

{APRIL 10 2004}

BITTER RICE: THE MARCH OF FOLLY (2)

The following passage may look familiar: “On the fourth day of the 1982 Israeli attack on Lebanon, I crossed the border at a lonely spot near Metulla and looked for the front, which had already reached the outskirts of Sidon. I was driving my private car, accompanied by a woman photographer. We passed a dozen Shiite villages and were received everywhere with great joy. We extracted ourselves only with difficulty from hundreds of villagers, each one insisting that we have coffee at their home. On the previous days, they had showered the Israeli soldiers with rice.

“A few months later I joined an army convoy going in the opposite direction, from Sidon to Metulla. The soldiers were now wearing bulletproof vests and helmets, many were on the verge of panic.

“What had happened? The Shiites had received the Israeli soldiers as liberators. When they realized that they had come to stay as occupiers, they started to kill them.

“When the Israeli troops entered Lebanon the Shiites were a down-trodden, powerless community, held in contempt by all the others. After a year of fighting the occupiers, they became a political and military power. The Shiite Hizbullah is the only military force in the Arab world that has beaten the mighty Israeli army.”

End of passage. I wrote it in an article called “Bitter Rice”, which appeared on March 22, 2003, on the eve of the invasion of Iraq, and which started with the words: “Beware of the Shiites. The troubles of the occupation will start after the fighting is over...”

Barbara Tuchman died too soon. Otherwise she could add a chapter about this war to her book “The March of Folly”.

It should be remembered that Tuchman was very strict in the choice of her examples. It was not enough that a government acted foolishly. In order to gain a place in her book, two additional conditions had to be met: that the results of the folly could be foreseen, and that there was indeed someone who warned in advance of these results.

(For example: the British king George III lost America because of a number of foolish acts. This could have been foreseen, and, indeed, the British politician and author Edmund Burke warned of them at the time.)

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What is happening now in Iraq was completely predictable. It is an exact repeat of all that happened to us in Lebanon. Otto von Bismarck once remarked: "A fool learns from his experience. A wise person learns from the experience of others." If so, how to define President George W. Bush, who is not even able to learn from his own experience?

If I have already quoted myself, I may as well do it again. On February 8, 2003, in an article entitled "The Smell of War", I wrote: "This is not a war about terrorism. This is not a war about weapons of mass destruction. This is not a war about democracy in Iraq. This is a war about something else...There is a strong smell of oil in the air."

At the time, this sounded like defamation. Today it is already clear beyond doubt that the American invasion had nothing to do with either the "war on terrorism", nor with weapons of mass destruction, nor with the crimes of Saddam Hussein or with democracy. This has been proven and documented beyond all doubt, most recently by the testimony of Richard Clarke, who has been Bush's man in charge of the "war against terrorism". From the moment Bush entered the White House, he and his handlers pursued one aim in the Middle East: to occupy Iraq.

The Bushes are oilmen. Among the big-money people who helped to put the two Bushes, Sr. and Jr., into the White House, oilmen played a leading role. They have decided that the American Empire needs to get its hands on the vast oil reserves of Iraq and to establish a permanent military base in the middle of the oil region, between the oil of the Caspian Sea and the oil of the Persian/Arabian Gulf.

The neo-con fanatics, most of whom are right-wing Zionists, added to this another objective: to eliminate the Iraqi threat to Israel, before freeing Israel of the Syrian and Iranian threats. But this was a secondary aim. It would not have succeeded in dominating American policy without the decisive impact of Dick Cheney and the other Bush handlers, who wanted to establish direct American military control over most of the earth's oil.

This aim has been achieved. Iraq was conquered. 135 thousand US soldiers uphold the occupation regime, with the addition of a few troops of the satellite countries, such as Poland, the Ukraine, the UK, El-Salvador and Italy. A small (and not very intelligent) official named "L. Paul Bremer 3rd", no less, has become Governor of the new colony, and he intends to "hand over sovereignty" to an Iraqi government he himself has appointed.

That is to say, sovereignty over garbage collection and hospitals, but definitely not over the really important functions, which will be firmly in the hands of American "advisors". For this purpose, the biggest US Embassy in the world is being built in Baghdad: over 3000 officials, who will control every aspect of government in the country.

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That reminds one of the Vichy regime of Marshal Petain in France. The Iraqis themselves will be reminded of the British colonial power structure in their country, which operated through an Arab “king”.

As far as the Americans are concerned, this could last forever. Not for a year, not for two years, but for decades, like the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian areas. But, unlike the Israelis, they call this “nation building” and “establishing the first democracy in the Arab world”. George Orwell would have enjoyed it.

A minor factor was overlooked: the Iraqi people. But one really cannot think about everything, can one?

When the armed resistance started, the Americans comforted themselves with talk about “remnants of the Saddam regime”, or “terrorists”, perhaps foreign agents of Osama Bin-Laden. More than any other colonial regime, the Americans find it difficult to accept the most simple fact in the world: that an occupied people will arise against its occupier. And really, what have the Iraqis to complain about, after the idealistic Americans, out of the kindness of their hearts, liberated them from the evil Saddam?

Now the Americans are considering whether to bring in more troops. The politicians ask the generals: how many more soldiers do you need in order to control Iraq? And the generals ponder in all earnest: 10 thousand more? 20 thousand more? If there had been one serious person among them, he would have answered: “Even 500 thousand will not be enough. When a whole people rises, foreign soldiers are helpless.”

The Americans were ready for the Sunnis to be dissatisfied. They had been ruling the Iraqi state since it was founded by the British after the first World War, and were going to lose their supremacy. But the Shiites? After all, in the “democracy” that the Americans were about to establish, the Shiites could expect a major share in power. But the Shiites do not want to receive “power” in a country that stays occupied.

Even before the war, we warned (don’t worry, I am not going to quote myself a third time!) that it was well-nigh impossible to maintain a state of three mutually hostile peoples: the Sunnis, the Shiites and the Kurds. That is still true today. But perhaps a miracle is happening now: Shiites and Sunnis are fighting together against the occupation. Who knows, the common struggle may just, and for the first time, forge a real Iraqi nation and prevent a bloody civil war along the road. Let us hope so.

Now the Americans are caught in a trap of their own making. Even if they wanted to leave Iraq (which they certainly do not!), they would be unable to do so. As the Hebrew saying goes, they can neither swallow it nor spit it out.

There is really nothing they can do. They will sink ever deeper into the quagmire, kill and be killed, destroy and be destroyed, with ever growing brutality, in a kind of a new desert Vietnam. In the hourly news on Al Jazeera, it is already difficult to distinguish

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between our soldiers in Ramallah and the American soldiers in Falluja. What is happening to us will happen to them, only on a larger scale.

How will this similarity influence Bush and his people? They might say: One quagmire is enough. Let's get out of one of them. Let us compel Sharon to make, at long last, an agreement with the Palestinians, instead of babbling about "unilateral disengagement", which will probably never happen anyhow.

But Bush and the Bushites could also say: If we are so much alike, let us embrace Sharon even more closely. Such a reaction would find its well-earned place in "March of Folly 2".

That might be even a good thing, allowing these two gentlemen the pleasure of leaving the stage together.