

## THE VIEW FROM 'LA REPUBBLICA'

I belong to an Italian conversation group, and as a loyal member of that group I am expected to read Italian publications regularly. So I buy an Italian newspaper from time to time, and I try to read it from cover to cover. Normally this takes me about two months. However, I can speed up the process considerably by skipping all the articles on Italian politics. That works out well, since Italian politics are, and always will be, completely incomprehensible to an outsider!

All kidding aside, Italian newspapers contain some excellent reporting. Italy, after all, is fairly close to Africa and the Middle East; it is also part of Europe, and it has a long, deep relationship with the United States. As a result, Italian reporters have a broad perspective. Sometimes a foreign publication gives us a clearer look at ourselves than we can achieve on our own; and a few months ago, in the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, I found a very compelling article about our involvement in Iraq. It pointed to a number of facts which we all vaguely know, but on which we have failed to focus. In particular, it reviewed the promises, claims, and predictions made to us by our leaders before they took us to war.

Here, for instance, are the remarks of two administration officials back then, as reported by *La Repubblica*. I quote: “Just a few hours before the ‘shock and awe’ attack on Baghdad, Vice-President Dick Cheney shook his head, with the air of a schoolmaster dealing with particularly obtuse children, and said on television: ‘How long will the war last? We are talking about weeks at most, not months.’ Rumsfeld, his right arm at the Pentagon, echoed Cheney’s remarks shortly afterward. [He said] ‘six days, six weeks, I doubt six months.’” End of quote.

Now, of course, the war has entered its fifth year, and few can be pleased with the results. President Bush has initiated a troop surge, but he is very vague as to what it is designed to accomplish, how its progress is to be measured, or how long it will last. The comments of General Petraeus and Secretary of Defense Gates seem to presuppose an indefinite time-frame, possibly years. Yet we have put in four years already! When do we decide that enough is enough? This war has now lasted longer than our involvement in World War II or Korea, and it also recently surpassed the American Civil War. Since the founding of our Republic, only the war in Vietnam has lasted longer.

As for the cost, Paul Wolfowitz—Rumsfeld’s assistant when hostilities began--predicted that the war would require a total outlay of 50 million dollars. It now consumes nearly two billion dollars every week. So far the war has cost us more than 400 billion dollars, and according to some experts it will cost about a trillion before it is over. The Baker Commission sets the figure twice as high.

The death toll is low, compared with the other wars that I mentioned, but it has still surpassed 3,000—more than died on September 11, which it was supposed to avenge. In addition, as *La Repubblica* points out, the number of wounded in this engagement is quite

high. Together, the dead and wounded amount to more than 30,000—the equivalent of two entire divisions. Medical science is now saving many soldiers who would have died in previous conflicts, but often they are left with severe injuries that can be expected to last a lifetime. The cost of caring for these victims over the coming decades cannot even be estimated.

So far, of course, I have merely been talking about American casualties. The death toll among the Iraqi population is infinitely worse.

I am not quite through. When the war began in 2003, Vice-President Cheney predicted that we would be welcomed as liberators. There was a near-total failure to predict the insurgency, or to make any provision for it. There was an equal failure to foresee the possibility of ethnic and sectarian strife, although the example of Yugoslavia, where similar problems followed the death of a strongman, could have been instructive. In the meantime, Iraq has plunged into chaos.

In 2003, Mr. Cheney said there was no doubt that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. But none were ever found. Some on the right believe that the weapons were handed over to another country, but no significant evidence has been produced to bolster that claim. Nowadays not even President Bush contends that such weapons existed.

To sum it up, the Bush administration had a good plan for defeating the Iraqi army, but in all other respects it tragically misjudged the situation. It failed to grasp the risks, the cost, and the realities. At the same time, it greatly exaggerated the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. The predictions of this administration could not have been more inaccurate. And now, four years later, we find ourselves in the midst of a civil war. Ultimately this is a conflict which cannot be resolved by American troops or guns.

So far I have simply been following the article in *La Repubblica*. There is, however, an additional issue that was not mentioned in the article but needs to be addressed—namely, the terrible unfairness of it all. One brief anecdote will illustrate what I mean. Last year Jim Lehrer, the anchor man for public television, was awarded an honorary degree at Harvard. He was allowed to address the graduating class, and he started off by asking, “How many of you are planning to serve in Iraq?” No hands went up. Then he asked, “How many of you *know* anyone who is serving in Iraq?” This time a few hands went up, but not many. That says it all.

Clearly we are far removed from the early days of World War II, when graduates of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton rushed to enlist after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The current war is being fought by the sons and daughters of the less affluent. Meanwhile the elite escape untouched. Such blatant inequity is indefensible. If we ever go to war again, we must make sure that the burden is shared equally by all segments of our society.

The final question is, where do we go from here? I used to believe that the first step toward resolving this problem was to admit that our invasion of Iraq was a mistake; then, I thought, we could look for an exit strategy. But the current administration seems totally unable to admit that it has made an error. It has no idea of how to back away from an untenable position when it finds itself in one. This is a skill that most of us are forced to acquire at an early age!

I realize that a full, immediate withdrawal could cause severe disruptions within Iraq, and is simply out of the question. But the Baker Commission, a bipartisan group, has offered a reasonable plan for removing our troops within the space of a year. Various other proposals are also on the table. To me it seems imperative that we commit ourselves to a phased withdrawal and, in fact, to a timetable. The Iraqis will have to resolve this problem; they need to know that we are planning to leave, and they need to have an idea of when. If we convey the impression that we intend to stay there indefinitely, we will only inflame the insurgency! A timetable actually works to our advantage.

If the administration does not yield on any of these points, and if no intelligent compromise can be achieved, then the people should express their opposition in the loudest possible voice and by all legal means.

One way or another, we must bring this war to a close. Otherwise our young men and women will continue to die, in growing numbers, without any end in sight, and all for nothing.

*Presented by Eric Saunders at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration in Philadelphia on Sunday, May 27, 2007.*