Kanan Makiya has written a utopian blueprint for postwar Iraq. But its reception from a feuding U.S. administration and from competing Iraqi ethnic interests suggests that a post-Saddam happily-ever-after may be wishful thinking.

Dreaming of Democracy

By George Packer

Last summer, the State Department convened a number of Iraqi exiles to advise the United States government on the problems that Iraq would face after the fall of Saddam Hussein. It was called, rather grandly, the Future of Iraq Project. Among the topics was democracy, and among the Iraqis invited to join was a dissident named Kanan Makiya. He seemed a natural choice. In 1989, under the pseudonym Samir al-Khalil, Makiya published a book called "Republic of Fear," which relentlessly dissected the totalitarian nature of Saddam's regime. The pseudonym wasn't a whim; in those years Iraq's overseas dissidents were frequently bumped off. Ignored upon publication, the book became a best seller the next year with the outbreak of the Persian Gulf war, and Makiya, the son of Iraq's most distinguished architect and a trained architect himself, was thrust into the turbulence of Middle Eastern politics. At the end of the war, during a
THE DREAMER Kanan Makiya, a leader of the Iraqi opposition, in Sulaimaniya, in the Kurdish-controlled portion of Iraq, last month.

Photograph by Chang W. Lee
The Morning After

forum at Harvard, the author revealed his identity for the first time and urged President George H.W. Bush to finish the job the war had left undone by getting rid of Saddam Hussein. Makiya's ideas cut deeply against the grain of Arab intellectual life and won him both powerful admirers and powerful enemies.

But when the State Department's invitation came last year, Makiya balked. He assumed that the Future of Iraq Project wasn't serious. "Some people in the government are talking democratic change," he told me recently, referring to the civilian hawks in the Pentagon, "and there are other people who think that's all a pile of garbage. These others are in the State Department and the C.I.A. today. They are very powerful players."

The history of the Iraqi opposition's relationship with the United States government is a tangled and unhappy one, leaving deep suspicions between and within them. Iraq is one of the most diverse countries in the Arab world, with a majority population of Shi'ite Arabs, who predominate in the south, as well as large minorities of Sunni Arabs in the center, Kurds in the north and smaller groups of Assyrians, Turkomans, Armenians and a surviving handful of Jews. This ethnic makeup explains some of the Iraqi opposition's notorious divisions, but the political differences are even more rancorous. And nothing Iraqis say about one another quite equals the vitriol of the feuding over Iraq within the American government.

The Iraq question seems to exist on the far side of a looking glass where everyone turns into his opposite. The State Department and the C.I.A., considered the moderate wing of the Bush foreign policy apparatus, favor working through Iraq's traditional politics, which would mean removing Saddam but letting power stay with his ruling Ba'ath Party, mainly minority Sunni Arabs. The State Department wants stability above all. Meanwhile, the hard-line hawks at the Pentagon and in the vice president's office, with their professed devotion to sweeping transformation in Iraq, want the transition to democracy to be led by the Western-oriented exiles grouped since 1992 under the loose umbrella of the Iraqi National Congress, whose chairman, Ahmad Chalabi, is close to Makiya.

The battle is less between left and right than between realists and revolutionaries. It has simmered throughout the buildup to war, and it could haunt and possibly sabotage the postwar reconstruction. It makes an odd kind of sense that Makiya, 53, who was once a Trotskyist and supporter of radical Palestinian politics, has ended up as a liberal in the camp of neconservative zealots, who see a democratic Iraq as a lever for moving the entire Arab world toward the West.

In the end, Makiya decided to call the State Department's bluff — to "hoist them on their own petard." He joined the Future of Iraq Project's Democratic Principles Working Group, and along with a few allies from the exile community in Washington and London, he took over the writing of a detailed report on democracy after Saddam. There's something in it to offend everyone. The report proposes, among other radical ideas, a representative "transitional authority" chosen by Iraq's opposition exiles and ready to operate inside the country as the regime crumbles; the postwar demilitarization of Iraq; the dismantling of the Ba'ath Party along the lines of German de-Nazification; war crimes trials and a truth commission; thoroughgoing secularism; a constitution in which individual and minority group rights would be guaranteed in advance of local and then national elections, so that democracy does not lead to tyranny of the majority; a decentralized federal government in which the regions would be drawn along geographic rather than ethnic lines; and an end to ethnic identity as a basis for the state. As long as Iraq is defined as an Arab state, other ethnic groups, like Kurds and Assyrians, will continue to be second-class citizens. In Kanan Makiya's blueprint, Iraq would officially cease to be an Arab country.

