

George Bush's Iraq

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Throwing Grenades in the Global Economic Cockpit

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Juan Cole on George Bush's Iraq (part one)

Throwing Grenades in the Global Economic Cockpit An Interview with Juan Cole (Part 2)

By MWC Editor At Large Tom Engelhardt

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The next day, at his *Informed Comment* website, Juan Cole posted a response in which he wrote, "I just cannot understand this sort of argument," and then laid out the nature of his disagreement with it in some detail. This started several days of debate among various experts, scholars, and bloggers at his site (and elsewhere) which resulted in Cole rethinking his position somewhat and issuing an eloquent call for American ground troops to be withdrawn from Iraq. (If you haven't read it, you should!)

This debate and discussion provides the basis for the second half of Tomdispatch's interview with Cole. My own thoughts on withdrawal can be found at *Withdrawal on the Agenda*, a June 2005 updating of a piece, *Time of Withdrawal*, I wrote six months after the fall of Baghdad. You should also know that I consider the "nightmare scenario" Cole lays out below but one (frightening) possibility in Iraq's future. Based on memories of the Vietnam era, I'm wary of all predictions about the horrors that are bound to occur if the United States were to withdraw, or withdraw too quickly, as well as fears of a "bloodbath-to-come." This is a complex issue I hope to take up in a dispatch later in the week. Meanwhile, onward.

Tomdispatch: Now I want to turn to the issue of withdrawal. I've been particularly impressed that, at your site, you post your own intellectual development, so to speak -- and that includes putting up letters and essays by people who take you on. This is unbelievably rare. The reader can actually see a brain at work, regularly reassessing a changing situation. It's been especially true on the question of the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq. Having gone back recently to read your site's earliest months, it's obvious that you've become fiercer and angrier as time has gone on in relation to the Bush administration. You recently wrote a piece saying that U.S. ground troops must come out now, "for the good of Iraq, for the good of America." Would you discuss the development of your thoughts on this? Where are you now on the issue of withdrawal and how it might happen?

Juan Cole: The first thing I should say is I'm not under any illusion that it matters a great deal what I think on the subject.

TD: [Laughs.] Neither of us is exactly capable of withdrawing American troops from Iraq. I'm endlessly aware of this when people call for one plan or another. I think, wait a minute...

JC: [Laughs.] When you're talking about the debates I hold with my readers and the way I put up critiques of my position, what academic life has to offer is open debate and being honest about your sources, about how you come to a conclusion. The whole point of my blog is to attempt to represent the life of the mind in a public forum. I view what I do as different from politics where you want to stay on message, stay on point. You want to put out an image, a position and stick to it. You make fun of your opponent for waffling or being indecisive. But what serious thinker hasn't gone back and forth? You'd have to be crazy if you didn't consider other options than the one you initially started out with or if, over time, experience didn't sometimes cause you to take a different position.

You know, Whitman said: "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes." That's the American spirit, so I'm happy to debate these things, reveal my thinking, and let the world see how one intellectual concerned with the Middle East deals with the array of information that's coming at us over time.

Well, I'm now really worried about what the outcome in Iraq might mean for the Middle East, for the United States, and for the world. I'm really, really worried and I can think up some nightmare scenarios...

TD: Give me one...

JC: Say the U.S. and its allies draw down their troops -- and it's very clear, the allies are pfffft! Everybody's announced that, after the December 15th election, they're going to draw down. But if a withdrawal is done in the wrong way, or unwisely, here's what could happen:

You've already got this low-intensity sectarian war going on in a province like Babel. Twenty-two guys'll show up dead in the morning, bullets behind their ears, mafia-style. They'll be Shiites or they'll be Sunnis. So you know the two sides -- at night, when the U.S. can't see them so well -- are already fighting it out with each other. And it's over land. Babel province was traditionally heavily Shiite. Saddam expelled Shiites and brought in Sunnis. It was part of his planting of Sunnis.

TD: As in Kirkuk...

JC: That was Arabization, this was Sunnitization. So let's say the U.S. is not around much anymore, what's going to happen if you have a whole brigade of Sunni fighters come down from Mahmudiyah and attack Hila? That sort of thing happened in Lebanon during the civil war. These neighborhood militias can become armies and leave their areas to wage war against other neighborhood militias that become armies. Now, if that started happening, and if the Sunni Arabs started to win, it's inevitable that the Revolutionary Guards will come across the border from Iran to help the Shiites. Iran's not going to sit by and allow Iraq's Shiites to be massacred. If that happened, the Saudis, the Jordanians, and the Syrian Sunnis are not going to stand by either and let Iranian Revolutionary Guards massacre Sunni Arabs in reprisal. They're going to come in. You could simultaneously be having Kurdish massacres of Turkmen which would bring Turkey in. So you could end up with a regional low-intensity war. Think of the Spanish Civil War.

