

## New Friends For Old

By Karl Zinsmeister

**M**y first weeks back in the U.S. after spending a month and a half in the middle of a desert war this spring as an embedded journalist were an adjustment period. I expected that. But what surprised me most in the days after I returned was the disconnect between what I had observed with my own eyes and ears in Iraq, and what was being reported in the major media.

I'll give you a concrete example. Just after I climbed off my last military transport and arrived home, the historic million-person Shiite pilgrimage to Karbala and Najaf—long suppressed by Saddam Hussein—took place. The imagery of this event presented in the U.S. media was pretty scary: Many of you will remember the much-repeated photographs and video of a number of pilgrims cutting themselves with swords as they walked the route, making a bloody mess. The strong impression of the news coverage was that the Shiites were both religious extremists and unfriendly to American ideals and interests. I had spent most of my time in Iraq among the Shia, and in my experience neither of those negative characterizations were accurate. The Shiites I observed were generally thrilled to be free of Saddam Hussein's yoke, and appreciative of the Americans who had made that happen.

It so happens that the security for this Shiite pilgrimage had been provided by troopers from the 82nd Airborne whom I know well. Their camp had been right beside the road that the pilgrims trod. So I called up one of the officers on the scene—a smart, frank captain and helicopter pilot named Robin Brown—and asked, “Robin, we’re getting all this reporting on fanatical, restive, anti-American Shiites. Did something change dramatically in the few days after I left, or what’s going on?”

Somewhat stunned, she reported that the pilgrimage not only came off without conflict, but actually turned out to be one of the humanitarian highlights of her time in Iraq. “For three solid days there was this constant river of people, and they were singing, honking horns, celebrating. We would watch over the low wall separating our compound from the road, and people would wave to us, laugh, and smile. It was an amazingly festive, peaceful, joyful experience,” she recounts in *Boots on the Ground*, my new book about the war.

**T**his is just one illustration of why some of us with recent experiences in Iraq ended up questioning the accuracy of the relentlessly gloomy reporting coming out of that country this summer and fall. Convinced that the Iraq debate needed to move beyond small incidents and sensational video images, beyond armchair analysis and loose speculation about Iraqi hearts and minds, I decided to seek more systematic evidence.

America has been hobbled, in setting its policies toward Iraq, by not knowing much about what everyday Iraqis really think. Are they on the side of the radical Islamists? What kind of government would they like for themselves? What is their attitude toward the U.S.? Do the majority Shiites hate us or love us? Could Iraq become another mullah-

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dominated state like Iran? Are the people in the Sunni triangle the real problem? Up to now we've only been able to guess, or rely on anecdotal temperature-takings of the Iraqi public. We've particularly been at the mercy of images presented to us by the press.

We all know that journalists have a bad news bias. For most reporters, a peaceful religious march is a yawn, while some maniacs cutting themselves with swords is an audience-attracting dream. A thousand schools being rehabbed is not considered news, but one school blowing up becomes a weeklong feeding frenzy. Unless they are careful, journalists in Iraq will simply gravitate to covering whatever is on fire today, and overlook the softer, deeper, ultimately more important story of the unfolding of a social and political revolution in the heart of the Middle East.

Seeking reliable hard information on the true state of Iraqi opinion, *The American Enterprise* conducted the first scientific poll in Iraq, during August, in concert with Zogby International. Given the state of the country, this was not easy. I consulted with Eastern European pollsters about the best methods for eliciting honest answers from people long conditioned to repressing their true sentiments. We labored to put together careful questions and translations, and good regional samplings to make sure our results would accurately reflect the views of Iraq's multifarious, long-suffering people. Zogby drew usefully on their earlier experiences polling under harsh conditions in places like Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.

Our survey was necessarily limited in scope and sample size, but it reflects a nationally representative cross-section of Iraqi views, as captured in four disparate cities: Basra (Iraq's second largest, home to 1.7 million people, in the far south), Mosul (third largest, far north), Kirkuk (Kurdish-influenced oil city, fourth largest), and Ramadi (a resistance hotbed in the Sunni triangle). No perfect poll is currently possible in Iraq—there hasn't been a proper national census for decades, so educated guesses are necessary as to population levels and ethnic makeups. And security presented many challenges—our intrepid field workers were sidetracked several times.

But I am proud of the research we finally put together. Our poll was followed the next month by another (conducted in Baghdad alone) from Gallup. Altogether there have now been four polls of various sorts in Iraq (the other two were by a British firm and an Iraqi academic, respectively), and despite very different methodologies and geographical coverage, their results are reassuringly congruent. In all of them, the Iraqi public turns out to be surprisingly optimistic, unambiguously glad to be free of Saddam, and quite willing to have U.S. troops stay in their country for a year or more to help them get launched onto a new footing.

On pages 31-32, I describe what I consider the most important findings of the poll, and some distinguished experts add additional perspective in adjoining essays. So let me just say here, very generally, that the results reveal the Iraqi public to be more sensible, stable, and moderate than commonly portrayed.

The population as a whole turns out to be not so fanatical, seething, or disgusted with the United States after all.

This new evidence suggests Iraq is manageable. If the small number of militants conducting murder and sabotage inside the country can gradually be eliminated by American troops (which is happening amidst stage two of the war), then the mass of citizens living along the Tigris-Euphrates valley are likely to make reasonably sensible use of their new freedom. "We will not forget it was the U.S. soldiers who liberated us from Saddam," said Abid Ali, an auto repair shop owner in Sadr City recently.

In other words, we're making headway in a benighted part of the world—if we will just hang in there.

Meanwhile, in the more privileged lands that have traditionally been our allies, trends have been running in a different direction. In the opening article of this issue's feature section, the great French writer Jean-Francois Revel warns (seconded by Fouad Ajami) that a poisonous anti-Americanism has taken root in Western Europe. His argument will remind many *TAE* subscribers of the cautionary we published exactly one year ago in our issue "Continental Drift: Europe and the U.S. Part Company" (December 2002). The conflicts sketched there erupted into full-blown fracture just three months later, when the French and Germans quite nastily blocked Security Council resolutions on Iraq.

Revel and Ajami note that, these days, foreign animosity toward the U.S. is rarely something that can be corrected or negotiated away—because it is a psychological side effect of America's galloping success. The deepest anti-Americanism is built on ideological bile and envy. This suggests Americans will need to be steelier in dealing with other nations in the future. The writers in our final feature, "Goodbye to the U.N.," counsel that the U.S. may also need to put less stock in international diplomacy (which has increasingly become a mirage and a charade), and instead be prepared to act independently, with the courage and confidence of our convictions, recognizing that world leadership can be a lonely position.

Allies—including many fervent ones like the Eastern Europeans, and emerging ones in the Persian Gulf and Asia—will rise to make common cause with the U.S. as it pursues universal ideals of human liberty over coming decades. But these future friends will often be new ones. And some of our previous compatriots will only be obstacles in the years ahead.

America has always been a much more dynamic, roiling, and risk-taking nation than the Western European countries that first colonized our shores. As prior global elites and their international bureaucracies become increasingly infirm, reactionary, and economically sluggish, America's future lies more and more with younger, emerging nations.

Australia, Poland, and democratic Iraq: Here we come.

