

Iraq teeters on edge despite US troop 'departure'

Six years of war and insurgency. Hundreds of thousands of people dead, missing or injured, and one in every 10 displaced. Economic chaos everywhere. Basic infrastructure barely functioning. Everywhere, every moment, the omnipresent fear of a sudden, violent death. And yet last week, splattered across our television screens, brave pictures of happy Iraqi soldiers bearing flags and celebrating the "departure" of United States soldiers.



NICHOLAS STUART

However, pan back from the close-up of the locals supposedly taking over, and it becomes obvious that these images are from inside Baghdad's green zone – well away from the bombs still ripping apart life from the streets outside. Success is no longer an elusive dream, but peace has not yet come to Iraq. Our diplomats in Baghdad still require a security detachment of more than 100 soldiers for basic protection. The danger of the detachment's task is represented by the awarding of medals. Baghdad still has a long way to go before anything resembling "normality" returns.

people died violently last month – twice the number killed in May, with 75 dead after one bomb in the capital and another 80 murdered by an explosion in the northern city of Kirkuk. This explains why the US soldiers aren't really "departing". Now they'll occupy a smaller number of massive bases on the edges of the cities. The boundary of Baghdad has been specially redrawn so one of the biggest cantonments, the sprawling Camp Victory, is now outside city limits. But more than 130,000 US soldiers remain inside Iraq. Some of them will still be "backing up" the Iraqi forces for another 14 months.

The key to their real departure now, as always, will be the establishment of a viable government that can bring some degree of stability to the country, Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki

called for celebrations as the Americans reduced their visible footprint, but he's well aware of the need for their continued presence behind the scenes. If they left, things could fall apart in a matter of weeks. Too many rival groups continue the fight.

A couple of days after the official departure ceremonies took place, another ritual could be seen in the Shi'ite stronghold of Sadr City, also inside the capital. After weekly prayers there it's become customary to denounce the "foreign devils" and burn a few US flags. In Sunni-dominated Anbar province the US has bought peace. It's now paying former insurgents and placing them in re-formed units as part of a desperate attempt to stop them fighting the central government. Adding to the combustible situation are the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq, (suspected to be behind much of last month's violence) and the Kurds in the north of the country, who appear absolutely determined to wrest as much independence as they can from the Arabs in Baghdad. Uniting four strong, disparate forces, with diametrically opposed objectives, is a seemingly impossible task.

What has been achieved is already remarkable. The country has been held together. George W. Bush's decision to surge the numbers of soldiers engaging the insurgency, and giving them the task to protect the people rather than just hunt for terrorists, has proved to be correct.

At that time Barack Obama had wanted to simply ship out and head home. But the view must look different when you're sitting in the White House, because now he's agreed to leave the soldiers in Iraq and cross his fingers, hoping their background presence will support al-Maliki and prevent further disintegration. The plan makes sense. The new strategy is for the US forces to cordon off and protect the vulnerable cities, preventing insurgents from moving between areas to cause further chaos. The Iraqi soldiers will supposedly take over responsibility for security in built-up areas, while still being able to call on the Americans if they need back-up. The key question is: Will the soldiers be prepared to die for al-Maliki's administration. Or will the centrifugal forces, pulling the country apart, be strong enough to

finally overcome the centre once it lacks the spine provided by the Americans. The over-arching factor – the key to determining the final result – is time. Normal conflicts are won by the application of critical mass at the decisive point, but insurgencies are not like this. Victory will be achieved by the side that can stomach the fight for the longest period, not necessarily the one that kills more of the enemy. When the US appointed Jerry Bremer to run Iraq in 2003, one of his first (and most stupid) acts was to disband the army. Disaffected, armed former soldiers became a rump of support for the insurgency. The country has never recovered. The surge was an attempt to buy time for the central government to convince people that central authority still meant something. The next few months will display the real trajectory of the country's future.

Another reminder of the transience of power came with the US sweep through Helmand province in Afghanistan last week. Pictures showed US soldiers deploying in front of old irrigation channels. What they probably didn't realise was those same ditches were

built with US aid in the 1960's and '70s. More than \$US70 million had been sunk into the local infrastructure. It was the Cold War, and until Soviet forces invaded in 1979 the US supported the farmers. Then decay set in; the water channels collapsed; agriculture buckled and opium poppy cultivation took over.

