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Patience, Iraq, and the American Character

by Rushworth M. Kidder

At about four in the morning on March 1, the Iraqi Governing Council reached unanimous agreement on the country's interim constitution -- a very significant step forward. It sets out basic freedoms -- of the press, of speech, of assembly, and of worship. It creates an independent judiciary and provides civilian control over the military. And it pushes democracy farther along than any other Arab state.

In a hard-fought compromise, it also reportedly makes Islam only one source of legislation, rather than the principal source. And in a move that puts it significantly ahead of the United States (which has been pushing for its creation prior to handing over sovereignty to the Iraqis), the document targets a quarter of the seats in the National Assembly for women.

The interim constitution still could come unglued. But even as it was being formulated, the reasons why it matters were being spelled out by one of the most respected U.S. authorities on Iraq, Judith Yaphe. Now at the National Defense University in Washington, Dr. Yaphe spent much of her career analyzing Middle Eastern politics for the Central Intelligence Agency, winning the Intelligence Medal of Commendation for her work on the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf war. She was speaking over the weekend to the Camden Conference, a small deliberative forum of interested citizens gathered on the coast of Maine to discuss U.S. foreign policy in the twenty-first century. Her remarks set forth a career's worth of counsel for policy-makers trying to come together around Iraq's reconstruction and future development.

First, she observed, you can't divide up Iraq. True, it has all sorts of fractious groups, most notably the Sunni and Shiite Muslim communities. But it also has a long history of being itself and long traditions of intermarriage among its various religions and tribes.

Second, she said, "don't create democratic institutions without democracy." The British, she says, made that mistake in Iraq in the 1920s.

Third, "don't promise power and then deny it." The danger of the current state of affairs is that with the passage of time, the liberator turns into the occupier unless power really can be devolved.

Fourth, don't insert artificial timetables. The Middle East runs on its own schedules, which have no relationship to the needs of the U.S. electoral process. Our problem as Americans, she noted, is that "we don't have patience."

Fortunately, each of these caveats is addressed by the interim constitution. It demands that Iraq, however diverse, must remain whole, and even contemplates a Kurdish militia operating within the defense structure to ensure that Kurds stay within the new Iraq. It creates democratic institutions, but also enshrines such democratic principles as equal treatment of all people under the law. And it moves toward the hand-off of real power.

But does it reflect patience? Dr. Yaphe's comment stopped me in my tracks. In the nuances and detours of foreign policy, patience is hugely important. Yet Americans, entrepreneurial to the

core and eager to get on with the job at hand, are not a particularly patient people. Our overseas cousins know that about us -- know that the typical U.S. response to an intractable foreign-policy problem with centuries of complexity behind it is to convene a high-level conference charged with sorting it out by next week.

To be sure, that penchant for immediacy can sometimes produce admirable bursts of energy that break stalemates and spawn success. It can also lead to unseemly displays, as when Bill Clinton demanded, in the waning weeks of his presidency, that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict suddenly get resolved so that the solution could become part of his legacy -- or when George Bush now insists that Iraq get stabilized in time for the November presidential election.

The problem with the virtue of patience is that it can be used as a moral weapon by both the quick and the deliberative. How many grand initiatives have failed for want of the moral courage to seize the moment and force it to conclusiveness? Yet how many delicate, fragile beginnings have been stomped into oblivion by the heavy boots of a heedless impatience?

The challenge in Iraq, as in so much of our foreign policy, is to get the balance right on this particular virtue. Doing so may require us to reflect on who we are as Americans -- and whether what we are is what we ought to be. That's a grandly ethical task. As we move into an election year in which foreign policy debates will take an unusually high profile, such a discussion deserves our attention.