

Democracy in Iraq: Notes on a Greek tragedy

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Ironically, Iraqi Shi'ite Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani is currently disrupting US plans to democratize Iraq by demanding that the upcoming election process be more democratic. The Coalition Provisional Authority has balked at al-Sistani's proposals, as it prefers the process for creating a new government to be a "selectocracy," a series of easily stage-managed regional representative caucuses that can produce the most manageable batch of Iraqi collaborators. Al-Sistani and his followers, however, are calling for a more immediate and more direct process that would curtail external manipulation and the policing of election results by the US.

Shi'ite democracy wouldn't be any more free or fair than the one arranged by the combat-boots-and-pinstripe-suit imperial proconsulship of Paul Bremmer and the assorted other heavily-armed corporate carpetbaggers that presently rule Iraq. For one thing, al-Sistani's scheme probably would result in the creation of a piously-observant Shi'ite ruling class. The only form of government possibly more oppressive than military rule is a theocracy. But the whole affair raises at least one theoretical question worth considering: just what kind of democracy would satisfy the CEOs and professional serial killers that presently run the US government?

Of course, the miserabilist Bush-Cheney notion, of democracy bears absolutely no resemblance to the intricate consensus decision-making and direct democracy practiced by collectives and communities that we all admire. While progressives naively cling to the abstract ideals of democracy, anarchists recognize that, in general, "democratization," "democratic," and "democracy" are meaningless code words used by authorities to abstract and bury the essences of freedom, self-determination, and autonomy under institutions of coercion, compulsory conformity, and the "common good."

Nonetheless, the State propagandists' relentless blather about democracy in the Middle East is calculated to make the Empire's colonization of Iraq seem altruistic (and to distract us from previous malarkey about Saddam Hussein's massive weapons stockpile). As anti-authoritarians and anticrats, we cannot allow the excuse of democratization to legitimate the monstrous use of hideous force by the institutions of Anglo-US capitalism against peoples everywhere.

Understanding history can help us avoid having our critical observations neutralized by smug publicity for more Cruise missile democracy. Since a blizzard of lies will assuredly blow around like depleted-uranium dust as US imperialists discuss future military actions in the Middle East, it may be instructive to understand how to begin to criticize their endless spew of pro-democracy twaddle. This can be accomplished by articulating the rampant unfreedom in the definition of democracy used by the Bush-Cheney regime. One of the most explicit explanations came out of Bush's mouth amid a major policy statement about building democracy in the Middle East. The declaration was read on November 6, 2003 to the board of the National Endowment for Democracy at the US Chamber of Commerce:

"We're working closely with Iraqi citizens as they prepare a constitution, as they move toward free elections and take increasing responsibility for their own affairs. As in the defense of Greece in 1947, and later in the Berlin Airlift, the strength and will of free peoples are now being tested before a watching world. And we will meet this test." [Applause]

In this grim statement, Bush likened the project of creating democracy in Iraq by occupation to the situation that resulted from the US intervention in the Greek Civil War nearly sixty years ago. Although it is almost certain that the ignorant Jughead has no historical knowledge of what

had happened in Greece in the mid-1940s, you can be certain that the neoconservative Politburo that pulls his strings carefully researched every word of this manifesto. Let us consider, then, what democracy means to the US ruling junta, by examining it in the context of “the defense of Greece in 1947.”

From Nazi occupation to British occupation

As part of their campaigns in eastern Central Europe, Nazi troops invaded and occupied Greece in late spring of 1941. Many Greek military units fled for British – controlled North Africa, and an anti-axis Greek government was set up in exile while bands of armed resistance fighters spontaneously began organizing themselves in Greece.

As in other Balkan countries at the time, the partisans who attacked the fascist occupiers were motivated by a variety of political and social concerns; in the case of Greece, the popular resistance movement was bitterly split between groups’ directed by the underground Stalinist party (KKE), by pro-British Greek monarchists and liberals, and by a number of smaller, independent groups of Trotskyists, anarchists, ethnic nationalists, and others who had been fighting fascism in Greece since the mid-1930s.