Today the Americans are back, but it's far from certain they'll stay. While this question mark hangs over their presence, it's difficult for the locals to commit wholeheartedly to backing the Government. Why cooperate to defeat the insurgency if a rebel will be the last man standing. The terrorists just need to move elsewhere while the US occupies the ground. Then, when the sweep moves on, the rebels can return – exacting a harsh vengeance on anyone who's helped the invaders. Only a successful local administration – a good or a strong one – will be able to harness time, turning it into the factor that will win the battle. It remains to be seen whether either Afghanistan or Iraq has politicians who can win.

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G8 loses way to point of nothing

OLIVER MARC HARTWICH

A hectic sequence of state banquets, photo opportunities and diplomatic excitement followed by a declaration as solemn as meaningless – that's all we can expect of the G8 summit in Italy this week. We know this because we've been there before. After 34 years of G-something summits, it's time someone told these self-proclaimed world leaders that their time is over. The greatest disasters often begin with a good idea. If you wait long enough, you will see how "wisdom becomes nonsense" as Mephistopheles explains in Goethe's *Faust*. This is the story of the G8, and the devil could not have written a better script.

The original idea behind the Group of Eight, or the Group of Six as it was initially, was to summon a small number of statesmen for informal talks. The 1970s world economy was rattled by the oil crisis. Geopolitics was all about the confrontation between the United States, the Soviet Union, and their respective allies. The G6 and later the G7 were part of the West's response to these economic and security threats. As an institution of its time, the G7 made perfect political and strategic sense. A forum of the world's dominant Western democracies was the obvious place to discuss the oil crisis and the Cold War. Driven by people such as French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, the G7 resembled a gentlemen's club, not a formalised institution. Tellingly, the first meeting took place in the small French chateau of Rambouillet, not in a high-tech Paris conference centre.

The bloc-to-bloc confrontation of the past is being replaced by a new multi-polar order. The Cold War is over, the Soviet Union has disappeared, Giscard d'Estaing and Schmidt are enjoying their retirement, China and India are emerging as new superpowers, but the G8 still exists. Confronted with a new world order and crises for which it was never intended, it struggles for relevance. It is becoming obvious that the G8 has outlived its usefulness.

Going back through past G8 communiqués of the past, it is clear how over-ambition and incapacity can go hand in hand. The 1992 summit expressed concern over excessive public deficits and rising levels of debt – to no avail. In 1997 the leaders stated "the importance of avoiding exchange rates that could lead to the re-emergence of large external imbalances", but the US trade deficit kept ballooning regardless. In 2001, the G8 said "we underscore the importance of focusing on steps to increase opportunities for trade", yet the world did not need to hold its breath for a breakthrough in World Trade Organisation talks.

The G8 record on international security issues is no better either. At the 1995 summit, the leaders expressed their desire for an improved early warning system to alert the United Nations to the impending crises. This sounded good although the people of Darfur or the Zimbabweans would not have noticed any difference. It is questionable whether the G7 leaders really believed North Korea would listen when they urged it not to withdraw from the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty in 1993. We know what has happened since.

Time and again the G8 has shown itself unable to let action follow its finely crafted declarations. But this has not stopped it from promising to: eradicate poverty, stop climate change and bring peace to the Middle East. The list of good intentions declared at G8 summits is endless.

It is no coincidence that G8 summits do not deliver on their promises because the G8 was never meant to deliver on anything. It is an informal institution with the limited goal of facilitating an exchange of opinions between heads of government. Not less, but definitely not more.

That the G8 was a product of its time is clear just by looking at its member states. If a similar consultation process was begun today, no one in his right mind would think that a country such as Italy had to be part of it. The only thing its Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi can bring to this year's summit is entertainment value. Nor is it clear what advice British Prime Minister Gordon Brown can offer on the global economy after presiding over his own country's economic downfall.

The G8 deserves a special mention in the history books for its role in the 1970s and '80s, but only to the history books does it belong. In its current form, the G8 has managed to be even weaker than the sum of its parts. Wisdom has become nonsense, and the wise thing to do now is not to make the G8 bigger or more representative but to abolish it.

