

# Forum

## A vision of peace in Iraq

During the initial march to Baghdad at the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003, then Maj. Gen. David H. Petraeus repeatedly asked embedded journalist Rick Atkinson to “Tell me how this ends.”

Gen. Petraeus — gifted new commander of the multinational forces in Iraq — has, in the intervening four years, thought long and hard about how to untie the Iraqi knot. His testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, hours before the State of the Union, is testament to this fact and reflects his work on counterinsurgency — the “thinking man’s war” — in which the emphasis is put squarely on civilian security in the interest of building trust . . . toward rebuilding society.

It’s a good strategy — albeit an admittedly risky one. Indeed, regarding “expectations,” Gen. Petraeus forthrightly stated, if the troop surge intended to secure Baghdad and Anbar Province using counterinsurgency techniques is not succeeding for lack of Iraqi cooperation or U.S. re-

sources, military and otherwise, he will provide the necessary assessment.

But, let’s be honest. This new strategy is like trying to seal the dikes before the whole wall comes crashing down to give larger forces — political, economic, cultural — the opportunity to displace the turbulent theater of war, with the calm-inspiring theater of daily life and its ordinary routines.

Gen. Petraeus said as much — abetted by Adm. William J. Fallon’s statement at his confirmation hearing for Centcom commander a week later that “Time is short.”

Security will, to use another analogy, provide the firewall to give peace a chance. But does peace even have a prayer?

The inspiring example of the Iraqi clerics — Shi’ite and Sunni — who traveled to Mecca last October to call for an end to violence in their homeland, as reported by the Financial Times, supports the

notion that peace is, indeed, possible. (Their call, in fact, represents somewhat of a trend. Last month, 13 church leaders in the Holy Land publicly urged Israeli and Palestinian leaders to change course and return to the negotiating table, as reported in Zenit.com.)

Admittedly, the Iraqi clerics’ call for peace will require many diligent and resolute follow-on efforts, which all the cynics will roundly dismiss, as those authors of Iraq-is-a-debacle books did when I asked them about the Mecca-bound clerics’ mission.

But, the logic for ending the cycle of violence is compelling. All the killing will produce no good effect. Eventually the bloodshed will cease, with countless dead and maimed left in its wake, and Iraqi society will gradually resume the normal rhythms of life — in a land that late in the fourth millennium B.C. was the very “Cradle

of Civilization.” Now, ironically, some five millennia later, as the late Pope John Paul II so eloquently expressed it, the answer to the world’s problems is a “Civilization of Love.” But how to achieve a civilization devoid of hate?

Billions directed toward economic development — jobs — derived from equitably sharing Iraq’s oil revenues would surely be helpful. Yet, key to achieving these elemental benchmarks of civilization is the religious/cultural dimension — which gives those reconciliation-seeking clerics singular importance.

Surely they have ideas on how to ease the fire and flood of sectarian and ethnic tensions. Further, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, Iraq’s most powerful figure, whom apparently no American official has ever met, would have wisdom to impart. Ayatollahs, after all, are key figures. To wit, in late January, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s supreme religious leader,

called on President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to butt out of all matters nuclear. Interestingly, on Feb. 5, Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, one of Iraq’s most powerful Shi’ite leaders — the same leader President Bush met with two days before the release of the Iraq Study Group report — visited with Ayatollah Khamenei in Tehran and called on Iran to talk with the United States after discussions with Iran’s Supreme National Security Council Chief, Ali Larijani.

So, in response to Gen. Petraeus’ query on “how this ends,” the emerging picture would suggest the following: ultimately through a people, a culture *deciding* to grow anew as a civilization . . . *of love* — a creative vision longing for a Gandhi to fill the leadership void divided loyalties creates . . . or maybe a smart cleric or two who know the hatred must end.

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