Back in the 1980s, Saddam Hussein and Khomeini fought a war with one another for eight years, but on the whole they avoided hitting each other's oil facilities. Both understood that doing that would reduce their countries to fourth-world states. So there was a kind of mutually-assured-destruction doctrine between them, which is possible between states. But in the guerrilla war in Iraq, the Sunni guerrillas have already pioneered using pipeline sabotage and oil sabotage...

TD: I'm actually surprised that such sabotage has yet to make it to the Caspian pipelines or elsewhere.

JC: Well, it could still spread. In August of 2004, when the Marines were fighting the Muqtada al-Sadr people in Najaf, the Sadrists in Basra did make threats to start pipeline sabotage in the south, which really would have crippled Iraq. In a regional guerrilla war, there would be a lot of impetus for Sunni guerrillas to hit the Iranian pipelines, and there are some Sunni tribes in the oil-producing areas of Iran who might be enlisted for this purpose. If the Saudis got involved, then the radical Shiites have an impetus to hit the Saudi pipelines, and the Saudi petroleum facilities are in a heavily Shiite area. Basically, what we've learned from Iraq is that petroleum is produced in a human-security environment in which powerful local forces want it to be produced. If some significant proportion of the local forces doesn't want it to be produced, they can spoil it.

TD: As in Nigeria...

JC: We have seen this all over the world. We focus on states, but states can't provide security for hundreds of miles of pipeline. It's literally impossible. So think what you're talking about here. Something on the order of 80-84 million barrels of petroleum are produced every day in the world. Saudi Arabia produces 9 of that reliably, sometimes more. Iran produces 4. On a good day, Iraq used to produce almost 3. Now it's down to somewhere around 1.8 million. If you took all of that off the market, that's about a fifth of world petroleum production. Do you know what that's going to do to prices!

If you don't like three-dollar-a-gallon gasoline, you're going to really hate this kind of world I'm painting. I think the price shock would reduce economic growth globally, plunging some countries into recession or even depression. This would be a world-class catastrophe. And it's also not clear, once it starts, how you stop it.

TD: In this context, you still called recently for U.S. ground troops to be brought out now.

JC: Because I'm not convinced that U.S. ground troops are preventing this kind of scenario from happening.

TD: So talk a little about your thinking on withdrawal.

JC: Well, my concern is that U.S. ground troops are being used at the moment for things like the Fallujah operation, the Tal Afar operation, or now the Haditha operation. This essentially means using the troops to attack cities which are Sunni Arab (or in the case of Tal Afar, Sunni Turkmen). These are seen as bastions of the guerrilla movement and facilitators of the infiltration of foreign fighters into the country. To empty them of their populations, to flatten entire neighborhoods, to do extensive infrastructural and building damage to them, to reduce their inhabitants to tent dwellers and refugees, and maybe gradually let them back in to live in tents on the rubble of their former homes -- this way of proceeding has no chance of success as an anti-insurgency tactic. People in other cities see this happening and they sympathize with their fellow Sunnis.

The hope for counterinsurgency would involve three things. Of course, you'd have to hit people who are blowing up innocent civilians. You'd have to try to stop that, but you'd also have to open backchannels to their political leadership and try to find ways to bring them into the system. And you have to convince the general population not to support them. Operations like Fallujah, Tal Afar, and Haditha might have some limited effect -- I think not very much -- in fighting the guerrilla movement. But they do not cause the political leadership to come in from the cold or the general Sunni population to think well enough about the U.S. and its Iraqi allies to start informing on that movement.

So things are only getting worse in the Sunni areas. People forget that a year ago, before the second Fallujah campaign, Mosul was being held up as a model. It had been governed by General [David H.] Petraeus. It seemed like it might be possible to woo the Sunni Arabs there. But during the Fallujah campaign Mosul exploded. Four thousand police resigned. Guerrillas en masse took over checkpoints throughout the city. There were bombings and it never really has settled down again. As al-Zaman [the Times of Baghdad] reported recently, Northern Mosul is now essentially guerrilla-held territory.

TD: And after fifteen months on the job, Petraeus, who was also responsible for "standing up" the Iraqi Army, has just been reassigned to the United States.

JC: He's been replaced, which indicates to me that the whole thing is not going very well. It may be that he was given an impossible job.

So, if the U.S. ground troops are going to be used in this way, then they're just creating more guerrillas over time. I don't see evidence of progress here but of deterioration. It's looking more and more like Algeria in the early 1960s rather than the mid-50s when the French were having some success against the guerrilla movement in Algiers. Therefore, it seems to me, we ought to get the ground troops out and stop using them this way to empty cities, destroy neighborhoods, and pursue what is frankly a punitive and scorched-earth policy towards the Sunni Arab population.

