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Iraq: Democratic or Free?

by Sheldon Richman

The White House website has this to say about Iraq: “Under the leadership of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the new Iraqi Governing Council, major strides are being planned and made in three key areas: security, economic stability and growth, and democracy.” Let’s focus on that last item.

Leaving aside the Bush administration’s flawed case for invading Iraq, should Americans want to see democracy established there? It’s a peculiar goal for America, considering that the country’s Founders were anti-democratic.

What? The Founders were anti-democratic? Political language is so imprecise (that is, dishonest) these days that I’m sure this statement will shock some readers. So let’s say it. The United States didn’t begin as a democracy. It was never intended to be a democracy.

James Madison, the acknowledged author of the Constitution, rejected democracy in *The Federalist Papers*, which were newspaper columns promoting ratification of the document. In Federalist No. 10 Madison asked how private rights can be secured against a tyrannical majority? He replied, “The majority ... must be rendered, by their number and local situation, unable to concert and carry into effect schemes of oppression.” That rules out democracy. As Madison wrote, “From this view of the subject, it may be concluded, that a pure Democracy, by which I mean a Society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the Government in person, can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction.... Hence it is, that such Democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security, or the rights of property.”

Thus his constitution was full of limits on majority rule: each state, no matter the size, gets two senators (originally elected by the state legislatures); presidents can veto Congress’s bills, and a supermajority is required to override; the people do not directly elect the president.

What’s more, the first thing the first Congress did was amend the Constitution. The First Amendment begins with the words “Congress [that is, the people’s representatives] shall make no law ...” Take that, democrats!

Madison got it only partly right. Direct democracy is not freedom in action; it's an assault on freedom. It permits majorities to subjugate the smallest minority of all — the individual, the only entity to which the idea of freedom applies. The alleged freedom of “the people” is merely a cover for subordinating individual persons to some gang's edicts.

But Madison was mistaken in thinking that a large republic would sufficiently safeguard our liberties. By the 1830s Alexis de Tocqueville could see what Madison could not see in 1787: the potential for democratic despotism. Paper constitutions notwithstanding, when enough people fail to appreciate the danger of unlimited power, they will demand that elected officials provide them things they cannot obtain through peaceful, voluntary exchange. Vote-hungry politicians will then pander to the electorate, making ever-more-elaborate promises. Since government produces nothing, it can fulfill those promises only by dispensing wealth first taken from others.

That's what the democratic mentality has brought America to. Politics is a mammoth bazaar in which politicians bid for votes from interest groups. Or, as H. L. Mencken said, every election is an advance auction on stolen property.

That is apparently what's in store for Iraq.

Too much attention goes to how political offices are filled, and too little to what officeholders can do once in power. Elections are preferable to violence and heredity succession, but *who* rules is less important than *which* rules.

Considering that President Bush has made the welfare state his own by promising all kinds of tax-funded booty for Americans, I shudder to think what Iraq will look like in a year or two. It may resemble America, but that won't mean it's free.

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This article was originally published in November of 2003.