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Reflections on the War in Iraq and Factionalism in American Politics

Cover Page Footnote

Christopher Shays is a United States Representative from Connecticut's Fourth Congressional District. He has been a member of Congress since 1987 and has taken eighteen fact finding trips to Iraq. This talk was delivered at Sacred Heart University on September 17, 2007, as the Annual Constitution Day Lecture.

CHRISTOPHER SHAYS

*Reflections on the War in Iraq
and Factionalism in American Politics*

We can learn a lot about ourselves and our great nation by looking at one of the world's oldest civilizations and its people, a people struggling under the most difficult circumstances to construct a governing constitution that will allow them to unite their nation, survive and prosper.

In my first visit to Iraq in April 2003, I had to sneak into the seaport city of Um Qasr near the Kuwait border. The State Department was helping me but the Department of Defense was trying to track me down and stop me from entering this historic land. As I approached the border, the British guards at the gate were asking for identification. My Save the Children driver talking with DOD officials by satellite phone was cooperating with them as little as possible, and I sat quietly in the Land Rover's front seat feeling like an anxious prisoner trying to gain my freedom by escaping into Iraq, not trying to get out.

We did get into this land of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and so began my first of eighteen trips seeking to exercise my solemn constitutional responsibility of congressional oversight over a reluctant executive branch.

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The irony of this experience was not lost on me. Here I was trying to fulfill my responsibility as the Chairman of the National Security Subcommittee of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee with specific jurisdiction over both the Departments of Defense and State, and one of these departments, Defense, was trying to prevent me from exercising that responsibility, and the other, State, was trying to help me carry it out.

And why would we want such oversight?

The reality is, if more members of Congress had done proper oversight and gone to Iraq, abuses like Abu Ghraib never would have happened. Some members would have toured the facility and one of the soldiers in that dysfunctional Reserve unit would have quietly approached a member and said “Sir or ma’am, I don’t know the first thing about being a prison guard, and by the way, some pretty bad stuff is going on here.”

The member of Congress would more than likely have waited until the soldier left and then asked some tough questions of the supervisors and demanded to see all of the facility. If he or she had gotten any “push back,” they would have come home asking even more questions. And the military would have been forced to look into the issue and take corrective action before things got out of hand.

Abu Ghraib was about a military unit run amuck. With proper oversight the abuses would have been easy to correct, and would have been corrected, without a lot of fanfare or publicity. The press would not have had a story. Our nation’s reputation wouldn’t have been in question and a primary recruitment cry of Al Qaeda would never have existed.

As it was, Abu Ghraib happened. The press ran the story with little obligation or inclination to contain it. Al Jazeera and Al Qaeda used it to inflame the Muslim world and hundreds of American soldiers, sailors, marines, and air men and woman died as a result.

In our Constitution there are checks and balances between the executive and legislative branches, but the so-called Fourth Estate, the press, is on its own. Our founding fathers knew the tension

between the legislative and executive branches makes both branches perform better, our country stronger, and our people safer. The fact is, the failure of the past Republican Congress to consistently do aggressive oversight hurt the President, his administration, and the country, and helped elect a new Democratic Congress.

During the first year of the war I traveled primarily outside the umbrella of the military, staying in places like Umm Qasr, Basrah, Al Kut, Arbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Khanagin. That year turned out to be an undeniable disaster.

Regrettably, the President sided with the Department of Defense and Rumsfeld. The Department of State and Colin Powell were put on the sideline. Paul Bremer was bought in to rule as dictator. And I saw first hand the result of such a government. The voice of everyday Iraqis was not being heard and predictably one bad decision piled on another.

Following the fateful decision to arbitrarily disband their police, border patrol, and army, I was continually asked by everyday Iraqis, "Why are you putting my neighbor, my uncle, my brother, my cousin, my nephew, my father, my son, my husband out of work? Why can't he at least guard a hospital?" That question still haunts me to this day. You see, Wilfredo Perez Jr. of Norwalk, the first fourth Congressional District casualty, was killed, guarding a hospital.

I found myself asking, "Why did we leave 26 million Iraqis in a country larger than New England with no indigenous security? Why did we put so many Iraqis out of work leaving the general population completely defenseless and in the process endanger all our troops?"

Yes, one thing is clear: during the first year, the voices of the people of Iraq were never heard. They had no representation. Their dictator wasn't even an Iraqi but an American who had no real sense of their wants and fears and certainly no sensitivity to their culture. If only we had listened in the beginning and allowed Iraqis, not us, to shape their future.

