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THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

The Uncommitted

By MICHAEL IGNATIEFF

The election in Iraq is without precedent. Never, not even in the dying days of Weimar Germany when Nazis and Communists brawled in the streets, has there been such a concerted attempt to destroy an election through violence -- with candidates unable to appear in public, election workers driven into hiding, foreign monitors forced to "observe" the election from a nearby country, actual voting on election day a gamble with death in at least 4 of the 18 provinces and the only people voting safely the fortunate expatriates and exiles in foreign countries.

Just as depressing as the violence in Iraq is the indifference to it abroad. Americans and Europeans who have never lifted a finger to defend their own right to vote seem not to care that Iraqis are dying for the right to choose their own leaders. Why do so few people feel even a tremor of indignation when they see poll workers gunned down in a Baghdad street? Why isn't there a trickle of applause in the press for the more than 6,000 Iraqis actually standing for political office at the risk of their lives? Have we all become so disenchanting that we need Iraqis to remind us what a free election can actually be worth?

Explaining this morose silence requires understanding how support for Iraqi democracy has become the casualty of the corrosive bitterness that still surrounds the initial decision to go to war. Establishing free institutions in Iraq was the best reason to support the war -- now it is the only reason -- and for that very reason democracy there has ceased to be a respectable cause. The administration's ideologues -- the ones who wrote the presidential inaugural and its image of America in the service of "the Author of Liberty" -- have managed the nearly impossible: to turn democracy itself into a disreputable slogan. Liberals can't bring themselves to support freedom in Iraq lest they seem to collude with neoconservative bombast. Meanwhile, antiwar ideologues can't support the Iraqis because that would require admitting that positive outcomes can result from bad policies and worse intentions. Finally there are the ideological fools in the Arab world and even a few here at home who think the "insurgents" are fighting a just war against American imperialism. All this makes you wonder when the left forgot the proper name for people who bomb polling stations, kill election workers and assassinate candidates. The right name for such people is fascists.

What may also be silencing voices in support of Iraqi democracy is the conventional wisdom that has been thrown over the debate on Iraq like a fire blanket -- everyone believes that Iraq is a disaster: hence elections are doomed. As I was told by one suave European observer, with a look of self-

satisfaction on his face, all that remains is the final act. We are waiting, he said, for the helicopters to lift off the last Americans from the roofs of the green zone in Baghdad. For its part, the administration sometimes seems to support the elections less to give the Iraqis a chance at freedom than to provide what Henry Kissinger, speaking of Vietnam, called "a decent interval" before inevitable collapse.

Beneath the fire blanket of defeatism, everyone -- for and against the war -- is apparently preparing exit strategies. Those who were against tell us that democracy can't be imposed at gunpoint, when the actual issue is whether it can survive being hijacked at gunpoint. Other experts tell us how "basically" violent Iraqi society is or how tribal it is, as a way of explaining why insurgency has taken root and democracy is dying on the vine. A more subtle kind of condescension claims that Iraq has been scarred by Baathism and therefore cannot produce free minds.

All this savant expertise ignores the evidence that Iraqis want free institutions and that their leaders have fought to establish them in almost impossible circumstances. Consider the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who demanded democratic elections in 2003 when the victorious invaders were talking about deferring them indefinitely. Since the beginning, Sistani has refused either to ratify American occupation or to legitimize Shia extremism. In the face of incessant provocation, he has marginalized men of violence. His aides have been assassinated and his offices have been attacked, but no calls to massacre the Sunni or the occupiers have issued from his spokesmen. Or consider the Kurds, who put aside their factional infighting, produced a common slate for the elections and kept their peshmergas from seizing Kirkuk and thus saved the country from a civil war over that ethnically mixed city. Finally, consider the moderate Sunnis, who have joined the Allawi government and risked the fury of the Sunni insurgents. The defeatism of Washington think tanks and newspaper editorials misses a simple point: the only displays of political prudence and democratic courage since the Americans rolled into Iraq in 2003 have been by the much despised Iraqis, not their supposedly all-seeing imperial benefactors. Since we lack the grace to admit that Iraqis have often shown more wisdom and courage than we have, we naturally don't trust that wisdom and courage to save Iraq now.

The Bush administration knows that while its mistakes have cost it any real influence in rooting democracy in Iraq, its historical reputation will depend largely on whether freedom does take root there. Already the revisionists are working over the facts: the best way to write the history in advance is to shift the blame for the failure of Iraqi democracy onto the Iraqis themselves. Those who opposed the war collude with this revisionism in advance by giving up on the Iraqis and this, their only chance of freedom. Let us have the decency to support people who are fighting for a free election, and let us have the honesty not to blame them for our own incompetence if they fail. There is still no reason to assume they will.

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