



## Hopeless Causes

Hardly a day goes by that I don't hear at least one expert political analyst gravely inform the American public that democracy in Iraq is a hopeless cause. We're told that our Soldiers are fighting and dying for nothing because it's impossible to export democracy. (This probably comes as a surprise to Germany and Japan, both of whom had democracy thrust upon them by the Allies at the end of World War II, and both of whom have enjoyed flourishing democratic governments for nearly six decades. But that's another argument for another day.)

We are assured that democracy will fail in Iraq because the process in use there is turning out to be extremely difficult and highly dangerous. Every setback is heralded as proof-positive that the Iraqi people cannot govern themselves peacefully. Every political squabble within the fledgling Iraqi government is magnified into an unmistakable symptom of impending social collapse.

The implication is that any nation with the capacity and desire for freedom will find a way to transition quickly and smoothly to democratic self-government. After all, America managed a smooth and orderly transition over two-hundred years ago. If we could do it, so can the people of Iraq. It therefore stands to reason that the Iraqi people must not really *want* freedom and self-government. If they *did*, they'd have followed America's example by now.

But just how accurate is our cultural memory of our own country's journey to self-government? Did we really make the transition as seamlessly as we'd like to believe?

I've been talking to a lot of people about this recently. A surprising number of American citizens seem to have only the vaguest notions about the evolution of our own form of self-government. The general consensus seems to go something like this: The Revolutionary War ended; the Constitution was drafted and signed; we elected George Washington as our first president, and democracy was off and running in America. Some other stuff happened with the British around 1812, but — other than that — the road to freedom was pretty smooth until the Civil War. Most of us have forgotten the names and

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dates we were forced to memorize in American History 101, but that little synopsis hits most of the high points, right?

Let's poke around in the pages of history and find out. Let's make a few comparisons, and see how Iraq's burgeoning attempts at self-government measure up against the evolution of democracy in America.

On January 30, 2005, the people of Iraq went to the polls to elect a Transitional National Assembly for their country. Among its other duties in managing the shift toward democracy, the National Assembly was chartered to draft a permanent constitution for Iraq. The August 17th deadline for completion of the constitution came and went, but the constitution wasn't finished. The National Assembly extended the deadline to August 22nd. When that date arrived, Speaker Hachim al-Hasani announced that the draft was complete, but the National Assembly needed three more days to work out some points of disagreement before accepting the final version.

That was all the proof the doubters needed. Although the National Assembly did manage to complete their constitution in plenty of time for the Iraqi national referendum in October of 2005, they'd already demonstrated that they couldn't even meet simple deadlines. How could this clearly dysfunctional assembly be trusted to craft a document worthy of governing a nation?

The United States did it much better and much faster, right? Let's look back ...

On November 15, 1777, after sixteen months of bitter political debate, the Second Continental Congress adopted the *Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union* (often referred to as the *Articles of Confederation*). This governing document for the newly-declared United States was not formally ratified until March 1, 1781, more than three years after it was drafted.

A little math tells us that the Transitional National Assembly in Iraq managed in six and a half months what took America sixteen months to complete. The Iraqis went on to ratify their constitution in ten days, including the time spent counting and validating the votes. By contrast, ratification of the American Articles of Confederation took three years. Odd that we never hear any of *that* mentioned when political experts are telling us how laborious the Iraqi constitutional process has been.

Okay, the Iraqis did things a little more quickly than we did, but the Second Continental Congress didn't have telephones, email, fax machines, televisions, or automobiles. Iraq had two centuries of technological advantage on their side, so it's probably not fair to compare timelines. Besides, we had them on quality. It's widely agreed that the Iraqi constitution is significantly flawed. On the other hand, our nation's governing document was efficient, well-crafted, and it has withstood the test of time. Or maybe not ...

In practice, the Articles of Confederation proved to be so fundamentally unsound that they threatened the very existence of the young nation they were intended to govern. In 1787, the members of Congress voted to scrap the Articles of Confederation entirely, and draft a new compact for governing our country. The resulting document was the *Constitution of the United States of America*, and it remains in force today.