"It's the architect in me," he says, nursing a cold over Japanese tea in Cambridge, Mass., where he lives. Makiya is a balding and somewhat disheveled Brandeis University professor of Middle East studies with a soft, intense manner. His office in a Cambridge apartment is lined with leatherbound books on Islamic history and literature. When his cellphone rings, he apologizes for having temporarily acquired one — "a disaster for a writer." The immediate world of waitresses and crosswalks constantly surprises Makiya out of his thoughts, which these days are elsewhere. This unlikely revolutionary is taking the huge gamble that by riding on the back of an American war, he can hold the Americans to their own talk and help direct the outcome.

"We've played a kind of game," he says. "It's not a game, it's serious — we've emerged with something very hard to disown even though it comes up with conclusions opposite to what the State Department wanted. They never wanted that kind of document in the first place."

In December, Makiya went to London to present the report at a meeting of the hundreds of mullahs, monarchists, ex-officers, party bosses, businessmen, intellectuals and schemers who make up Iraq's fractious exiled opposition. In London I saw that the qualities that make Makiya a powerful thinker also make him a bad politician — the most eloquent spokesman for Iraqi democracy and at times his own worst advocate. In the weeks since London the pressure on him has only grown, along with the difficulty of the task. The closer we get to war, the harder it is to believe that the liberal democracy Makiya envisages will be the outcome. The problem isn't just the Iraqis. It's also the Americans.

N

o one knows what will happen when Saddam Hussein's death grip on his country is finally broken. Prediction is a dangerous business in politics generally, but in the case of Iraq, where since 1968 the only political activity that won't get you killed is unambiguous loyalty to the Ba'ath Party, the future is especially opaque. For the past several months the country has been crawling with foreign journalists, yet the security apparatus is so extensive

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Of the 18 regime changes forced by the United States in the 20th century, only 5 resulted in democracy, and in wars fought unilaterally, the number goes down to one — Panama.

At the Creation: Faisal I, son of Hussein of Mecca, with his party and advisers at the Versailles peace conference in 1919, two years before being made king of the new country of Iraq. His British backer, T.E. Lawrence, is third from the right.

and terror so deeply internalized that most of what we know about Iraq’s unofficial thoughts is confined to facial expressions and buried meanings. When Makiya and two other Iraqis were invited to the Oval Office in January, he told President Bush that invading American troops would be greeted with “sweets and flowers.” More fancifully, Prof. Fouad Ajami, a Middle East scholar at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, predicts “kites and boom boxes.”

A recent report compiled by the International Crisis Group, a policy organization based in Brussels, from secret interviews held in three Iraqi cities last fall gives perhaps the most thorough account of political thought in Iraq today, and it lends some support to the optimists. With unexpected homogeneity, Iraqis voiced an acceptance of the inevitability of war and a change of government. “We have nothing to lose,” one Iraqi said. According to the report, “A significant number of those Iraqis interviewed, with surprising candor, expressed their view that if such a change required an American-led attack, they would support it.” Though fear of a destructive war and anarchy afterward runs deep, “the overwhelming sentiment among those interviewed was one of frustration and impatience with the status quo.”

But when it comes to the Iraqi landscape after the dictator’s fall, the International Crisis Group report has more sobering news for those who imagine a swift transition to democracy. “Thoughts about a post-Saddam Iraq remain extremely vague and inarticulate,” it found. In the words of one Iraqi, “We have become political dwarfs.” Questions about successor regimes and federal democracy met with indifference. On the other hand, according to the report, the opposition in exile “is viewed with considerable suspicion” — far more than a foreign occupier would be — “and the desire for a long-term U.S. involvement is higher than anticipated.”

When Saddam suddenly ordered the release of tens of thousands of prisoners from the notorious Abu Ghraib prison last fall, the surge of inmates from within the walls and family members from without overwhelmed prison guards and crushed a number of people to death at the very moment of freedom. Reporters who ventured into the bowels of the prison were struck by the appalling odors of long human confinement. When the seal on Iraq is broken, the surge will be just as intense, and the smell of decades of repression just as rank. “With the removal of the dictator,” says Thomas Carothers, a democracy expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “political life will begin immediately,” and unless American troops are able to provide civil order while their hunt down weapons depots and resisting units of the Special Republican Guard, it will initially look more like vigilantism than party-building. Peter Galbraith, a professor at the National Defense University in Washington, says: “As the American troops sweep north, they’ll pass Basra in the early days. Presumably they won’t go into the city. Then who’s going to govern the city? Will there be another uprising? I think there’s a good chance.”

