

**APRIL 29**

# Staying the media course in Iraq

**O**n his way to confirmation as U.S. ambassador to Iraq, the current U.N. envoy John Negroponte was busily twisting language like a pretzel at a Senate hearing the other day. The new Baghdad regime, to be installed on June 30, will have sovereignty. Well, sort of. Negroponte explained: "That is why I use the term 'exercise of sovereignty.' I think in the case of military activity, their forces will come under the unified command of the multinational force. That is the plan."

In other words, the Baghdad government will be praised as the embodiment of Iraqi sovereignty while the U.S. military continues to do whatever Washington wants it to do in Iraq – including order the Iraqi military around. Negroponte talked about "real dialogue between our military commanders, the new Iraqi government and, I think, the United States mission as well." But ultimately, he said, the American military "is going to have the freedom to act in their self-defense, and they're going to be free to operate in Iraq as they best see fit."

The disconnect between democracy rhetoric and imperial reality is glaring enough to require some media acknowledgment. During an April 25 interview on NPR's "Weekend Edition," a former adviser to the Iraq occupation authority discussed the Bush administration's concept of "limited sovereignty" for Iraqi people. "The sovereign of the country is the power that has the last say," law professor Noah Feldman commented, "and you can't really have the last say in a country unless you command the army. So in a sense, you can't really claim to be sovereign if someone else runs your army."

But the gaping holes in the U.S. stance are being largely papered over in news coverage. Part of the process is for major American media outlets to simultaneously acknowledge and deny fundamental contradictions between the Bush administration's rhetoric about democracy and its actual policies.

In his novel "1984," Orwell wrote about an approach that involves "holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them." Among the semi-conscious maneuvers: "to forget any fact that has become

inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies – all this is indispensably necessary.”

When the New York Times published an article on April 24 about its interview with “the top United States commander in the Middle East,” the second sentence explained: “The commander, General John P. Abizaid, said the security situation was liable to worsen as June 30 approached, and with it the return of self-rule to Iraq.”

Earth to New York Times! Earth to New York Times!

Lovely as it may have looked in the news story, “the return of self-rule” is no more scheduled for Iraq on June 30 than the splashdown of a million-pound asteroid in the Tigris River. Editors at the New York Times did not need to be clairvoyant to adduce the massive evidence to that effect. On the day before the story appeared about the impending “self-rule,” all that those editors needed to do was read their own newspaper’s front page – where an article reported “the Bush administration’s plans for a new caretaker government in Iraq would place severe limits on its sovereignty, including only partial command over its armed forces and no authority to enact new laws.”

For that matter, “partial command” is enough of a stretch to be an oxymoron, since – in effect – the U.S. government is insisting on the right to pretty much tell any Iraqi government what to do and not do with its own military. “Asked whether the new Iraqi government would have a chance to approve military operations led by American commanders, who would be in charge of both foreign and Iraqi forces, a senior official said Americans would have the final say,” the Times reported in the same story. The article added that an undersecretary of state, Marc Grossman, stated that “American commanders will ‘have the right, and the power, and the obligation’ to decide.” These days the White House is grasping at the U.N. flag as a tattered fig leaf for its own insistence on trying to control Iraq. “U.S. Shifts Policy and Taps World Body to Add Legitimacy to Transitional Government,” said a Wall Street Journal headline last Wednesday. The story below promptly got tangled in euphemisms about the U.S. maneuvers: “Several unknown factors cloud the U.N.’s planning, including the degree of power the U.S. military will reserve to itself after June 30 and doubts over whether the violence in Iraq will subside enough for civilian home-rule to blossom.”

Really, those factors aren’t particularly unknown. The U.S. military will reserve to itself the degree of power necessary for using American might to run Iraq as much as feasible. And authentic “civilian home-rule” will not blossom in the hothouse of the U.S. military occupation.