Before we criticize the Iraqi National Assembly for drafting a less-than-perfect constitution, we should remember that we didn't get it right the first time either. In fact, we didn't get it entirely right the second time, or the fifth. Many of the freedoms we cherish most as American citizens were added later, because they were not written into the original constitution. The famous *Bill of Rights* became the first ten amendments to the constitution, because the framers could not initially reach consensus on the need to formally state guarantees of personal freedom for citizens.

Our constitution has been amended twenty-seven times, most recently in 1992. In its original form, it might well have been as inadequate as the Iraqi constitution is alleged to be. But like ours, Iraq's constitution is a living document designed to grow and improve over time. To count it as a failure because the first draft is not perfect strikes me as the worst sort of cultural hypocrisy.

But what about the lack of stability in Iraq? What about the ongoing disputes over territory and apportionment of power? What about threats to the safety of the Iraqi government, and the apparently endless streams of accusations and denials? Can we really expect democracy to take hold in such a hostile environment? A review of our own history shows that our forebears had their share of problems too.

In 1783, rebellious officers of the Continental Army began circulating an anonymous letter urging their fellow Soldiers to defy the authority of Congress for its failure to honor past promises. While George Washington struggled to quell the resulting dissent, a second anonymous letter appeared, falsely declaring that Washington was sympathetic to the mutinous officers. If the modern media had existed in the eighteenth century, the barrage of accusations and denials that resulted from those seditious letters would have undoubtedly dominated the news cycle for weeks or months.

In March of the same year, Congress was forced to flee Philadelphia to escape riots and protests by unpaid veterans of the Revolutionary War. The members of Congress reconvened in Princeton, New Jersey, essentially exiled by unrest in their own country.

Three years later, former Revolutionary War Captain Daniel Shays raised an armed mob and forced the courts in Northampton, Massachusetts to shut down. Over the next several months, the growing rebellion forced the Massachusetts Supreme Court to adjourn and attacked a federal arsenal in Springfield, before being routed by a hastily-raised army under the command of Revolutionary War hero, General Benjamin Lincoln. At approximately the same time, another mob of armed dissidents marched on the New Hampshire State Assembly to demand changes in the state's policies regarding paper money.

These examples were by no means the only attempts to overturn the rule of law in America with threats and violence. Even a cursory study of our country's history reveals numerous attempts to elevate mob rule over the principles of democracy.

In our culture's collective memory, the transition to self-government was peaceful and orderly. In reality — with armed mobs intimidating the courts, attacking federal facilities, and even threatening Congress — the formative years of the United States were unstable and often



violent. But the nation survived its bloody and tumultuous childhood, and went on to survive a civil war that very nearly ripped it apart.

With all of the forces arrayed against it, democracy could have easily failed in this country. Standing outside of our borders, an unbiased observer in the early years of this nation might well have given us up as a lost cause. How could America's fragile and unproven self-government possibly survive armed internal insurrections, political infighting, economic collapse, civil war, and the assassinations of political leaders and socially prominent figures?

With the substitution of two words, that same question can be redirected toward another fledgling democracy. How can Iraq's fragile and unproven self-government possibly survive armed internal insurrections, political infighting, economic collapse, civil war, and the assassinations of political leaders and socially prominent figures? The answer is simple. Iraq can survive the same way we did: by holding on to the dream that is freedom when all the forces of the universe seem to be determined to tear it away.

The people of Iraq cannot follow the example of America's smooth and easy transition to democracy, because that example is a myth. If we think we did it the easy way, we've utterly forgotten our history. This nation yearned for freedom, and we won it. But liberty did not come to us easily. We paid for it, one grueling inch at a time. We paid for it with resolve, with the sweat of our backs, and with the blood of our patriots.

Expecting it to come to Iraq any other way is wishful thinking. And right now, the Iraqis are learning for themselves that freedom is never a hopeless cause.

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