Their anger was palpable: "Americans if you are here as our guests, you are welcome forever. If you are here as occupiers, we will fight you to the death."

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When we transferred power to the Iraqis in June 2004 and allowed them to establish their own government, they, and we, saw what turned out to be eighteen months of tangible progress. To their credit, in January of 2005 they elected a transitional government, wrote their Constitution, ratified that Constitution in an October plebiscite, and just three months later elected a new government under their Constitution.

The year 2006, however, was another matter. The Samarra bombing ignited sectarian violence. It took four months just to form the Maliki government, and once in power, Prime Minister Maliki, particularly in the early stages, lacked the political will to get things done. With his small margin of supporters and belief that the government needed to be more deliberate and not rush the tough decisions, it has been difficult for Iraqis to find common ground based on *our* timeline on when things need to get done.

But before we become too self-righteous about what Iraqis have done or should have done, it cannot be lost on any of us that our own Constitution was preceded by the Articles of Confederation and thirteen years (from 1776 to 1789) of blood, sweat and toil. And even then we didn't get it perfect. If you were black you were most likely a slave and two-thirds a person. In fact, dialogue about the issue of slavery and how to deal with it was such a nonstarter that it wasn't even discussed.

As an American history major in college, I loved studying about our Federalist Era. I marveled at how so many great men found themselves in one place with such a difficult and monumental task: to build a nation, establish a democracy, and create a republic. We are seeing Iraqis faced with a similar challenge.

The meetings of our Founding Fathers in Philadelphia were filled with passion, courage, devotion, great intelligence, humor, optimism, experience, and most importantly a willingness to take chances, build trust, and compromise for a common goal and a greater good.

There was George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, and of course our own Roger Sherman,

to name a few. Thomas Jefferson was absent, but he was not absent when it came to the Bill of Rights, demanding its inclusion if Virginia was to be part of the Union.

I haven't identified an Iraqi George Washington, Madison, or Franklin. Nor have I seen in the Iraqi Governing Council the dynamics found at our nation's Constitutional Convention. The tension between Virginia and New England seems like child's play compared to the ethnic gravitation of the Kurds toward autonomy and even more significantly the sectarian conflict between Shias and Sunnis.

One thing is clear to me: while Iraqis wrestle with sectarian violence, they don't wrestle with their national identity. They know who they are. They are Iraqis, people of two great rivers, descendants of the Fertile Crescent, where, as they tell me, it all began. So when I ask, "Are you Sunni?" they reply, "Yes, I am a Sunni but I am married to a Shia." Or when I ask, "Are you a Shia?" they often respond, "I am a Shia but my tribe is Sunni or my son or daughter is married to a Sunni."

In the United States, I am constantly being told Iraq is not a real country. But when I am in Iraq, I am told, "We are Iraqis." "We are the cradle of western civilization." "Your roots come from us." "We may be Sunni or Shia, but we are all Iraqis."

This point was emphasized to me by an Iraqi intern who worked in my office during the 2006 summer. He told me he never thought or identified himself as a Sunni. He always thought of himself as an Iraqi until his family in Bagdad became threatened by Shia militia and sought refuge among other Sunnis.

This is not an irrelevant point. When it comes to the creation of a diverse nation, sectarian and nationalistic tendencies can break a country apart. It was not at all certain that our Thirteen Colonies would form a "perfect union," but fortunately patriotism trumped regional and sectarian tendencies lurking beneath the surface.

While Iraqis don't seem to have the optimism or experience to govern, they have the passion, humor, intelligence, devotion, and courage that would match the bravest of any of our patriots. As an

example, I think of Mithal Al Alusi, who was meeting with me in my Washington office a few years back after his two college-age sons were killed two months earlier during an attempt on his life.

Mithal had attended a conference of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Israel, and upon return to Iraq was taken off the Supreme National Debaathification Commission and stripped of his security. There were already two attempts on his life before the third, which killed his only children. The assassins have made it clear they will not stop trying to kill him until they succeed.

So there he was sitting in my office, a truly marked man, and I said to him, "Mr. Al Alusi, you cannot go home. I will do everything I can to enable you to stay in the United States." To which he replied in disbelief: "I can't leave Iraq. My country needs me."

