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Breaking the Clinch

By David Brooks

Iraq is at the beginning of a civil war fought using the tactics of genocide, and it has all the conditions to get much worse. As a Newsweek correspondent, Christian Caryl, wrote recently from Baghdad, "What's clear is that we're far closer to the beginning of this cycle of violence than to its end." As John Burns of The Times said on "Charlie Rose" last night, "Friends of mine who are Iraqis — Shiite, Sunni, Kurd — all foresee a civil war on a scale with bloodshed that would absolutely dwarf what we're seeing now."

Iraq already has the warlord structures that caused mass murder in Rwanda, Bosnia, Sierra Leone and elsewhere. Violent, stupid men who would be the dregs of society under normal conditions rise amid the trauma, chaos and stress and become revered leaders.

They command squads of young men who leave the moral universe and have no future in a peacetime world. They kill for fun, faith and profit — because they find it more rewarding to massacre and loot than to farm or labor. They are manipulated by political leaders with a savage zero-sum mind-set, who know they must kill or be killed, and who are instituting strategic ethnic cleansing campaigns to expand their turf.

Worse, Iraq already has the psychological conditions that have undergirded the great bloodbaths of recent years. Iraqi minds, according to the most sensitive reporting, have already been rewired by the experiences of trauma and extreme stress.

Some people become hyperaggressive and turn into perfect killers. Others endure a phased mental shutdown that looks like severe depression. They lose their memory and become passive and fatalistic. They become perfect victims.

Amid the turmoil, the complexity of life falls away, and things are reduced to stark polarities: Sunni-Shiite or Shiite-Sunni, human-subhuman. Once this mental descent has begun, it is possible to kill without compunction.

In Rwanda, for example, the journalist Jean Hatzfeld interviewed a Hutu man who had killed his Tutsi neighbor. "At the fatal instant," the man recalled, "I did not see in him what he had been before. ... His features were indeed similar to those of the person I knew, but nothing firmly reminded me that I had lived beside him for a long time."

The weakness of the Bush surge plan is that it relies on the Maliki government to somehow be above this vortex. But there are no impartial institutions in Iraq, ready to foster reconciliation. As ABC's Jonathan Karl notes in *The Weekly Standard*, the Shiite finance ministries now close banks that may finance Sunni investments. The Saadrist health ministries dismiss Sunni doctors. The sectarian vortex is not fomented by extremists who are appendages to society. The vortex is through and through.

The Democratic approach, as articulated by Senator Jim Webb — simply get out of Iraq “in short order” — is a howl of pain that takes no note of the long-term political and humanitarian consequences. Does the party that still talks piously about ending bloodshed in Darfur really want to walk away from a genocide the U.S. is partly responsible for? Are U.S. troops going to be pulled back to secure bases to watch passively while rivers of Iraqi blood lap at their gates? How many decades will Americans be fighting to quell the cycle of regional violence set loose by a transnational Sunni-Shiite explosion?

I for one have become disillusioned with dreams of transforming Iraqi society from the top down. But it’s not too late to steer the situation in a less bad direction. Increased American forces can do good — they are still, as David Ignatius says, the biggest militia on the block — provided they are directed toward realistic goals.

There is one option that does approach Iraqi reality from the bottom up. That option recognizes that Iraq is broken and that its people are fleeing their homes to survive. It calls for a “soft partition” of Iraq in order to bring political institutions into accord with the social facts — a central government to handle oil revenues and manage the currency, etc., but a country divided into separate sectarian areas to reduce contact and conflict. When the various groups in Bosnia finally separated, it became possible to negotiate a cold (if miserable) peace.

Soft partition has been advocated in different ways by Joe Biden and Les Gelb, by Michael O’Hanlon and Edward Joseph, by Pauline Baker at the Fund for Peace, and in a more extreme version, by Peter Galbraith.

On Sunday, I’ll give further publicity to their recommendations.

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