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Values blur in good and evil

America's fight for freedom and democracy means little if it doesn't take responsibility for its practices of torture, IRFAN YUSUF writes

Uncle Sam stands at the top of a flight of stairs, looking more than slightly perplexed. Below him is a windowless chamber – its sparse furnishings consist of a lamp, a wooden bench and a closet shaped roughly to the contours of a human body, spikes emerging from its rear wall. A man hangs from the roof, his ankles bound. Below him stand a Caucasian man dressed in a Nazi uniform, a hooded Spanish inquisitor brandishing a sword and a third man in military fatigues and an Arab head-dress.

All three are watching Uncle Sam, inviting him to join them, the third man stating: "C'mon down. Once you take the first step, it's easy." What I've just described in words is a cartoon by Philadelphia Inquirer cartoonist Tony Auth. It's only now, with debate over the use of torture in the "war on terror", that we're discovering just how deep the Leader of the Free World had descended.

The frequent mantra recited by Western political masters was that we were in a war against terrorists who hated us because of who we are, because of our values. Terrorists despised us for being civilised. They wanted to replace notions such as democracy and the rule of law, which we stood for, with terror and lawlessness. This was a war for civilisation, a fight to defend freedom. Yet within a mere six months of the 9/11 attacks, top officials of the CIA were happy to flout the rule of law and to breach the very values they claimed to protect.

To use the words of North Carolina Senator Lindsay Graham, the Bush administration saw the law as a nicety we could not afford. This new lawlessness incorporated the use of harsh interrogation techniques (read torture) such as waterboarding. In this torture, a prisoner is bound to an inclined board, his feet raised and his head slightly below the feet; then cloth is wrapped over his face and water is poured over him. Unavoidably, the prisoners gag reflex is activated and he feels convinced he is drowning. One CIA prisoner, Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libbi, is said to have been subjected to waterboarding that proved so effective that he provided false evidence of a link between al-Qaeda and the former Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein which led to the 2003 invasion. Al-Libbi made these fabricated claims as he was terrified of further harsh treatment.

Even if we accepted claims by United States lawmakers that torture was used to protect Americans, al-Libbi's torture was clearly used for political purposes to justify a war the Bush administration was determined to fight even before the first jets hit the World Trade Center. Once evil means are adopted even for seemingly noble ends, the lines between good and evil soon become blurred. Al-Libbi's treatment is just the tip of the iceberg. Thousands of people have been detained in various US detention facilities, both known and secret, including in Indonesia, Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Guantanamo Bay.

Among them were two Australian citizens – David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib. Yet while US media seem almost fixated with the role



that Republican and Democrat lawmakers and US government officials played in ordering and executing torture of detainees, few Australian journalists have considered what role (if any) the Australian government may have played or at least what knowledge it may have had of the torture of Australian citizens at Guantanamo Bay.

And yet now the US is reluctant to settle Guantanamo detainees on its own territory. Meanwhile US President Barack Obama is reluctant to release further documents and photos of torture conducted by the CIA for fear it will further inflame tensions. It is this very secrecy which provides a perfect cover for even more abuse.

Regardless of how painful the process may be, the US must take responsibility for the consequences of its inquisition. Yet all we

seem to be hearing from Obama is empty rhetoric about how the US does not torture – the same rhetoric used by his predecessor. Obama chose Cairo as the location to give his speech to the nominally Muslim world. Cairo was also the place where Australian citizen Mamdouh Habib was sent by the US to have terrorism confessions extracted from him using the most brutal forms of torture. In his memoir *My Story: the tale of a terrorist who wasn't*, Habib outlined not just his own torture but also the suffering of other inmates also beaten and drugged.

During his Cairo address to an audience of political leaders and diplomats from Muslim-majority states, Obama admitted the US had acted contrary to its ideals by instituting torture. Yet among governments represented were those which will continue to implement

the US policy of extraordinary rendition or the secret abduction and transfer of prisoners to countries that will carry out torture on behalf of the US. The *Washington Post* reported on February 1, 2009, that Obama issued executive orders allowing the CIA to carry on with renditions. He further allowed the CIA to detain suspects in facilities used only to hold people on a short-term, transitory basis. America will effectively now outsource Guantanamo-type operations to the generals, sheikhs, colonels, dictators and presidents-for-life who will no doubt torture not just those deemed terror suspects by the US but also domestic political opponents. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recently urged all those

involved in the torture process – including doctors, nurses, psychologists and lawyers – to be pursued and not let off the hook. Australia and New Zealand can play a role in this process, given that both are the only two nations in the Pacific region to have ratified the Convention Against Torture. Yet given the lacklustre performance on the part of John Howard and Kevin Rudd on the treatment of former Australian citizen detainees at Guantanamo, one cannot expect too much from Australia. Terrorists may hate us for our values, but clearly we don't seem to like our values too much either.