In 1943, after the overthrow of Mussolini and the resurgence of the Soviet Red Army’s counter-offensive in Southeastern Europe, the Germans began to withdraw from the region. Greece was officially “liberated” by British troops in 1944; in October of that year, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin redrew the map of the postwar world and agreed that 90% of Greece would be put under a joint British-US sphere of influence.

Like the Nazis before them, the British occupation forces re-activated local authority structures to maintain law and order. In turn, the Greek government-in-exile, closely aligned itself with the British military and ordered the resistance movement to disband and to turn in their weapons. Many did, but the left-wing and ethnic factions, outraged by the persistence of pro-fascist elements in the government, refused to do so, vowing instead to continue their fight for freedom.

Within weeks, the former anti-Nazi resistance had regrouped itself into an insurgency against the British occupation. The experience of the Nazi occupation formed the basis for suspicions about national security, public order, and justice apparatuses.

More British troops were brought in to buttress the center-right Greek government, primarily soldiers mustered from the native population in colonized India. But Greek and British soldiers who had been stationed in Alexandria, Egypt mutinied: they were in uniform to fight fascism, their soldier committee representatives said, not to help fascist sympathizers secure power in Athens. The rebellion was quickly snuffed out and news of it was covered up. Tanks, armored cars, and heavy artillery were being used more frequently against the insurgency.

Streetcars loaded with explosives plowed into British tanks on street corners in the major cities, while workers, students, and political activists disrupted urban life with a series of noisy mass demonstrations. A general strike in Athens was called in December 1944 against the Greek government that had been established by British fiat. Although demonstrations had been outlawed by British authorities, thousands converged on Constitution Square to voice their opinions. Greek police opened fire and at least ten unarmed demonstrators were killed and more than one hundred wounded.

British paratroopers moved in later that day to clear Constitution Square, but many protesters filtered out into surrounding neighborhoods and continued to attack buildings symbolic of the government's authority (such as, police stations) for weeks afterward. Martial law was declared, but two days after the Constitution Square shootings, hundreds of thousands of protesters turned up for the funerals of those slain with banners that read "British Soldiers: We Want to Choose Our Own Government."

Churchill felt it necessary to personally fly to Athens to show British support for the Greek government. While there, he charged, "We have to hold and dominate Athens ... with bloodshed if necessary."

The British eventually defeated the partisans, but only after they had committed large numbers of troops to occupying Greece. The British solution to calming unruly internal political sectarianism was to arrange for an entirely new Greek government—a monarchy—to be formed in conjunction with the archbishop of Athens.

Violence by fascist and ultra-monarchist gangs who had been armed by the British to maintain order was widespread, and many former Nazi collaborators continued to exert power over the Greek people. Some resistance fighters who were KKE loyalists crossed the border into Yugoslavia, where they were given safe haven by Tito.

This alliance panicked the nascent Cold War strategists in London and Washington DC, but, as is the case today in the popular resistance against the Anglo-US occupation in Iraq, it is important to remember that there were many other factions involved in insurrectionary activities. Whereas today we are told that the Iraqi resistance movement consists of an unholy alliance of "diehard Ba'athists" and "foreign terrorists," the explanation given by the US government to Western newspapers fifty-seven years ago was that "anarcho — Slavonic communists" and "bandits" were destabilizing Greece. In both cases, the truth is much more complicated.

Early in 1947, military exhaustion, political resistance in London, and worsening economic difficulties pressed the British government to tell US President: Harry Truman that it could no longer maintain control in Greece and that it was withdrawing its military.

The Truman Doctrine, 1947–1949

At this point, the insurgency had developed into a full-fledged civil war. Confronted by the very real possibility that anti-occupation and possibly pro-Soviet rebels would overthrow the corrupt right-wing oligarchy that the British had installed in power, the US government unveiled a foreign policy initiative that would suffocate popular liberation movements around the world for the next fifty years: the Truman Doctrine.

This policy became a cornerstone of Cold War neo-colonialism; as Truman explained it, the US government and military would brazenly intervene in the internal affairs of any nation that did not comply with the global political and economic objectives of the US.

Propping up the foundering rightist regime in the Greek Civil War would be the first laboratory experiment on how to implement the new Truman Doctrine, and the US quickly flooded the Greek government with more than \$300 million (in 1947 US dollars) to help "modernize" the army in its fight against the insurgency.

