

2008-01-01

Negroponte: Legacy of Bush Administration for Obama

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Recommended Citation

Clonan, T., 2008: Negroponte: Bush Legacy for Obama, Dublin: The Irish Times.

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Negroponte

Muntader al-Zaidi's words as he threw his shoes at the outgoing US President in the Green Zone in Baghdad this week may well become the epitaph for George Bush's disastrous invasion of Iraq. It was a hugely symbolic act and was reminiscent of the beating with shoes by angry Iraqis of Saddam's statue – toppled by US troops as the Iraqi capital fell to US forces - on the 9th of April 2003. Hurling his shoes at President Bush, al-Zaidi declared his act a 'gift' from the Iraqis, 'a farewell kiss you dog'. Al-Zaidi concluded his rebuke of President Bush with the comment 'This is from the widows, the orphans and those who were killed in Iraq'.

Al-Zaidi's comments reflect the anger of many Iraqis at the arguably unnecessary loss of civilian lives during – and in the aftermath of – the US invasion of Iraq. It is estimated that up to a quarter of a million Iraqi men, women and children have lost their lives since the US invaded in March 2003. Many of the deaths have been attributed to a failure on the part of the US as occupying forces to properly secure and administer the country. Many reports, including one published by The Lancet cite the destruction of the country's security, energy, health and food infrastructure by US forces and resistance groups during the invasion phase of the Iraq war and subsequent insurgency as central to the prolonged – and perhaps avoidable – suffering of the Iraqi people.

Prior to the invasion itself, in February 2003, the US Army's Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Eric Shinneski – during testimony to the Armed Services Committee – warned that the invasion force being assembled by President Bush was too small to secure and administer Iraq properly. The full-blown insurgency that followed the 'collapse' of Saddam's regime in April 2003, along with the wanton destruction of much of Iraq's key infrastructure appeared to vindicate warnings given to the Bush administration by the US military's top generals. Few members of Bush's inner circle have spoken frankly on the record about the decision to invade Iraq with such a small invasion force.

However, speaking at Trinity College Dublin's University Philosophical Society in late November of this year, US Deputy Secretary of State, John Negroponte made some interesting and frank admissions about the foreign policy and security record of the outgoing Bush administration – particularly as it applied to Iraq. Deputy Secretary of State Negroponte was appointed by President Bush as US Ambassador to the United Nations from 2001 until 2004 – during which period he played a pivotal role in attempts to garner international support for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Subsequently, he succeeded Paul Bremer as the US Ambassador to Iraq from 2004 to 2005. Thereafter, he served as US Director of National Intelligence for two years from 2005 to 2007. As a high profile Washington insider – throughout both terms of the Bush administration – Deputy Secretary Negroponte played a key role in determining the shape and nature of the Bush administration's responses to 9/11 and its subsequent robust military and foreign policy interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

During a lively question and answer session at the Philosophical Society on Monday, Negroponte was asked many questions about the strategy behind the invasion of Iraq. Responding to observations that the US invasion force was relatively small – at less than

250,000, barely one quarter of the total coalition force of over one million troops assembled for Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield during the first Gulf War – he admitted that the down-sized US occupation force was not strong enough to provide security or the prospect of reconstruction for the Iraqi people. He observed that the Bush administration, after the initial success in toppling Saddam's regime, thought 'the rest would be easy'. He also observed that when he arrived as Ambassador to Iraq in 2004, he expected to oversee the reconstruction of the country. However, he stated it was evident that reconstruction was simply not possible and that the country was in the throes of a 'widespread insurgency' – an insurgency that the Bush administration 'didn't foresee'.

This admission, and assertion that the US did not anticipate a widespread insurgency within Iraq, although such an insurgency had been predicted at the time by the US general staff - along with most international intelligence and security analysts – leaves the Bush administration open to the charge of having recklessly failed in its duty of care to the newly 'liberated' citizens of Iraq. The fourth Geneva Convention explicitly sets out the obligations and duties of an occupying force with regard to the physical security, food security, health and welfare of its protected citizens. Deputy Secretary Negroponte's remarks in Dublin in November – coupled with the suffering endured by the Iraqi people in the immediate aftermath of the invasion and the uncontrolled destruction of the country's key infrastructure – suggest strongly that the Bush administration were in clear breach of their obligations towards ordinary Iraqi citizens under the Geneva Conventions.

Deputy Secretary Negroponte was equally candid about the fall off in support for the invasion of Iraq within the US itself after the preliminary invasion phase. He stated that 'initial support for the war', was followed by a period during which the US experienced 'substantial casualties' and a decline in popular support for the war. He admitted that the insurgency – primarily led by former regime elements and Al Qaeda cells operating within Iraq – 'affected the attitude at home' towards the war.

This admission – that the Iraqi insurgency was directly responsible for the lowering of domestic support for the Administration's war aims there – sounded a warning note for the future of America's involvement in Afghanistan. With President-elect Obama expected to increase the number of US troops deployed to an increasingly restive Afghanistan, Negroponte made the insightful – and worrying - observation that the Taliban's 'theory of victory' was simply to 'undermine the Afghan government', 'wear out' or severely 'test' the NATO partnership's resolve to fight in Afghanistan and ultimately, to simply 'outlast the NATO alliance presence in Afghanistan'. Based on the US experience in Iraq – as described by one of its chief proponents – and based on the current strains and tensions within NATO, the short and long term prospects for a continued US and NATO involvement in Afghanistan under President Obama look grim. A decisive Victory in Afghanistan for NATO and its ISAF partners – including Ireland – would appear to be as remote as it was for the Soviets during their occupation of the country.

Deputy Secretary Negroponte did refer to some of ISAF's successes in Afghanistan including a reduction by 26% in the infant mortality rate there along with the

considerable achievement of providing education for over 6.5 million Afghan children – including 1.5 million girls who were previously denied education under the Taliban regime. He acknowledged the significant challenges that lie ahead for the new administration in Afghanistan and in an interview with the Irish Times – given after his public remarks – he identified the interlinked issues of the insurgency within Afghanistan and an increasingly unstable and radicalised Pakistan as significant challenges for the incoming Obama administration. Confronted with such seemingly intractable difficulties - in a significant statement - Negroponte also indicated that in principle, he would not rule out talks or negotiations with the Taliban and other resistance groups if certain conditions were met and if there appeared to be some constructive political engagement possible.

Responding to questions on the legacy of eight years of the foreign and domestic policies of the Bush administration, Negroponte accepted that some commentators would charge that the US had lost much of its international moral authority and had experienced a diminution in its standing as a world power. He observed that these had been ‘controversial times’ but that one of the key characteristics of democratic states such as the US and Ireland was that ‘honest people can openly disagree on what we believe to be right and wrong’. He also stated that he felt ‘it is good to rationalise and discuss these issues and to try and pass on the best possible understanding of our policies, aims and objectives’. He stated that he and others in the Bush administration ‘accept the criticism’ that had come with the exercise of power in difficult circumstances and were ‘prepared to line up to that’ and to openly discuss their motivations and rationale for foreign or domestic policies in whatever forum - political or academic.

As the question and answer session drew to a close on Monday, a student of the Philosophical Society asked Negroponte which one of the 43 Presidents of the United States did he admire the most. Somewhat prophetically – and without hesitation – he replied ‘President Roosevelt, for getting us through crisis’. As the Bush administration prepares for transition to President-elect Obama, it is clear that however high the expectations are for the new Democrat Presidency – the challenges are equally daunting.

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