

Academy Sponsors Joint Meeting with the Cambridge Public Library Ambassador Peter Galbraith Speaks on Iraq

Addressing an audience at the House of the Academy on March 31, the day an Iraqi mob murdered and mutilated four American civilian contractors, Peter W. Galbraith asserted that Iraq is “not salvageable as a unitary state.” The former Ambassador to Croatia, known for his work in brokering peace in the Balkans during the 1990s, described a loose federation of self-governing republics as the only feasible solution to the increasingly contentious situation in Iraq. In contrast with the Bush administration’s vision of a pluralistic, Western-style democracy uniting Kurds, Shiites, and Sunnis, Galbraith’s plan would result in three distinct states founded on the differing aspirations of Iraq’s major groups.

Entitled “How to Get Out of Iraq: What Went Wrong and What it Means,” Galbraith’s talk inaugurated the John Kenneth Galbraith Honor Lectures, a series the Cambridge Public Library sponsored in collaboration with the Academy to celebrate the contributions of community residents to the wider world. Janet Axelrod, Chairperson of the Library’s Board of Trustees, thanked the Academy for hosting the event, pointing out that the collaboration “reflects the shared mission [of the Academy and the Library] to promote knowledge and to stimulate discourse.”

John Kenneth Galbraith, longtime Academy Fellow, whom Academy Vice President Louis Cabot introduced as a distinguished economist, prolific author, advisor to several presidents, recipient of numerous honorary degrees, and “the tallest man in Cambridge,” attended the event with his wife Catherine. An international scholar and statesman, and a beloved member of the Harvard and Cambridge community, Galbraith received a warm ovation from the audience.

In the title of his speech, Ambassador Galbraith intentionally paid homage to his father’s tract of forty years ago called “How to Get



Peter W. Galbraith

Out of Vietnam.” He asserted his belief that the American experience in Iraq, like that in Vietnam, “may define the United States’ role in the world for much longer than the actual involvement in the country.” Unlike his father in the Vietnam era, however, he did not oppose American intervention in the current war.

Ranking Saddam’s reign with Pol Pot’s in Cambodia as “the two most cruel and inhumane regimes in the second half of the twentieth century,” Galbraith told the Academy audience that “in a more lawful world, the international community would have acted and should have acted to remove this regime long before 2003.” An eyewitness to the devastation follow-

Excerpt from the Inaugural John Kenneth Galbraith Honor Lecture, given by Ambassador Peter Galbraith at the House of the Academy on March 31, 2004

In my view, Iraq is not salvageable as a unitary state. From my experience in the Balkans, I feel strongly that it is impossible to preserve the unity of a democratic state where people in a geographically defined region almost unanimously do not want to be part of that state. And I have never met an Iraqi Kurd who preferred membership in Iraq if independence were a realistic option.

The best hope for holding Iraq together – and thereby avoiding civil war – is to let each of its major constituent communities have as much of what they want as possible. This too provides the only path that can get American forces out of Iraq . . .

The Iraq interim constitution defines the country as a federal state but centralizes power in ways that cannot be implemented. Les Gelb, the former president of the Council on Foreign Relations, wrote a piece in *The New York Times* last December proposing a three-state solution for Iraq, modeled on the constitution of the former Yugoslavia. Applying a Yugoslavia model (my understanding of how it would apply in Iraq, not Gelb’s), each of Iraq’s constituent peoples – the Kurds, the Sunni Arabs,

and the Shi’ite Arabs – would have their own republics which would be self-governing, financially self-sustaining, and with their own territorial military and police forces. The central government’s role would be limited to foreign affairs, monetary policy, and some coordination of defense policy. I would only add to this Yugoslav model that there should be some sharing of revenue, as an impoverished Sunni region is in neither the interest of the other two regions nor of the international community . . .

A loose federation will allow the United States and its allies to disengage from most of Iraq. The outcome will not be optimal. The country will remain whole more in name than in reality. Western-style human rights are likely to take root only in the Kurdish north (and there only partially). The legal status of women is likely to be set back in the south, even as compared to the Saddam Hussein regime. But the alternative is an indefinite U.S. occupation of Iraq in which we have fewer and fewer allies. It is an occupation that we cannot afford and that prevents us from addressing more serious threats to our national security . . .

ing Saddam’s genocide of the Kurdish people in the 1980s, Galbraith had been among the first to document Saddam’s use of chemical warfare against his own people.

It is not the Bush administration’s decision to bring down Saddam that Galbraith criticizes, but “the horrific mistakes” of the immediate postwar period. As part of the ABC news team reporting on the

war, Galbraith landed in Baghdad in April 2003 just four days after the U.S. military took the city. “Already,” he said, “it was apparent to me that things were going catastrophically wrong.” Galbraith personally witnessed the looting of public buildings in the ensuing two months. He spoke with marines stationed near the Iraqi

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equivalent of the Center for Disease Control who had received no orders to secure the building despite reports of looters carrying away live HIV virus. Galbraith described his own tour of the abandoned Foreign Ministry, where vital information about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction may have been stored. He saw documents strewn everywhere and found looters "lighting small fires" with original government treaties.

"If it can be said that the United States lost Iraq, it did so in the chaotic days of April 2003 when U.S. forces permitted the systematic and preventable looting of every significant public institution in Baghdad," Galbraith said. He

believes the looting had profound effects. "It demoralized the very Iraqi professionals on whom we would count to rebuild the country because, after all, virtually all of them are associated with public institutions. And more important, it served to undermine Iraqi confidence in and respect for the U.S. occupation authorities."

The three-state solution that Galbraith now regards as the best conceivable outcome of the war will permit each of Iraq's "major constituent communities [to] have as much of what they want as is possible." It is a solution that will come at a cost, however. "Western-style human rights are likely to take root only in the Kurdish north," he said, "and in the south the legal status of women in Iraq is likely to



Front (left to right): Catherine Galbraith, John Kenneth Galbraith, Janet Axelrod (Cambridge Public Library); back (left to right): Louis Cabot (Cabot-Wellington, LLC), Henry Rosovsky (Harvard University), Jeremy Knowles (Harvard University), Carl Kaysen (MIT), and Matthew Meselson (Harvard University)

be set back even as compared to the Saddam Hussein regime."

In December of 2002, the Academy published *War with Iraq: Costs,*

Consequences, and Alternatives. Copies are available on the Academy's website at www.amacad.org. ■