In 1991, when Kurds in the north and Shiites in the south rose up against Saddam after his defeat in Kuwait, the score-settling and looting were so extreme that Makiya later wrote of a “basic nihilistic impulse.” Today, Iraqi Kurds, under the protection of an allied no-fly zone, has a flourishing civil society and the beginnings of democratic self-government. Peter Galbraith, who as a Senate aide in the late 1980’s saw the effects of genocide in Kurdish villages and unsuccessfully tried to turn Reagan administration policy against Saddam, says: “A unified and democratic Iraq is an oxymoron. The important point about the north is that the Iraqi identity is disappearing there.”

A breakaway Kurdistan is a long-term possibility; civil violence in the south is the more immediate threat. The Shiites there have been especially persecuted by Saddam since their 1991 uprising was put down with tens of thousands of deaths. Joseph Braude, a young Iraqi-American whose book “The New Iraq” will be published this month, says that the impoverished Shiite south is “not an existential threat to the map of Iraq. It’s more of a terrible social challenge of Iraqi society.” The distribution of wealth, more than the ethnic division of power, he says, will determine whether there will ever be social peace in Iraq. Iraq’s Shiites — the most disenfranchised group, with the freshest grievances and the strongest claim on a share of power — will challenge the policing and diplomatic skills of an army of occupation after the flowers, sweets, kites and boom boxes disappear. Patrick Clawson, deputy director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and editor of the book “How to Build a New Iraq After Saddam,” thinks that Iraq’s disintegration into ethnic pieces is less of a threat than a series of “revolving-door coups,” and for that reason the United States military should keep intact elements of Iraq’s army to maintain order and even join a new government.

To the crucial questions of who will take power after Saddam and for how long, the administration has been loath to give a public answer. For months, a surprisingly public argument has raged between the State Department and the Pentagon over the shape of Iraq after a war. People close to the administration’s decision-making about the postwar period describe a confused, largely day-to-day process, in contrast with the disciplined long-term planning for the war itself. In the Pentagon version, Iraqi exiles would form a provisional government prepared to take power under American protection. The State Department, which intensely dislikes the Iraqi National Congress and its chairman, Ahmad Chalabi, has done everything possible to block this possibility and either encourage a coup or plan for the American military to run Iraq for months or years until it would gradually hand over power to Iraqis.

Chalabi is a banker with an aristocratic manner and a controversial reputation who has devoted a considerable part of his fortune and the past decade of his life to building up the Iraqi National Congress, which is based in London. He elicits strong reactions of admiration or contempt in Washington. David L. Phillips, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations who works closely with the State Department on its Future of Iraq Project, says, “If Ahmad Chalabi walked down a street in Baghdad today, nobody would recognize him.” In the view of the State Department’s Middle East hands, there’s something inauthentic about Iraqi exiles, soaked for years in nostalgia, grand ideas and impotence. Some of them haven’t set foot in Baghdad for more than three decades; Makiya left to attend M.I.T. in 1968, the year the Baath Party seized total power, and has lived in Cambridge or London ever since. Condoleezza Rice, to whom both American factions have appealed as an arbiter, told one Iraqi,
"We’ve suffered so much that the only alternative is democracy," says Jessica Mathews of the Carnegie Endowment. "As soon as you say it, you realize there’s a mile between the beginning and end of that sentence."

THINGS TO COME

An unfinished statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad. If he is removed from power, the shape of government in Iraq could take any form — secular, religious, democratic, military or some combination thereof.

referring to Poland’s World War II-era self-proclaimed government-in-exile, “The trouble with the Iraqi opposition is they’re like the London Poles.” But the Pentagon hawks and their neoconservative allies argue just as passionately that the exiles are the only Iraqis capable of forming a government, all political life inside Iraq having long since been extinguished. In this view, State’s scorn for the Iraqi National Congress amounts to a disbelief in Arab democracy.

It now seems that the State Department has won this fight. As Peter Galbraith suggested, half in jest, the Pentagon will get its war and State will get its postwar. In mid-February, administration officials finally announced plans for an American military government to run the country for at least two years, guaranteeing security and overseeing the reconstruction of Iraq and the election of an Iraqi government. Baath Party officials would be removed from the top levels of the bureaucracy, but those a notch down would be kept on to work with their American superiors. Gen. Tommy Franks of the United States Central Command would take a job that the Pentagon never wanted to exist, acting as a sort of discreet and colorless MacArthur. Iraq’s exiles would be the losers, relegated to seats on an advisory council to be shared with American-picked Iraqis from inside the country. This proposed course of action, played down for months by the administration, suggests that in the absence of a strong coalition of countries, a largely American war will be followed by a largely American peace.