A year later, I visited Mithal in the so called government's Green Zone, where we found him a place to live so at least in his home he and his wife could be safe. During this visit I noticed there were no pictures of any family members, so I asked him if he would show me a picture of his two sons. He brought out an 8 by 11 colored print protected by a thin plastic sheet, which he told me he keeps in a file because his wife cannot endure the sadness and pain of looking at her two precious sons. The picture shows Mithal's arm stretched out around both his sons, with his head leaning on the shoulder of one of them. It was such a loving image. It breaks my heart to think of it and know that his is not the only Iraqi story of intense devotion, sacrifice, and loss.

This great Iraq patriot Mithal Al Alusi was elected to the parliament later that year.

So how is this new government doing? The Shias, Sunni, and Kurds in the early stages of the government reminded me of a sixth-grade dance, where little interaction takes place except for a brave few willing to risk some contact. They interact a lot more now, but as a fledgling democracy the Shias, who constitute 60% of the population, understand "majority rule" but struggle with the concept of "minority rights."

This struggle over minority rights is at the center of their differences. The Shias fear repeating history and losing power to the Sunnis minority. They believe if this happens, like in the past, we will not be there to help them. And Sunnis fear having little or no power under an unsympathetic majority.

In Iraq it is easy to advocate for majority rule. They get it. The majority rules. But it is difficult, very difficult, to explain and advocate for the power and freedom that comes to a nation that protects its minorities and makes sure they are not outside the government, but an important part of that government. As I witness democracy take root in this ancient land, I will never take for granted the essential nature of “minority rights.” Minority rights is the lubricant that makes the whole system work. Without it democratic governments would come to a grinding halt.

So we have a people that has spent four years and five months trying to create the perfect union for themselves. With the death of 3,780 of our troops, 12,512 seriously wounded, and expenditures of over one-half trillion dollar, we are losing patience with Iraq.

Americans feel justified, given the supreme sacrifice of our military and the expenditure of so much money, to lecture Iraqis about how they need to get their act together, forgetting they didn't attack us. We attacked them, and then proceeded to eliminate their security—all their police, border patrol, and army—after Saddam, to add insult to injury, had already let out of jail all the criminals throughout Iraq.

One US politician after another berates the Maliki government, and the Sunni, Shia, and Kurds for their intransigence and failure to work out their differences and find common ground. I can't help but wonder who are we to talk? When was the last time Republicans and Democrats, House and Senate, White House and Congress worked together on any major piece of legislation facing our country? The Senate, once again, hasn't passed one of the eleven appropriations bills necessary to fund our government. We can't even agree on what to do in Iraq. So what about us?

When it comes to Iraq, the former Republican Congress was

blatantly partisan. The new Democratic Congress has returned the favor. And the press, rather than encouraging Republicans and Democrats, the White House and Congress, to come together, has picked sides and marshaled the facts to fit their own conclusions. It is hard to know, I might add, with a press that is accountable to no one, where you can go to get the unadulterated facts.

The reality is that we went into Iraq on a bipartisan basis with two-thirds of the House and three-quarters of the Senate supporting the resolution to use force. And the only way we are going to successfully bring most of our troops home is if we come together, find common ground, and compromise.

But this is not likely to happen in the near future, since the leadership and majority of both parties is captive to their so-called party's base. The Republican religious right and the Democratic anti-war left leave most Americans wondering: who is speaking for us? In this highly intense politically charged environment the answer is: practically no one.

The largest number of Americans aren't on the right or the left. The bell curve is in the middle of the political spectrum. In the past presidential election, 42% of the American people said they were neither red or blue (i.e., Republican or Democrat) but purple. This leaves Republicans and Democrats with just 29% support each.

And why is this relevant? The majority of Americans are not being heard or represented. The extremes focus on ideology and berate the fact that, according to them, Republicans and Democrats are no different from each other. So they keep pushing extreme positions. But the American people are in the middle of the political spectrum. They want solutions, not ideology. They want problems solved, not ignored. And they are getting neither.

Our Constitution was created by men who knew the meaning of compromise. During their time together, they grew to trust and respect each other and in the process gave up hardened views. They allowed themselves to be drawn to the middle of the political spectrum and in the process created the United States of America, where the people rule and have ruled for 218 years.

The question that confronts all of us today is: Do we have this same capacity, like our Founding Fathers, to grow to trust and respect each other, give up hardened views, and find solutions to the plethora of inconvenient truths that confront us?

Of this we can be certain: now is not the time for Congress and the White House to do nothing. There are many inconvenient truths we must confront, but we won't successfully address any of them until we have honest debate and until compromise and coming to the middle becomes something Americans value again.