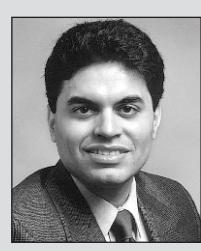


Bowing to the mighty Ayatollah



FAREED ZAKARIA
writes from America

American policymakers made two grave mistakes after the war. The first was to occupy the country with too few troops, creating a security vacuum. This image of weakness was reinforced when Washington caved in to Sistani's objections last June, junked its original transition plan and sped things up to coincide with the American elections. The second mistake was to dismiss from the start the need for allies and international institutions.

credibility," says Yitzhak Nakash, the leading authority on Iraqi Shiites.

The United States fears that he will brand them as colonialists and the new transition government as a puppet regime. American officials know these few words could well derail their plans. The occupation can survive an insurgency, but it cannot survive 10 countrywide protest marches with thousands chanting "Colonialists go home!"

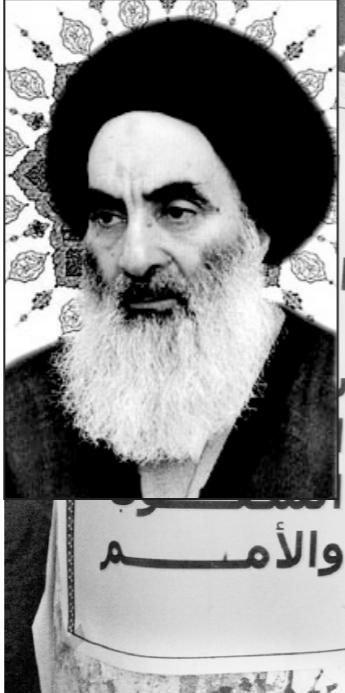
There really should be no contest. On one side is history's most important superpower, victorious in war, ruling Iraq with 150,000 troops and funding its reconstruction to the tune of \$20 billion this year. On the other side is an aging cleric with no formal authority, no troops, little money, who is unwilling to even speak in public. Yet last June, when Ayatollah Sistani made it known that he didn't like the American plan to transfer power to Iraqis, the plan collapsed. And last week, when Sistani announced that he is still unhappy with the new American proposal, Paul Bremer rushed to Washington for consultations. What does this man have that the United States doesn't?

Legitimacy. Sistani is regarded by Iraqi Shiites as the most learned cleric in the country. He is also seen as having been uncorrupted by Saddam Hussein's reign. "During the Iran-Iraq War, Sistani managed to demonstrate that he could be controlled neither by Saddam nor by his fellow ayatollahs in Iran, which has given him enormous

"Hold elections now!" knowing that they were the only politically organised force in the country. So the administration has decided that the United Nations has legitimacy after all. Along with its allies on the Governing Council, Washington is now asking Kofi Annan to give the United Nations' blessings to its plan, explain that

elections cannot be held precipitously and get involved in the entire political process. The columnist William Safire, who has long ridiculed the need for a UN role, is now sheepishly asking if Annan could do us a favour, please. The foreigners are being invited in. It might be too little, too late.

A power struggle has begun in Iraq, as could have been predicted - indeed was predicted. Sistani is becoming more vocal and political because he faces a challenge to his leadership from the more activist cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. "Al-Sadr does not have Sistani's reputation or training as a scholar and thus presents himself as a populist



Shiite demonstrators in Najaf (inset: Sistani)



leader who will look after Shia political interests," says Nakash. It's turning into a contest to see who can stand up to the Americans more vociferously and appeal to Shiite fears. The Iraqi Shiites are deeply suspicious that the United States will betray them, as it did in 1992 after the Gulf War, or that it will foist favoured exiles like Ahmad Chalabi upon them. Sistani recently told Iraq's tribal leaders that they should take power, not "those who came from abroad."

The tragedy is that while Sistani's fears are understandable, Washington's phased transition makes great sense. It allows for time to build institutions, form political parties and reform the agencies of government. An immediate transfer will ensure that the political contest will overwhelm all this institutional reform. But Washington lacks the basic tool it needs to negotiate with the locals: legitimacy. Belatedly it now recognises that the United Nations can arbitrate political problems without being accused of being a coloniser.