There are other projections for what might take place — ones that follow the law of unintended consequences. The Turkish Army occupies northern Iraq to prevent an independent Kurdistan on its border, prompting Turkish and Iraqi Kurds to join forces against the Turks and Iraqi Turkomans. The Kurds refuse to rejoin the country that once tried to exterminate them unless federalism gives them control over the oil reserves of Kirkuk. The two Kurdish parties resume the fighting that broke out between them in 1996. The Iranian hard-liners, realizing that Iraq’s territorial integrity has become a theoretical matter, take the opportunity to finish off the opposition mujahedeen across the border. Shiite mullahs, finding themselves locked out of power again, resist American authority and form antioccupation militias. A Sunni officer in the Iraqi Army pulls off an 11th-hour coup, declares himself friendly to the United States and stops the process cold. Makiya calls this last “my greatest fear.”

In Arabic, “Iraq” means “well-rooted country,” which suggests the kind of promotional thinking that makes urban planners christen a concrete housing project "Metropolitan Gardens.” The country was assembled at Versailles after World War I out of three former Ottoman provinces and handed over by the League of Nations in 1920 to be a British mandate, breaking the promise of postwar independence that T.E. Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, had made to Britain’s Arab allies. But the British found this unruly congregation of peoples more trouble to govern than it was worth, even with Lawrence’s friend King Faisal I on the throne, and in 1932 Iraq became an independent constitutional monarchy, though the imperial power didn’t leave without securing favorable oil concessions. Within four years Iraq gave the Arab world its first modern coup. After that, the violence never really stopped, with coups, ethnic pogroms and massacres among political parties. (The Arab Baath movement emerged in World War II as a pro-Nazi group.) But the most turbulent decade followed the overthrow of the constitutional monarchy in 1958. One military regime was toppled by the next. In 1968 the Arab Baath Socialist Party finally consolidated power, destroying its opponents among the Communists and the other Arab nationalists. Saddam, the head of internal security, quickly acquired de facto power but assumed the presidency only in 1979 amid a bloody purge. Chaos gave way to dictatorship, two ruinous foreign wars and the Kurdish genocide.

Iraqis today, depending on their age, express deep nostalgia either for the cosmopolitan Baghdad of the years before the Jews were made to flee upon the creation of Israel; or for the constitutional monarchy before the 1958 coup; or for the oil-rich years of the 1970’s. But while Iraq might once have been stable or wealthy or tolerant, it was never really democratic. Makiya first got to know Ahmad Chalabi when they sat together on an airplane and Makiya was impressed to find the chairman of the Iraqi National Congress reading a thick tome on the reconstruction of postwar Germany. But anyone seeking historical lessons for a democratic Iraq has to face the fact that Germany before Hitler was liberal compared with Iraq before Saddam.

This bloody history has produced a hopeful new idea. Call it Iraq exceptionalism. It’s the idea that Iraqis have suffered so intensely under a radical nationalist regime that they are by now immune to the anti-Western rhetoric that remains potent in the rest of the Arab world. Iraqis crushed by Saddam’s brand of Arab nationalism do not see America and Israel as their eternal enemies. The real enemy is the one within.

This thinking took hold of Makiya during the Iran-Iraq war. He left his father’s London architectural practice when Mohamed Makiya began to receive commissions from Saddam to rebuild Baghdad in monumental fashion; he threw himself into the research for “Republic of Fear.” It changed him from a revolutionary Marxist to a liberal democrat. He began to think outside the dominant lines of Middle Eastern ideologies: rather than an anti-imperialist resistance leader, he became a dissident in the Eastern European way, diagnosing the pathology of homegrown tyranny: “It wasn’t the United States, it was Iraqis and Iraqians who were bleeding themselves to death," he told me. “This sense that the malaise was principally in my world, and not principally in the United States, was the seismic shift in my politics.”

The implications of the shift are far-reaching, for the lens through which most of the Arab world views Israel and America might no longer fit Iraq. Without denying the justice of the Palestinian cause, Makiya says, Arabs shouldn’t regard it as the key to solving regional problems. The crucial issue is no longer national liberation, but democracy based on human rights. These ideas came to a head during the gulf war, when most of the Arab world supported Saddam. “Republic of Fear,” copies of which had been smuggled into Iraq, made Makiya famous among his countrymen, and after the war, when he traveled through the Kurdish region to film a BBC documentary, “Saddam’s Killing Fields,” Iraqis sought him out to tell their stories of the genocide and the bloody repres-
to its new, oil-rich democracy. And finally, the deadlock in which Israel and Palestine are trapped would end as Palestinians, realizing that their Arab backers were now tending their own democratic gardens, would accept compromise. By this way of thinking, the road to Damascus, Tehran, Riyadh and Jerusalem goes through Baghdad.

The idea is sometimes referred to as a new domino theory, with tyrannies collapsing on top of one another. Among the harder heads at the State Department, I was told, is also mocked as the Everybody Move Over One theory: Israel will take the West Bank, the Palestinians will get Jordan and the members of Jordan’s Hashemite ruling family will regain the Iraqi throne once held by their relative King Faisal I.

