005. That does not mean we are going to leave on that date, or any specific date, but simply means that we are making prudent provision for being in Iraq for a while yet.

When can our forces leave Iraq? The answer can only be—when the jobs assigned to respective force elements have been completed. It is impossible to be more precise than that. As each milestone along the path to a more democratic Iraq is passed, the time of coalition force withdrawal draws nearer.

Iraq is a test

When the government announced on 18 March 2003 that we had committed Australian Defence Force elements to the coalition of the willing, we made a commitment to the people of Iraq. We undertook to help them build a new

nation, one which would respect the rights of all its citizens and one that was at peace with itself and with its neighbours.

We also made a commitment to our long-term friends and allies to stand with them in the fight against WMD proliferation and terrorism. Iraq is an important test for the world's democracies, including Australia. It is a test of values—whether the powerful call for freedom can overcome the destructive force of terror. Ultimately, it is a test of character and leadership—whether we possess the necessary determination and resolve to meet our commitment to the Iraqi people or whether we will retreat in a pointless attempt at isolationism. I know Australia, for its part, can meet this test, because denying terrorists their victories and playing our role in ensuring global stability is something that I believe the Australian people, whatever their politics, overwhelmingly want. ♦

John Howard is the Prime Minister of Australia. This article is based on his address to the Institute of Public Affairs in Melbourne on 19 May 2004.

Conference Calendar

ADA members and other *Defender* readers may be interested in the following public conferences and activities:

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Defence and Industry 2004

21-23 June 2004, National Convention Centre, Canberra

Enquiries: (02) 6265-5638 or <www.defenceindustry2004.communicationlink.com.au>

Land Warfare Studies Centre Rowell Profession of Arms Seminar

Ethics, Moral Values and the Australian Military Profession in the 21st Century

15 July 2004, Telstra Theatre, Australian War Memorial, Canberra

Enquiries: (02) 6265-9890

Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies Conference 2004

Internal Drivers for Security Policy: Looking to the Future-Australia in 2025

06 August 2004, Blamey Theatre, Australian Defence College, Canberra

Enquiries: (02) 6266-0652

Australian Defence Force Academy and Engineers Australia

Homeland Security Conference 2004, Safeguarding Australia

24-25 August 2004, National Convention Centre, Canberra

Enquiries: (02) 9420-2020 or <www.homelandsecurityconference.org.au>

Royal Australian Air Force Conference 2004

The Future of Air Power: Network-Enabled Air Forces

16-17 September 2004, National Convention Centre, Canberra

Enquiries: (02) 6287-6563

Land Warfare Conference 2004

Weapons, Webs and Warfighter

27-30 September 2004, Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre

Enquiries: (08) 8259-5455 or <www.dsto.defence.gov.au/corporate/conferences/landwarfare>

Chief of Army History Conference 2004

Battles Near and Far: Operational Deployment in Theory and Practice

14-15 October 2004, National Convention Centre, Canberra

Enquiries: (02) 6266-2744 or <www.army.gov.au/ahu/events>

Australian Institute of Professional Intelligence Officers 13th Annual Conference

Success involves more than luck. It requires intelligence

19-21 October 2004, Hilton-on-the-Park, Melbourne

Enquiries: (03) 6234-1424