■ Irfan Yusuf's first book *Once Were Radicals* about young Muslims flirting with radical Islam was published by Allen & Unwin in May 2009.

In a safety drive, try sharing a Bunda Street space

Slow down and remove signs for new way, TONY SHIELDS and ASHLEY CARRUTHERS write

While many things about Canberra live up to the romantic image of the "bush capital", its roads haven't exactly been bucolic of late. Dismayed at the carnage that has taken place this year – the death toll stands at eight already – Chief Minister and Minister for Transport Jon Stanhope wants to change the way we drive. His "Vision Zero" calls for zero tolerance of speeding and drink driving, and zero fatalities. In a city of drivers hell-bent on getting where they're going pronto, these are fighting words. Less this brave call disappear into the noise of revving engines, all concerned road users need to grasp it as an invitation to join an open debate on safety and inclusiveness on our roads.

In this spirit, we'd like to make an apparently outrageous proposition: slowing down and driving safely could be fun. "Yeah, right," we hear you say. "No, really." What if safe driving didn't mean "more rules" but rather "no rules"? This concept underpins the growing "shared space" movement started by recently departed Dutchman Hans Monderman, who came as close to rock-star status as a traffic engineer might ever reasonably be expected to. An only partly reconstructed revhead ("I like to drive really fast on the autobahn"), Monderman advocated that removing traffic signs, lights and other controls from carefully selected locations would lead to slower speeds and a safer road environment. Disregarding a century of traffic engineering focused on separating and hyper-regulating drivers and other road users, Monderman wanted to throw them back into the mix together, and have them sort out it for themselves. Reintroducing ambiguity thus would make driving less robotic and more of a negotiation; less competitive and more cooperative;

and less aggressive and more social. This unlikely strategy has already been implemented in towns and parts of major CBDs throughout Europe. Everywhere it has been tried, driving speeds have slowed, walking and cycling have increased, and incidents have been reduced – in some places by half. The increased foot traffic has increased retail sales too. In 2008, Bendigo joined the revolution with a five-year program to re-engineer its entire city centre into a shared space, a world first. This year Barrack Street in Sydney's CBD also went "naked", and last week Sydney Mayor Clover Moore announced plans for many more shared streets. Clearly this strategy could work only in carefully selected locations in Canberra. In this sparsely populated and spread-out city we need high-volume arteries to move people

quickly. But that doesn't mean the car has to dominate everywhere. Bunda Street in Civic, soon due for a \$4 million makeover, would be an ideal place to trial a shared space. Bunda Street doesn't need to shift high volumes of traffic, but does need to have vehicle access and some parking. A shared Bunda Street could showcase the urban buzz that Civic can produce by allowing walkers, shoppers, filmgoers and cafe socialites to confidently take their places on it. The message that the space is shared could be sent to drivers by flattening the kerbs and continuing the paving surface in City Walk out across the street, among other measures. Visual amenity would be improved by this uniform surface, as well as the removal of most signs, road markings and barriers. As in Barrack Street, you could set up streetside kiosks selling

newspapers, fruit and vegies, giving it a vaguely Parisian feel. This complex environment itself would calm traffic by giving off an "approach with caution" vibe. In such an environment, people on foot and bikes will be emboldened to claim their share of the street. People in vehicles will have to slow down and become part of the scene rather than rushing through it. Revheads having trouble with this concept could think of it as akin to the "cruising" part of Summerbats, where you slow down to a crawl to show off your wheels, and perhaps parts of your anatomy, to the admiring crowd. Monderman might have needed some cultural translation of this concept, but would have recognised it as a form of the social driving he advocated. All road users would have to adapt to make a shared space on Bunda Street a success. But if we got the

formula right, we could conceivably create an environment that would seduce distracted parents in gleaming 4WDs, impatient men in white vans, lycra-clad Cadel Evans' impersonators, BMX bandits, skate punks and mobile phone-gazing sleepwalkers out of their self-centred reveries. We might even find ourselves becoming a community of mutually respectful road users rather than one of nervous wrecks one short black away from road rage meltdown. Driving down Bunda Street could become an educational experience in how good our roads could be – one which could kickstart the major shift in our road culture that we so badly need.

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