American policymakers made two grave mistakes after the war. The first was to occupy the country with too few troops, creating a security vacuum. This image of weakness was reinforced when Washington caved in to Sistani's objections last June, junked its original transition plan and sped things up to coincide with the American elections. The second mistake was to dismiss from the start the need for allies and international institutions. As a result, Washington is now governing Iraq with neither power nor legitimacy.

Fareed Zakaria is editor of Newsweek International

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Queries on Cleopatra



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

She is an avid reader of her hero Julius Caesar.

She casually threw the question in the air:

"When Caesar was killed where was Cleopatra?"

I thought she was Cleo of Petra.

I was called a fool and told it was not e but al!

Patra.

You need not try to further ascertain.

Cleo, however, she may amuse you,

Is not the muse of Petra, that's certain?

The name Cleopatra had one spelling, but pronounced differently three different ways

By her hopeful lovers who flirted, fretted and flounced

In Caesar and Cleopatra

George B. Shaw did the first part of her story.

In Caesar and Cleopatra.

William Shakespeare did the last part of her story.

I am telling all these after I have aroused the ire

Of that avid reader of Julius Caesar

Who casually threw the question in the air:

"When Caesar was killed was Cleopatra in Rome?"

She did not ask me the question to answer.

I was a fool; I looked up and found the answer

In a little Encyclopedia, yes, Cleopatra was in Rome.

She was mad, being deprived of reading a hefty tome

On ancient Rome --- Rome that was Rome.

She is a great book-lover.

She loves to read a book cover to cover.

She hates skipping.

She hates photocopying.

She hates to deprive the author of his copyright.

I must say, she is absolutely right.

I deeply felt sorry for depriving her

Of reading more about Cleopatra and Caesar.

In future I promise I shall never volunteer

Information, even a correct one to clear steer.

I shall keep silence, but still for my affection

For her I may choose to stand by her in attention.

Soon the book-lover casually threw a question,

Though not specifically for my attention:

"One of the two needles of Cleopatra

Is on the Thames Embankment in London.

I wonder where is the other one!"

Did she say it aside or did she soliloquize?

Should I keep quite, and let me be rather wise?

Should I say Cleopatra's Needles couldn't be found?

In the haystacks of the hoary history around

Or in the hefty tome on the ancient Rome

--- Rome that was Rome?

I kept quiet and did not say her to consider

That it was rather a recent story of loot and plunder.

She looked up and feigned searching the ceiling

And repeated the question with a troubled feeling:

"One of the two needles of Cleopatra

Is on the Thames Embankment in London.

I wonder where is the other one!"

I do not know when I involuntarily spoke out, "Hark!

It might be in New York's Central Park."

She never liked the books of easy to find references.

Was she then really within her senses?

When she said rather regally, "Good! Very good!"

Am I to believe that those words she did really utter,

As I always find it very difficult to understand her?

'Greater Israel' through expulsion of Palestinians?

BILLY I AHMED

THE so-called targeted assassinations of Palestinian militants and leaders and the daily repression that has claimed some 3,000 Palestinian lives in three years, are not blueprint primarily for security, but are rather aimed at the systematic expropriation of the Palestinian people. Sharon and his right-wing Zionist allies are determined to sabotage any possibility of creating an independent Palestinian state and remain committed to achieving a "greater Israel" through the expulsion of Palestinians from its territory.

Many

western nations feel that the Chinese government is dragging its feet over the issue of how much democracy they should allow for the folks living in Hong Kong. It should be pointed out that Britain drew up the Basic Law with China before the handover to ensure the territory would have a high degree of autonomy under Chinese rule. Nonetheless, the constitution stipulates that Beijing has the final say over any electoral changes. In his policy address, Mr. Tung Chee-hwa made no mention of a timetable for public consultation on democratic reforms. That has angered many citizens and raising fears that any reforms would be dictated by Beijing. Incidentally, Mr. Boucher's statement was a near verbatim copy of comments made by deputy State Department spokesman Adam Ereli on January 2, 2004, that prompted a protest from the Chinese foreign ministry, which labeled the remarks "interference." Pro-democracy groups in Hong Kong are demanding the government and Beijing commit to a firm timetable for implementing political reforms, including direct elections of the island's next leader by 2007.

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Victoria

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