Britain helped out by donating fifty fighter planes equipped with the very latest in mass-murdering technology, napalm bombs. Emboldened by the Truman Doctrine, rightist death

squads lynched and decapitated political opponents. Roving bands of armed vigilantes indiscriminately opened fire with machine guns in working-class districts in cities like Salonika in the spring of 1947, but no gunmen were ever arrested; meanwhile, police and military dragnets of left-wing neighborhoods helped make the prison population twice what it had been six years before.

US officials continuously portrayed the strife in Greece as the product of a nefarious Kremlin plot, but to this day, no evidence has ever emerged to show that Soviet aggression was behind the insurgency.

Much of the US paranoia about Communist conspiracies in the Greek Civil War was a result of absolute ignorance over the doctrinal points held by opposing factions of European Marxists, just as there have been so many stupid mistakes made by the US today because of the lack of knowledge about the intricate cultural variations among Islamic and Arabic communities.

The self-deluding belief that his regime was fighting the Communist bogey monster in Greece justified all manner of abuses in the eyes of Truman in his “defense of Greece,” just as Bush and his henchmen have been using the Global War Against Terrorism(TM) as a geopolitical blank check.

Actually, in many respects, the resemblance between Bush’s plan to “democratize” Iraq as part of his new Middle Eastern strategy and the reckless Realpolitik of the Truman Doctrine are depressingly similar. Truman’s excuse for the massively increased US commitment to the violent extreme rightists was prompted, he said, by the “terrorist activities of several thousand armed men, led by Communists.”

Bush’s fixation on terrorism is limited to those acts committed by Muslim non-State actors and ignores the daily atrocities committed by his allies, such as the ferocious military dictatorships in Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan. Similarly, Truman chose not to be at all concerned by State terror being enacted by those receiving US aid in Greece.

One of the results of Truman’s rationalizations in Greece in the mid-1940s was a harsh crack-down on dissidents in Greece which rivaled some of the worse aspects of Stalin’s own dictatorship. For example, anyone who publicly criticized the Greek government, the police, or the US were bundled off to grim Aegean island “re-education camps” without charges or a trial.

Historians who have uncovered some of the arrest records say that the oldest prisoner on one of these islands was an eighty year-old woman and the youngest (not counting the numerous suckling infants) to be a fourteen year-old girl. Prisoners were almost invariably subjected to arbitrary, inhumane treatment and warehoused in overcrowded, unsanitary holding cells without medical treatment or adequate fresh water.

Before long, the US government was in the position to plan and execute every aspect of the Greek economy, a degree of penetration that they would attempt to replicate throughout Western Europe through the mechanisms of the Marshall Plan for postwar reconstruction.

US operatives infiltrated “all aspects of Greek governmental affairs,” one former official of the American Mission for Aid to Greece (AMAG) recalled. AMAG bureaucrats congratulated Greek police for “courageously tackling” the unstable situation in their country by executing political prisoners, including those involved in the 1944 uprising against the British. Simultaneously, they repudiated media reports about wide-spread right-wing terrorism and the abominable conditions in Greek prisons and re-education camps in interviews and congressional hearings, saying things like the jailing of “enemies of the state” was “quite necessary and justifiable.”

According to journalists for mainstream US and British newspapers in the mid-1940s, the Greek government routinely used mass arrests, torture, and the forced expulsion of political undesirables—in fact, the government’s foreign minister had resigned in disgust in early 1946 because of rampant “terrorism by state organs.” US reporters who pursued these stories were often pressured by US government officials and their editors to examine their “unpatriotic” views.

One CBS correspondent¹ who had been particularly outspoken in his criticism of the Truman government’s unqualified support for the rightist authoritarian regime in Greece was tortured, murdered, and dumped into Salonika Bay. In the late 1970s, the story emerged as to how AMAG authorities helped the Greek police frame two young communists for his death.

Numerous paramilitary and parastate organizations with memberships drawn from the criminal underworld were created for dirty work and became a lasting feature of the Greek government for the next thirty years. Working in conjunction with US and British intelligence agents, Greek security services accumulated files on 80 to 90 percent of the population; in the US, the FBI spied on Greek-American communities and compiled reports on possible subversive sympathies. The permanent CIA station established in Athens after 1947 became one of the preeminent US intelligence outposts in Europe for the next forty years.