TD: I've been calling it the Carthaginian solution.

JC: Yes, and in the context of modern guerrilla war it's possibly the worst way to proceed. But unlike some of my friends to the left of me -- and I'm not sure it's even a left-right issue since the libertarians feel the same way -- I think it's really dangerous just to up and leave altogether and allow Iraq to fall into civil war. People say the most amazing things. Like, "Well, Iraq is already in civil war, so why would it matter if we left?" No! No! No! This is the stage before proper civil war. The difference is a matter of scale. You have hundreds of people a week being killed by guerrilla violence in Iraq. That's different from thousands of people, or tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands. I mean we've seen it in other countries -- Cambodia, Afghanistan, Congo -- you can lose a fifth of the population in this kind of struggle. I think it's outrageous that people would say, "Let's just up and leave and let what happens happen." I know the Bush administration has mismanaged this thing so badly that one's tempted to say, let's get them away from this before they do any more damage, but do we want a genocide on our conscience?

I know one person who said, "Well, once we're out, whatever happens is not our responsibility." Is it really true? You can invade a country, overthrow its government, dissolve its military, and then walk away, and a million people die, and that's not your problem? I don't understand this way of thinking.

TD: Let me change the location of this to Washington for a minute. You noted recently that the Arab press referred to the antiwar demonstrators in Washington as "the American street," which I found amusing, and you also pointed out the virtual absence of Democratic legislators, except for some members of the Congressional Black Caucus, even marching in the demonstration, no less addressing it. When we're thinking about Iraq and the future, other than a rising popular opposition to the war (which comes from many places, including simple unhappiness that we're not winning), it seems as if the political opposition doesn't exist. To exaggerate only slightly, half the Democrats in Congress are still calling for sending more troops -- which don't even exist -- into Iraq. I was wondering what you made of this, given your recent call for getting American ground troops out?

JC: Well, the first thing to say is that the Democratic Party is about as influential on Iraq policy as you and I are. Whatever position Democratic legislators took wouldn't necessarily be a policy position in the sense of having any hope

of being implemented as long as Bush is in the White House. And I think they're fearful of looking weak on foreign policy...

TD: ...The result of which is that they become unbelievably weak...

JC: The strategy may be talk tough and let Bush fail.

TD: You recently called that "a dangerous strategy."

JC: There's tremendous dissatisfaction in the country over the Iraq war and Bush foreign policy which could turn into grass-roots victories for Democratic candidates in 2006, if they could figure out how to address it and provide leadership on these issues. This is why I did one of my columns suggesting we turn to using Special Forces and air power to support Iraqi forces. Treat them like the Northern Alliance was treated during the Afghan War, even though I'm seeing this as an exit strategy rather than an entry strategy. I did this mainly to suggest that there are other stances the Democrats could take. You could say we need an exit strategy for Iraq that would be smart militarily and politically, and doesn't just involve 1975-style withdrawal from Vietnam with people hanging from helicopters but also doesn't involve being quiet and letting Bush dig his own grave. I think, first of all, that that's cowardly. Second, it's not good for the country not to have a debate and not to have leadership on the other side of an issue.

TD: Do you think Bush has dug his own grave?

JC: I mean, this is one of the great foreign policy debacles of American history. There's an enormous amount at stake in the oil Gulf and Bush is throwing grenades around in the cockpit of the world economy. So I think he has dug his own grave with regard to Iraq policy. Most politics in the United States, though, focuses on domestic issues.

TD: Despite the usual centrality of domestic issues, I happen to think that, above all else, the war has driven the Bush people ever since the post-invasion period. When, for instance, you look at the latest AP/Ipsos poll, what's bothering the evangelicals now above all else? It's the war.

JC: Yes, they are upset about what happened in Iraq because Bush made an alliance with the religious Shiites which meant an alliance with Islamic fundamentalists who have now put a Koran veto on legislation in Iraq. You know, the evangelicals were dreaming big. They thought Iraq was going to be a missionary success, that they would make the Iraqis into Protestants. But any missionary who showed up in Iraq now, we'd soon be seeing him on video pleading for his life. None of their objectives with regard to Iraq have been achieved.

This is something, by the way, that the evangelicals have been dreaming of since the 1850s. It's how the American University in Beirut got there. The Presbyterian missions were the ones that originally tried to missionize the Middle East and they failed all along the line -- and they continue to fail. The Bush moment was a moment in which those nineteenth century dreams of evangelical missionizing and imperial might being melded together were briefly revived. Now it's become clear to them that this is just not going to happen, so they're angry, they're disappointed. You can understand that.

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