At times this story is told in the lofty moral language of Woodrow Wilson, the language that President Bush used religiously in his State of the Union address. Others — both advocates and detractors — tell the story in more naked terms of power and resources. David Frum, the former Bush speechwriter who wrote the first two words in the phrase “axis of evil,” argues in his new book, “The Right Man,” “An American-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein — and a replacement of the radical Baathist dictatorship with a new government more closely aligned with the United States — would put America more wholly in charge of the region than any power since the Ottomans, or maybe the Romans.”

It’s an audacious idea, and part of its appeal lies in the audacity. It shoves history out of a deep hole. To the idea’s strongest backers, status-quo caution toward the sick, dangerous Middle East is contemptible, almost unbearable. “You have to start somewhere,” says Danielle Pletka, a vice president of the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative research group. “There are always a million excuses not to do something like this.” Who wouldn’t choose amputation over gangrene? If we have the will and imagination, the thinking goes, we can strike one great blow at terrorism, tyranny, underdevelopment and the region’s hardest, saddest problem.

“IT’S CALLED MAGICAL realism, Middle East-style,” says Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Exactly how, he wonders, would this chain reaction occur? Arab countries are stuck between autocratic governments and Islamist opposition, he says, and “our invasion of Iraq isn’t going to remove those political forces. They’re going to be sitting there the next day.” The war, which is vastly unpopular in the Arab world, is far more likely to improve the fortunes of the Islamists, he says, and provoke

Continued on Page 60
THE MORNING AFTER
Continued from Page 49

governments to tighten their grip, than to ventilate the region with an Arab spring.

The chances of democracy succeeding even in Iraq under American occupation are highly questionable, Carothers argues. War seldom creates democracy; according to a recent article in The Christian Science Monitor, of the 18 regimes changed forced by the United States in the 20th century, only 5 resulted in democracy, and in the case of wars fought unilaterally, the number goes down to one — Panama. Democracy takes root from within, over a long period of time, in conditions that have never prevailed in Iraq. For democracy to have a chance there would require a lengthy and careful American commitment to nation-building — which could easily look to Iraqis and other Arabs like colonialism. Nor can we be sure that democracy, in Iraq or elsewhere, will lead to pro-American regimes; it might lead to the opposite. “The idea that there’s a small democracy inside every society waiting to be released just isn’t true,” Carothers says. “If we’re pinning our hopes on the idea that this will lead to a democratic change throughout the region, then we’re invading for the wrong reason.” Jessica T. Mathews, president of the Carnegie Endowment, adds, “We’ve suffered so much that the only alternative is democracy” — as soon as you say it, you realize there’s a mile between the beginning and end of that sentence. This is the premise of the strategic rationale for war is that Arab public opinion — the resentment turning to fury that will probably greet an American invasion — doesn’t matter, because it is wrong, even delusional. “America,” Fouad Ajami writes, “ought to be able to live with this distrust and discount a good deal of this anti-Americanism as the ‘road rage’ of a thwarted Arab world — the congenital condition of a culture yet to take full responsibility for its self-inflicted wounds.”

I ran these notions by Hussein Ibish, the Lebanese-born communications director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. He pointed out that some Arab views, especially about the Palestinians, are based on reality, not manipulated paranoia, and that anyone genuinely interested in Arab democracy had better take the popular will into account, delusional or not. If, on the other hand, Iraq is to be turned back into a colonial mandate as it was 80 years ago, inching toward “Heart of Darkness,” as Ibish said, we should openly admit that the anti-colonial values of the intervening decade are being cast aside. “How do you think this discussion will sound translated into Arabic and broad-cast on Al Jazeera?” he asked. “This war will only reinforce the Arab feeling of humiliation and impotence. It could be a giant television commercial for Al Qaeda.”

As Arab regimes try to weather popular discontent, they will be far happier with the State Department’s postwar scheme for regional stability than with the Pentagon hawks’ notions about regional transformation — especially if Iraq’s oil is used by the Americans to rebuild Iraq and not to undermine OPEC, Iran, which has taken a surprisingly benign view of the war gathering on its horizon, might change its mind once American troops settle into Iraq for the long haul and events across the border make themselves felt among Iranian reformers. France and Russia, with their extensive interests in Iraqi oil and other contracts, might sit out the war but cut to the front of the line during the reconstruction to claim their share of the spoils. America’s closest ally in the neighborhood, Turkey, with its troops in Iraq’s north possibly provoking a Kurdish revolt, could turn out to be the most problematic player of all. Except, of course, for the Iraqis and the Americans themselves.

