

The Iraqi Quagmire  
James K. Galbraith

Sergio Vieira de Mello was the real thing. I met him in East Timor in 2001, at the U.S. mission on the evening of July 4th, 2001. He told my brother (his colleague in the transition cabinet) that he would not attend a dinner for the Australian foreign minister that night: “because I dislike him *intensely*.” Two days later I saw him again, as we joined the new East Timor self-defense forces for the last leg of a march to a new training ground. On that day, surrounded by guerrillas, their UN officers and the civilian staff, he was clearly having a good time.

Sergio was blunt, charming, energetic, funny. He knew his business, minced no words, commanded the loyalty of his mission and the respect of the Timorese. They knew he was working for *them* -- for the cause of a free and independent and self-governing East Timor. And so it should have been in Iraq.

But it wasn't. We face in Iraq what the UN did not face in Timor: an organized, brutal opposition, able to strike when and where it chooses. Why is this so? Partly because in Iraq large parts of the population do not want us there, and are prepared to abet those who would throw us out. The UN mission was simply an auxiliary target. And the security at the Canal Hotel was not good.

None of this should be surprising. Last November, at his request, I wrote a private memorandum to Gary Hart (a friend going back to the start of the McGovern effort in 1971) on how the situation might unfold. Here's what I said:

“... while the impending war on Iraq may prove to be fairly easy... the post-war occupation is certainly going to be ugly. Iraq is a huge country. The oil fields [and] the cities.... will need to be protected. The protectors will need to be protected. Saddam has 150,000 secret police who will not physically disappear. There is a large Shi'a population with whom our relations could deteriorate quickly if their leaders don't like our rule. Worst of all there is Al Qaeda. They are not in Iraq right now, but they will be. And they will find plenty of fresh targets in occupied Iraq. Algeria comes to mind; does anyone remember?

“... Saddam's government is ugly, but at present at least the Kurdish population is protected from him at low cost. The case for putting the U.S. Army at the service of the rest of the opposition remains totally unpersuasive and cannot be coherently made. This point becomes obvious when one reads the screeds suggesting that Iraq might somehow become an oasis of democracy in the Middle East. They are mostly written by people who fought to the last against a free vote for the presidency in Florida.

“Once we have invaded, getting out again is not going to be easy. On the contrary, it will be very easy for Al Qaeda and others to guarantee just enough turmoil to ensure that it is *never* quite safe to leave. The choice will therefore become one of staying and bleeding, or of accepting an ignominious retreat – think the Israelis

from South Lebanon but on a much larger scale. People need to understand is that a decision to invade Iraq is, in effect, a decision to establish what will be, for practical purposes, a *permanent* zone of occupation there....

“Empire is an economic system. But it is a system that works only in the presence of an overwhelming advantage of force, a general acquiescence of the regional leadership, large local security forces, and an absence of determined opposition. The British held India because, and only so long as, they enjoyed these advantages. In the Sudan, the matter was already different as early as the 1880s. The final outcome against the Mahdists at Omdurman was as it was only because, as Hillaire Belloc put it: “Whatever happens, we have got/ The Maxim Gun, and they have not.”

“But in modern conditions the correlation of forces does not lie with the imperial power. Explosives, mines, booby traps, rockets and similar weapons of resistance are too cheap and too effective. We will certainly face determined opposition in Iraq, sooner or later and possibly sooner, once the euphoria following the overthrow of Saddam wears off and as our other enemies get a chance to get into the game. The same will be increasingly true of our position elsewhere in the Middle East. In the face of determined opposition, empire has costs that no modern democracy can sustain -- and certainly not the United States with our attachment to peacetime prosperity and abhorrence of body bags.”

What happened to Sergio Vieira de Mello, to his dedicated colleagues at the United Nations mission in Baghdad, what has been happening to American soldiers and to innocent Iraqi civilians every single day, was terribly easy to predict. And the result? A UN staffer put it very well: "We send our best guy to Iraq and he comes home in a box."

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