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Operation Founding Fathers

by James Bovard

Few subjects generate more official lies than the U.S. government's devotion to spreading democracy abroad. Iraq has been the largest most recent geyser of such deceits. In order to understand future U.S. government messianic democracy efforts, it is worthwhile to review the opportunism with respect to representative government in Iraq.

In a late February 2003 Washington speech, George W. Bush invoked democracy to sanctify his pending invasion of Iraq. He condescended,

The nation of Iraq — with its proud heritage, abundant resources and skilled and educated people — is fully capable of moving toward democracy and living in freedom.

He then showed how the coming war would be a stepping-stone to lasting peace: “The world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values, because stable and free nations do not breed the ideologies of murder.”

But his March 18, 2003, memo to Congress, notifying them that he was invading Iraq, mentioned nothing about democracy as a *casus belli*.

In fact, suppressing democracy was one of the first orders of business for the U.S. occupation authorities. Three and a half months after the fall of Baghdad, U.S. military commanders “ordered a halt to local elections and self-rule in provincial cities and towns across Iraq, choosing instead to install their own handpicked mayors and administrators, many of whom are former Iraqi military leaders,” the *Washington Post* reported. Many Iraqis were outraged to see Saddam's former henchmen placed back in power over them. But a sergeant with the U.S. Army Civil Affairs Battalion running the city of Samarra explained that Iraqis must be content with political “baby steps.”

U.S. viceroy Paul Bremer insisted that there was “no blanket prohibition” against Iraqi self-rule, but added, “Elections that are held too early can be destructive. It's got to be done very carefully.” Bremer feared that the chaos that followed the toppling of both Saddam and Saddam

statues would not be conducive to electing positive thinkers: “In a postwar situation like this, if you start holding elections, the people who are rejectionists tend to win.” And the U.S. military presence would very likely be one of the first things freely elected Iraqis would have rejected. Muqtada al-Sadr, a Muslim cleric whose forces would later fight American troops, protested Bremer’s action: “I call for free elections that will represent all Iraqi opinion, far away from the influence of those who have intervened.”

The early suppression of popular government helped turn many Iraqis against the U.S. occupation. But as Noah Feldman, the Coalition Provisional Authority’s law advisor, explained in November 2003, “If you move too fast, the wrong people could get elected.” The repeated delays of elections were partly the result of the Bush administration’s lack of enthusiasm for Iraqi self-rule — as well as its fear that pro-Iran Shi’ites would win an honest election.

The Bush administration initially sought to install as Iraq’s ruler Washington favorite Ahmad Chalabi, an Iraqi exile whose false statements on WMDs helped sway the U.S. government to invade. University of Michigan history professor Juan Cole, one of the most respected American experts on the Middle East, observed, “If it had been up to Bush, Iraq would have been a soft dictatorship.” The Bush administration finally agreed to hold elections after Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most powerful religious leader in Iraq, sent his followers into the streets demanding an opportunity to vote.

Soviet-type democracy

The elections that were eventually held on January 30, 2005, had more in common with a Soviet-era East Bloc election than with a New England town meeting. In the weeks before the vote, the U.S. military carried out Operation Founding Fathers. In Samarra, the get-out-and-vote message was broadcast from loudspeakers at the same time American troops, leaping out of Bradley fighting vehicles, raided and searched people’s homes. The messages, taped in Arabic, were part of a selection including “Election news,” “Freedom to vote,” and “Love and family.” In Mosul, U.S. troops put up posters on destroyed buildings that declared, “The terrorists did this to the people of Mosul. They will continue to destroy unless you say, ‘Enough is enough.’” No posters were created to affix to buildings destroyed by U.S. bombs and tanks.

According to *Newsday*, U.S. military convoys rolled through Mosul neighborhoods shortly after sunrise on election day “with speakers blaring messages urging everyone to vote.” Soldiers also passed out thousands of sample ballots. As part of the election campaign, U.S. soldiers rounded up tens of thousands of Iraqis; the United States had more Iraqis under lock and key by election day than in the months after the invasion. The U.S. military was so desperate for control that it even dictated bedtimes for government workers. *Newsday* reported, “In their preparations for facilitating Iraq’s foray into democracy, Americans made sure Iraqi election workers got to bed early on the eve of the vote, demanding they be tucked in by 11 p.m.”

Carina Perelli, the top UN election official, condemned the role of U.S. troops, complaining that “the U.S. military have been extremely, I would say, overenthusiastic in trying to help out with this election.” Prior to the election, the Bush team portrayed voter turnout as the measure of Iraqi approval of the U.S. invasion. Bush predicted that “millions of Iraqi voters will show their bravery, their love of country, and their desire to live in freedom” by voting. The U.S. military efforts to boost voter turnout created a bogus seal of legitimacy for the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

In some places, the polling places were kept secret until the last minute. Most of the candidates’ names were kept secret, not even listed on the ballot. The vast majority of candidates never publicly campaigned, fearing assassination. There was no open airing of issues in the media, as the Iraqi government suppressed newspaper and television criticism of Allawi and his government’s policies. The government sought to blindfold voters before voters passed judgment on the government. Some Iraqis were told they would be denied food rations if they did not vote.