By November 1947, a joint US-Greek army staff was established, and the government’s US masters demanded that freedom of the press, freedom-of assembly, and the right to strike against one’s employer all be outlawed. Martial law was declared by the US proxies in the Greek government, meaning the incarceration of thousands of people as threats to national security, as well as the immediate execution of dozens of soldiers in the National Army “who showed negligence or faintheartedness” in the opinion of the commanding officer.

Napalm airstrikes against guerrilla forces and “suspect” rural villages increased in number, and Greek military officers began requesting flame-throwers and poison gas from their US sponsors. Within a year, there were about 500 US troops under AMAG control who were serving as military advisors, intelligence directors, and battlefield commanders despite repeated statements to the contrary issued to the press and to the US Congress by the Truman Administration.

Meanwhile, the war-weary insurgents were squabbling among themselves over tactical and political issues, such as whether to abandon smash-and-grab guerrilla warfare tactics in favor of securing and defending territorial gains on behalf of a “provisional democratic government of Free Greece,” the latter decision a fatal one in light of increased use of US artillery and aerial bombardments.

When the US supreme military commander in Greece reported that the “international Communist gangsters” had been defeated, Truman announced to the US Congress in November 1949 that the Greek Civil War was over. By the early 1950s, the Truman Doctrine alibi would be invoked to explain a war in Korea and the overthrow of an elected government in Guatemala.

The destruction to property in the Greek Civil War far exceeded the amount of damage done during the Nazi invasion, occupation, and withdrawal. The civil war had left at least 100,000 dead, three-quarters of a million people homeless, and 30,000 children living in forced exile outside of Greece in refugee camps. At least 25,000 Greeks were chucked out of the country by the US-backed regime and forced to relocate under Eastern Bloc dictatorships for the duration of their lives.

¹ His name was George Polk. His body was found on May 16, 1948.

This is what a Bush Democrat looks like

It has been widely assumed that a Stalinist government would have prevailed in Greece had Truman not intervened in the civil war. Not surprisingly, in the late 1960s, Johnson used the word “democracy” to describe Truman’s authoritarian successes in Greece as a historical antecedent to his own support of the anticommunist police state in South Vietnam.

The fact of the matter is that any interest that Moscow might have had in a Soviet Greece evaporated immediately after Tito broke ranks with the USSR, at which point Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe became far more important to Stalin. The rebel leaders were more interested in reading the latest translations of Mao Zedong’s (yet untested) theories on guerrilla warfare than any official directives that may have been issued from the Soviet Union. Moreover, outside of the KKE cadres, the amount and quality of Marxist rhetoric among the insurgents was meager, suggesting that the rebels were motivated by something other than Soviet foreign policy.

What is certain, however, is that, as a result of the US “defense of Greece in 1947,” a long, awful succession of right-wing governments representing the interests of conservative Christian monarchists, bourgeois autocrats, trigger-happy fascist patriots, and US industrialists kept the country’s jails full.

The resulting xenophobic, anti-intellectual garrison state was exceedingly brutal in its efforts to safeguard national security and honor cultural tradition against social decadence. Arbitrary arrest and torture by security forces was commonplace; books deemed decadent or subversive (such as Plato’s *The Republic*) were banned and destroyed; mini-skirts were criminalized and young male university students who wore their hair long risked being beaten and barbered by the police or paramilitary vigilantes. Until the fall of the dictatorship in 1974, the murderous Greek colonels were ardent supporters of NATO and of the Truman Doctrine’s unilateral, neo-colonial interventions in the name of democracy.

The Bush gang’s use of the history of US intervention on behalf of monarcho-fascists in the Greek Civil War as an analogy for regime change in Iraq illustrates their idea of what democracy means. Clearly, their democracy has nothing whatsoever to do with the rudiments of human liberty, self-determination, and autonomy. It is, instead, as we have said all along, a democracy of senseless State violence, war profiteering, rigged elections, barbed-wire compounds, media blackouts, and thousands of dead and mutilated children.

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