THE LONDON HILTON METROPOLE is a garish hotel near Paddington Station, and over a December weekend it seemed that most of Iraq’s three million to four million exiles were there, in turbans and robes, in kaffiyehs, in English-cut business suits, huddled in conspiratorial-looking groups, clutching cellphones to ears. Among them Makiya was an anomalous sight, looking rumpled in shirtsleeves, baggy corduroys and all-weather shoes, his face clean-shaven. (One Iraqi told me that the country’s next president must either be a woman or a man without a mustache.) The politics from the Kurdish, Shiite and ex-military parties complained that Makiya’s casual appearance lacked respect. The rumored contents of his report, copies of which most of them hadn’t yet received, troubled them, too. Worst of all was the bluntness with which Makiya and some of his young, Western-educated allies in the Iraqi National Congress were talking about the need to move beyond the “old politics” of the ethnic parties, which had all been born in the image of the Baath.

Before the conference, American officials made it clear that they were opposed to any votes being taken in London; no transitional government would be elected, no report on democracy approved. The State Department had won out. Just before the conference began, Makiya sat down in a cafe across from the British Museum to survey the damage with Salim Chalabi, a London lawyer and nephew of Ahmad Chalabi, who had helped draft the document. “They want to come out of this as one big happy family,” Makiya said of the traditional parties. “They want to show unity and support for the Americans. I want to win something concrete.” He wanted the Iraqi opposition to commit itself to a proposal and make itself relevant before the shooting started and the logic of war took its course. “But I’m afraid we’re fighting a losing battle.”

Chalabi told Makiya that his outspokenness was hurting his own case. Makiya is an old friend of the Kurds; in addition to having made the documentary “Saddam’s Killing Fields,” he directs Harvard’s Iraq Documentation Project, which is organizing and translating millions of documents left behind by the Baath Party as records of the genocide. But the Kurdish parties at the conference were vehemently opposed to the proposal for a nonethnic federation in Iraq. They had fought hard to gain recognition and equal status with the Arabs, and they were not going to relinquish it easily. The views of the Shiites on the section dealing with secularism had not been solicited. The Sunnis were less represented than anyone. There had been a lack of inclusiveness. Makiya agreed — but he couldn’t help adding: “I’ve begun to hate the word ‘inclusive’ here. I know it’s going to mean the lowest common denominator. Nothing will be said that means anything.”

Makiya was sweating, the lines deepening in his high forehead. The conference, the months of work, the political storm that always swirled around him, seemed to be placing him under an intolerable strain. Finally he relented.

“O.K., what should we do?” he asked.

“You have to play it more like a game,” Chalabi said. He suggested emphasizing the points on which there was agreement, like human rights, and muting the controversial ones. He urged Makiya to lower his profile.

On the first day of the conference, at a press briefing, Makiya sat alongside Ahmad Chalabi and a few others, content to listen. But when a reporter asked him a question, he leaned forward and said: “The report carries forward a completely new idea that doesn’t exist in the Arab-Muslim world. This is something tremendous, something unbelievable. We’re talking above all of an idea of democracy that isn’t only majority rule — an idea of democracy that is about minority rights and above all individual rights.” He added: “This is a fighting document, by the way. We intend to fight for it on the floor of the conference.”

I had seen it before: when Makiya spoke, the energy in the room became focused. Afterwards a swarm of reporters gathered around him. Into the room walked a furious Hoshyar Zebari, a leading official of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, whose own press conference had been sparsely attended. Later, I asked Zebari about the document and about Makiya. Zebari smiled through his answer, but he kept thumping me in the chest as he spoke. “We are rooted in the country, we are the ones who have suffered,” he said. “What Continued on Page 90
THE MORNING AFTER

Continued from Page 60

Kanan Makiya has done, I appreciate his intellectual work, but it’s just an intellectual exercise.”

Makiya, I suggested, was trying to give it teeth. “He’s the only one,” said an American who was hovering around the conversation. It was David L. Phillips, who had worked with the State Department on the Future of Iraq Project. “The report is not a political document — it’s not a blueprint. If it becomes one it will be divisive.”

Phillips later expressed sharp anger at Makiya for hijacking the writing of the report and then lobbying so hard for its provisions.

Back in Washington, officials thanked the Democratic Principles Working Group for its advice and shelved the report that the State Department had solicited. Makiya had called their bluff, and now they were calling his. The London conference ended with expressions of unity and vague support for that thing called democracy in Iraq. Makiya was blamed to a democracy transitional coordinating committee. But the report of the Democratic Principles Working Group, printed and bound with hundreds of pages of appendices and disserts, was never officially discussed. It struck me as inauspicious that of all the committees in the Future of Iraq Project — on water, electricity, agriculture and a host of other topics — only the committee on democracy was deemed a failure.