In most cases, voters had the option only of choosing certain lists — a Kurdish list, a Shi’a list, or similar groupings. As Ken Sanders, an Arizona lawyer and prominent analyst on the Internet, noted,

Iraqi voters were more or less compelled to vote for an ethnic group, national group, or religious faction. The make-up of the ballot essentially prevented Iraqis from voting for a particular person or political party.

The so-called Independent Iraqi Electoral Commission, which had been appointed by U.S. viceroy Bremer, had “absolute power to bar any candidate or organization and has done so [sic]. Those who have been barred by the Commission received neither due process nor an explanation why. Thus, the U.S., through its proxy, established the rules for the election and determined who could and could not be a candidate therein,” Sanders observed.

The fact that votes were counted was supposedly sufficient to make the election results the will of the majority. However, after the voting was finished in Mosul, “American troops loaded ballots and Iraqi election officials into their armored vehicles and drove them inside the walls of an Army camp, where they nudged tired workers to keep counting,” *Newsday* noted.

Tainted “success”

Bush proclaimed on the day of the vote that the elections were a “resounding success” and that “the world is hearing the voice of freedom from the center of the Middle East.” National Endowment for Democracy chief Carl Gershman hailed the Iraqi elections as “one of the great events in the history of democracy.” The American media largely parroted the official line. A few days later, in his State of the Union Address, Bush stated that the elections showed that “the Iraqi

people value their own liberty.” In words that failed to alarm enough viewers, he added, “Americans recognize that spirit of liberty, because we share it.”

The fact that so few questions and criticisms were raised about an election so obviously tainted illustrates that, for most of the American media, “democracy” is simply whatever the U.S. government says it is. The same newspapers that would have denounced similar abuses in an East Bloc regime or in a Third World tin-horn dictatorship embraced and broadcast the Bush administration’s ludicrous claims.

Less than six weeks after the Iraqi elections, the U.S. government revealed a new standard for the purity of Middle East elections. On March 8, 2005, Bush declared, “All Syrian military and intelligence personnel must withdraw before the Lebanese elections for those elections to be free and fair.” His comment evoked scant ridicule, despite the brazen U.S. military intervention in the Iraqi election.

After the Iraq election was canonized as a great victory for Bush, other details leaked out showing how the U.S. government manipulated the vote. After it became clear by mid 2004 that pro-American parties were going to get clobbered, Bush signed a secret authorization for the U.S. government to provide covert aid to Iraqi parties and politicians. However, when senior members of Congress were briefed on the plan (as required by law), they hit the roof. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi is reported to have objected, “Did we have 1100 American [soldiers] die so they could have a rigged election?” The Bush administration then canceled its formal covert aid plan. However, the administration carried out the covert aid plan anyhow, using back channels and undercover operatives that could be kept secret from Congress as well as the American public. Seymour Hersh reported in the *New Yorker* in July 2005 that

the White House promulgated a highly classified Presidential “finding” authorizing the C.I.A. to provide money and other support covertly to political candidates in certain countries who, in the Administration’s view, were seeking to spread democracy.

A former high-ranking CIA official confirmed that the Iraq election was a primary target for the aid. Les Campbell, a top official with the National Democratic Institute, observed,

It became clear that Allawi and his coalition had huge resources, although nothing was flowing through normal channels. He had very professional and very sophisticated media help and saturation television coverage.

Ghassan Atiyah, director of the Baghdad-based Iraq Foundation for Development and Democracy, declared that Allawi’s 15 percent final election result (compared with his poll numbers of 3 percent or 4 percent before the vote) “was due to American manipulation of the

election. There's no doubt about it. The Americans, directly or indirectly, spent millions on Allawi." Atiyyah complained that "as long as real democratic practices are not adhered to, you Americans cannot talk about democracy." (The Shi'ite parties apparently also cheated.) When National Security Council spokesman Frederick Jones was asked about the Hersh allegations, he insisted that the Bush administration "adopted a policy that we would not try to influence the outcome of the Iraqi election by covertly helping individual candidates for office." But Jones would not answer questions regarding "whether any political parties had benefited from covert support," the *Washington Post* noted. The entire U.S. operation was "legal" only in the sense that it occurred as a result of a secret presidential command — not an auspicious start for a foreign would-be democracy.

Developments in Iraq since the early 2005 election have done nothing to build confidence that this nation is on the political high road. Instead, foreign machinations have continued — and it may be years before we learn of some of the dirty deals, bribes, and threats carried out by U.S. and other foreign government officials.

There is no honest way to "fix" foreign elections. The louder Bush praises democracy, the more disgraceful U.S. foreign meddling becomes. Unfortunately, the invocations of democracy to sanctify U.S. foreign interventions continue to profoundly delude many, if not most, Americans.

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