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Guest columnist

Iraq: a solution to nothing

By Scott Ritter

Special to The Times

As the United States and Iraq approach the third anniversary of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, it might do all Americans well to take some time out and reflect on how we got where we are, as well as where we are going in Iraq and the Middle East as a whole.

Gone forever is any talk of song and flowers, economic recoveries paid for by Iraqi oil, or a blooming democracy in the cradle of civilization. The state of affairs between the Bush administration and the newly elected government of Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafari is strained, to say the least, with the United States threatening to cut off aid to Iraq, and Iraq telling the United States to "butt out."

Nearly three months have passed since the "historic" elections of December 2005, and the Iraqis have just now selected a prime minister (Jafari, a Shiite Islamic fundamentalist closely allied with Iran), and seemed hopelessly deadlocked on the issue of forming a government that will not promote an immediate outbreak of sectarian violence once formed.

The Sunni insurgency is stronger than ever, and Shiite death squads roam the street in the guise of government police and soldiers. Torture, rape and murder are rampant as official tools of government suppression. And American troops appear to be powerless to stop this mindless slide into the abyss, all the while being killed and maimed for a cause that has always been nebulous.

"Duty," "honor" and "country" mean little when the majority of the American citizens supposedly being served by the ongoing occupation of Iraq are more interested in "American Idol" than the process of bringing peace and stability to ancient Babylon, or when American politicians seem content to continue to allow the men and women who honor our nation through their service to die while those in power grasp for a politically face-saving way to "solve the Iraqi problem." And herein lies the problem: We continue to try to solve a problem we have yet to define, meaning we are seeking a solution to nothing.

America continues to pretend that we are building something of value in Iraq. And yet, common sense dictates that when one seeks to build on a corrupt foundation, whatever it is that is being

constructed is doomed eventually to collapse. Our nation's involvement in Iraq is based on as corrupt a foundation as imaginable. We didn't go to war for sound national-security reasons (i.e., a threat that manifested itself in a form solvable only through military intervention), but rather for domestic political reasons based on ideology that exploited the fear and ignorance of the American people in the post-Sept. 11, 2001, world.

In the topsy-turvy world of domestic American politics, this reality continues to fail to resonate. Those who opposed the invasion of Iraq continue to be demonized and marginalized, while those who supported it are embraced and applauded.

This "through the looking glass" quality in the American body politic not only hamstring the nation collectively on the issue of solving the Iraq problem, but also continues to distort reality when dealing with other emerging problems confronting our country and the world, such as the looming crisis with Iran over its nuclear programs.

Even as we fail to grasp the lessons of our unraveling failure in Iraq, we seem to be moving full steam ahead into a similar catastrophe in Iran, making the same mistakes by embracing a threat model (nuclear weapons) void of any hard evidence, and promoting a solution (democracy) that is undefined.

If the upcoming leather anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq tells us anything as a nation, it is that we are in desperate need of a national "time out" when it comes to the issue of Iraq, Iran and the global war on terror. We need to learn the lesson that every soldier, sailor, airman and Marine serving overseas knows only too well — you don't reinforce failure.

If our politicians, Republican and Democrat alike, are unable or unwilling to engage in a rancor-free discussion about where we as a nation are heading when it comes to issues of war and peace,

then perhaps we the people should engage in one of our own, and in the process establish agreed-upon principles and standards that not only would serve as a solid foundation upon which to build any future endeavors in the Middle East and elsewhere, but also set forward values and ideals that could be used to hold to account those whom we elect to represent us in higher office.

Scott Ritter is a former U.N. weapons inspector in Iraq (1991-1998) and Marine Corps intelligence officer. He is the author of "Iraq Confidential: The Untold Story of the Intelligence Conspiracy to Undermine the U.N. and Overthrow Saddam Hussein," published by Nation Books. He is speaking at Town Hall, Eighth Avenue and Seneca Street in Seattle, at 7:30 p.m. tonight.

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