The longer you try to look at Iraq on the morning after Saddam, the more you see the truth of what many people told me: getting rid of him will be the easy part. After that, the United States will find itself caught in a series of conundrums that will require supreme finesse: to liberate without appearing to dominate, to ensure order without over-staying, to secure its interests without trampling on Iraq’s, to oversee democratization without picking winners, to push for reforms in the neighborhood without unleashing demons. It’s hard to know whether to be more worried by the State Department’s complicity or by the Pentagon civilians’ zealotry.

On the day that Saigon fell in 1975, the British writer James Fenton found a framed quotation on a wall of the looted American embassy: “Better to let them do it imperfectly than to do it perfectly yourself, for it is their country, their way, and your time is short.” The words are from T.E. Lawrence. Vietnam remains the shadow over every American war, but never more than the one we’re poised to fight, for no war since Vietnam has possessed greater ambitions: to change the political culture of a country, maybe a whole region. Ever since Woodrow Wilson worked to put democracy and self-determination on the agenda, the strain of high-mindedness in the American character has drawn the world’s admiration and its scorn. In Graham Greene’s novel “The Quiet American,” which was recently released as a film, the title character is a young idealist sent to Vietnam in the early 1950’s to find a democratic “Third Force” between the French and the Communists. The book’s narrator, a jaded British journalist, remarks, “I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused.” Americans have never been very good at imperialism, or much interested in it; we’re too innocent, too impatient, too intoxicated with our own sense of selfless purpose. Several Iraqis expressed the wish that their occupiers could be the British again, who took the trouble to know them so much better, who wrote whole books on the Marsh Arabs and the flora and fauna of Kuwait. Afghanistan lost America’s attention as soon as Kandahar fell, and it remains unfinished business. As for Iraq, Jessica Mathews of the Carnegie Endowment, says, “Our country is not remotely prepared for what this is going to take.”

If so, the fault mainly lies with President Bush. His articulation of political aims and postwar plans has been sketchy to the point of empty cliché. He has never discussed the human costs of war, nor the price. The Yale economist William D. Nordhaus estimates the military expenditure between $50 billion

ANSWERS TO PUZZLES

OF FEBRUARY 23, 2003

LEO ROSTEN, CARNIVAL OF WIT —
Groucho Marx offered to write a blurb for a book I was about to publish. . . .

His comment, verbatim [was]: From the moment I picked your book up till the moment I put it down, I could not stop laughing. Someday I hope to read it.

A. Loudmouth  L. Rex Stout
B. Embalmed  M. Not to worry
C. Obfuscate  N. Iditarod
D. Ronin  O. Valkyrie
E. Out of kilter  P. Acute
F. Switcheroo  Q. Limbo
G. Tomtit  R. Omphaloskepsis
H. Empath  S. “Fargo”
I. No biggie  T. Webbed
J. Chowhound  U. Impromptu
K. Amphibian  V. Tofu

START APACHE  CALORIES
CALORIE PROTEIN  CALORIES
1096  27  79
FRUITDOWNROOTS  RECEPTOR
SEASON  POKER  WINS
BOXRE TV  SUNDAY  SATURDAY
UREA  ROAD  TO  CAR
SILVER  GOONERS  RAINE
OIL  DANGEROUS  MUG
AW  12  R  5  HOURS
LEERIEN  RECURRING  SIBL
HAIR  MAE  NER  PEL  SE
SCARE  KNIGHTS  FIAS
COKE  ON  PAKISTAN
FLINTS  OR  PRCISTS
LIME  OR  PRCISTS
TIMETABLE  FLANDERS
GATE  OR  JACOB
DOG  OR  JACOB
ABLAKE  PLAN  ELDORADO
HYACINTH  PLANETFLOWER
TEXAS  BEEDE  CHEAT
STENTORS  ESTHER  FALVE"
THE MORNING AFTER

Continued from Page 90

and $140 billion; far more daunting, his study finds, the postwar costs to the United States of occupying and rebuilding Iraq, along with the impact on oil markets and the economy, could run as high as $2 trillion. This is a calculation that no one in the administration has dared to make, at least publicly. Privately, some officials suggest that Iraqi oil will pay for it.

More than anything, the president hasn’t readied Americans psychologically to commit themselves to a project of such magnitude, nor has he made them understand why they should. He has maintained his spirit of hostility to nation-building while reversing his policy against it. Bush is a man who has never shown much curiosity about the world. When he met with Makiya and two other Iraqis in January, I was told by someone not present, the exiles spent a good portion of the time explaining to the president that there are two kinds of Arabs in Iraq, Sunnis and Shiites. The very notion of an Iraqi opposition appeared to be new to him. War has turned Bush into a foreign-policy president, but democratizing an Arab country will require a subtlety and sophistication that have been less in evidence than the resolve to fight.

