

Religion Today
October 10-16, 2004
Iraq: Not Vietnam, but Northern Ireland
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During this election season, Iraq has often been compared to Viet Nam. This usually aims to score political points, and gives more heat than light. But the reason to draw comparisons is to learn from past situations to help understand present and future circumstances. The predictive value becomes greater the more similar the two situations are--you can't compare apples and oranges. In that light, the British experience in Northern Ireland is much closer to the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Both Iraq and Northern Ireland have important religious dimensions, Viet Nam does not.

The religious character of the two countries is strikingly similar. Northern Ireland's population is divided between two versions of one religion, Christianity. On one side stand the Protestants, on the other the Catholics. These two groups have had a centuries-long history of social and religious friction. Iraq too contains two versions of a single religion, namely, Islam. The two sides, Sunnis and Shiites, have been in conflict for centuries. In both cases, there is a long history of hatred.

In both countries, an army from outside the area provides police and security services. In Iraq, this is the United States Army, while in Northern Ireland, it is the British Army. Since Northern Ireland belongs to Great Britain, this is not an occupying army, but it is a force directed from London rather than by local government authorities. Once the British Army began its involvement, its primary task was to keep the peace and prevent the two communities from preying on the other. Secondly, the army found its presence was provoking to the Irish and it was frequently attacked. The same situation applies to the U.S. Army in Iraq.

Finally, the extremists in both conflicts are not particularly religious themselves, but cloak their actions in religious rhetoric. In Northern Ireland, the ideology of the terrorist Irish Republican Army is solidly communist. In Iraq, the insurgents consist, on the one hand, of members of the now-illegal Bath Party, which also has a secular, Marxist ideology. On the other hand, they consist of non-Iraqis who blend a secular, technological background with a skewed, self-created understanding of Islam, which emphasizes quasi-military activities over the central Muslim religious practices of the Five Pillars.

Having shown the similarities of the two conflicts, what can we predict about the U.S. involvement in Iraq from the comparison with Northern Ireland?

First, it is nearly impossible for two sides that hate each other to find a working, stable form of self-government. Either one side seizes control and uses its power to persecute the other, or some form of power-sharing is established. In Northern Ireland, several power-sharing arrangements have failed over past decades. Outsiders just cannot make enemies work together.

Second, occupying armies stay a long time. The British Army has been active in Northern Ireland for more than 35 years. Once the army becomes part of the conflict, it becomes difficult to leave without allowing the militants to claim that they drove the occupiers out, which in turn incites more conflict.

Third, activities taken by the military to win the hearts and minds of the population are usually overshadowed by the atrocities of the conflict. Although building schools and purifying water are important tasks, any public relations gain can easily be destroyed by those opposed, as happened two weeks ago in Iraq when children receiving candy from U.S. soldiers were killed by a bomb blast targeting the soldiers.

Fourth, people from both sides of the conflict will emigrate to the country of the occupying army. This has happened with Northern Ireland as well as with other countries the British occupied over the centuries. So the United States of America can expect more and more Iraqi immigrants the longer its army remains in Iraq.

These observations are just a little of what we can expect from Iraq, based on the British experience in Northern Ireland. Further comparison might help our planners avoid mistakes and anticipate problems in Iraq. Perhaps we might learn enough to find a faster exit strategy, one which leaves behind a stable Iraq.