I asked John W. Dower, a history professor at M.I.T. and author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning book about the American occupation of Japan, to compare that project with the democratization of Iraq. The difference between Japan and Iraq is great enough, he answered; the difference between America in 1945 and 2003 is even greater. “We do not have the moral legitimacy we had then, nor do we have the other thing that was present when we occupied Japan — the vision of the American public that we would engage in serious and genuinely democratic nation-building and that we would do this in the context of an international order.”

Even Fouad Ajami, a strong believer in the war’s potential for regional reform, told me: “The country is depressed, psychologically and economically. There is no great call for taking our truth in Mesopotamia. The war will have an ideological claim, but tempered by the difficulty of Iraq, by the fact that we don’t know this land.”

The unease among Americans, even those who support the president, about the war and its aftermath is certainly due to fear of unknown consequences. It might also come from the sense that we’re trying to have it both ways — guns and butter, war without sacrifice, intervention without commitment. If Iraq succeeds in becoming a democracy under American protection, it will represent the triumph of hope over experience for both countries. It’s a notion that I always found easier to imagine when I was within earshot of Kanan Makiya.

In mid-January, Makiya emerged from his meeting at the Oval Office to declare himself “deeply reassured” by the president’s dedication to Iraqi democracy. Within a few days Makiya had flown to Tehran with Ahmad Chalabi and a few other Iraqi National Congress members to hold talks with Iraqi Shiite leaders. At the end of January, under the protection of Iranian security, they crossed the snow-covered mountains into northern Iraq. One recent morning, Makiya called me from Sulaimaniya, in Iraqi Kurdistan. He and the Kurds had patched up their differences, and one of the two Kurdish parties — the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan — had embraced the principle of nonethnic federalism. “The opposition is trying to get its act together, basically,” he said.

When the United States revealed a few weeks ago its intent to impose a military government after the war, Makiya took the news as a betrayal. “It is Baathism with an American face,” he declared. In his view, the odds for democracy have never looked longer, and he now wonders aloud if his harshest critics, who accused him of naiveté and worse, will be proved right after all. The exiles who gathered in late February to hold a second conference in northern Iraq won’t declare a provisional government against American wishes, Makiya told me, but they are trying to forge an Iraqi leadership that will be capable of forming one after the war sweeps through.

What Makiya is trying to do is think his way out of Iraq’s blood-stained history. After the gulf war, when he and other dissidents drafted what they called “Chartter 91,” outlining principles of tolerance for a new Iraq, Makiya received a severe letter from an old friend that he was willing to reprint in “Cruelty and Silence”: “I think — and please allow me to tell you this — that the ideas of the Charter issue from an ivory tower which has elevated itself so high up into the sky that we who are standing down below can hardly see or hear where they are coming from. You see, our society today has become like ‘1984.’ There is no one who remembers or who even dares to remember the meaning of words like ‘freedom,’ ‘democracy,’ ‘brotherhood’ or ‘humanity.’ They no longer know what ‘human rights’ are. I mean, what does this have to do with them? . . . Their only preoccupation is to survive and to live, like sheep.”

It’s possible that Makiya’s ideas are too lofty to stand a chance of being realized soon. David L. Phillips may be right to say that “Iraqis aren’t quite ready for the new politics. The tribal structures, the ethnic groupings — they matter to Iraqis. They’re important. This isn’t a university laboratory.” It’s also possible that Makiya was foolish ever to imagine American cooperation with his exile dreams, and that he is out of his element in the dangerous labyrinth of Iraqi power politics. Meanwhile, ahead of the war, an Arab translation of the report is being smuggled from Iraqi Kurdistan into Baghdad in miniature editions disguised as cigarette cartons.

“The document is just paper at the end of the day,” Makiya told me one snowy evening at his Cambridge apartment. “One of the less grandiose impulses behind it was this: there’s a world of people out there deeply, deeply skeptical about whether or not this country can make it to democracy. And I know deep down that they have good reason to be skeptical. I’m not really as rosy, I’m not as naïve as sometimes I appear on this question. But it seems to me, for history’s sake, important to have a group of Iraqis turn out a decent document that can be taken seriously, that will be picked up and remembered and churned over and used as some kind of a test, some kind of a yardstick against which to measure the progress of things afterward. And it was, after all, produced by Iraqis — so that Iraqis can lift their heads up a bit and go out there in the world and say: ‘We meant it. It wasn’t all a word game. Some of us tried to give it a shot.’ ”

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