

University of Montana NSEP panel discussion debates ‘Middle East disengagement or limited reengagement’

By Edward Campbell

Four distinguished scholars on Middle East affairs, Rochelle A. Davis, Clement M. Henry, Marvin G. Weinbaum, and Hekmat Karzai discussed America’s future in the region this morning at a University of Montana sponsored NSEP program Defense Critical Language and Culture Program of the University of Montana’s Mansfield Center. The panel discussion was moderated by retired Brigadier General Russell Howard.

Rochelle Davis

The first speaker, Rochelle Davis, Assistant Professor of Arab Culture and Society at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University’s Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, read from a paper she has written ‘Through the Occupiers Eyes’ which examined how American GIs in Iraq perceived Iraqi loyalties, and how those loyalties differed from American expectations. Her report is based on interviews of both American soldiers and Iraqi civilians.

Ms. Davis’ presentation presented a picture of an Iraqi civilian population whose loyalties are far from the politics which are being trotted out by certain elements of the extreme left who typically frame the Iraqi politics under a rubric of extreme nationalism and Arabism under slogans such as “the Iraqi nation,” or “the Arab nation,” the Iraqi population indeed lacks a national focus. Instead loyalties among the Iraqi



population are primarily to family, tribe, and religion.

According to Ms. Davis, American GIs inculcated with national patriotism under the rubric of Truth, Faith, and Allegiance; which extend vertically through the Chain of Command and horizontally to their fellow soldiers.

The Iraqi people on the other hand were more concerned with who they believed would be able to solve their immediate problems, to who would be able to provide safe guards and services; Order, Security and Fear.

What Americans typically understand as ‘national identity’ is effectively non-existent. She learned that Iraqis found discussions of central nationalism irrelevant whereas Americans tend to believe that national identity is paramount.

Ms. Davis believes that America, if it is to succeed in Iraq, must replace family, tribal, and religious loyalties with state loyalties.

It would be difficult not to conclude from this theory that if the vacuum created at the national center, by the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which caused a reversion to the more fundamental loyalties, were to be overcome it would very likely need to rely on the principles of Order, Security, and Fear which gave Iraq a national center under Saddam Hussein’s brutal regime, because Iraqi national identity before the war was founded on that. Ms. Davis believed that

cultural training could aid in occupation and state building.

Clement M. Henry

Clement M. Henry, Professor of Political Science at the University of Texas at Austin spoke second. Mr. Henry was the strongest proponent for disengagement. Mr. Henry began his part of the panel discussion with a quotation from Mark Twain's 'Our Flag is not Polluted:'

"I am not finding fault with this use of our flag; for in order not to seem eccentric I have swung around, now, and joined the nation in the conviction that nothing can sully a flag. I was not properly reared, and the illusion that a flag was a thing which must be sacredly guarded against shameful uses and unclean contacts, lest it suffer pollution; and so when it was sent out to the Philippines to float over a wanton war and a robbing expedition I supposed it was polluted, and in an ignorant moment I said so. But I stand corrected. I conceded and acknowledge that it was only the government that sent it on such an errand that was polluted. Let us compromise on that. I am glad to have it that way. For our flag could not well stand pollution, never having been used to it, but it is different with the administration."

He spent the remainder of his part of the discussion relating the history of failed imperialism and colonialism in the region focusing on the defeat of the British by the Atatürk and their failed occupation of Iraq in the 1930's, the failure of Napoleon in Egypt, the failure of the French in Algeria, including their brutal pacification campaigns which ended in disaster for themselves, the failure of the Italians in Libya, and the failure of the French in Morocco.

He said the region is so sensitive to occupation that we could not be greeted as liberators and said: "Its been a very destructive enterprise...we have to get out as soon as possible." And went on to say that America needed to figure out how to have a positive influence "without being tarred with the imperialist brush."

On the question of Palestine he said that even if we fully withdraw from Iraq we're going to be tarred with the brush "of being an accomplice to a little imperialist settler colonialist Israel."

Hekmat Karzai

The third part of the presentation was delivered by Hekmat Karzai, an Afghan native, who called himself "a big fan of the United States, and the Founder and Director of the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS) in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Mr. Karzai said that the security situation in Afghanistan is rapidly deteriorating indicating the rapid rise of suicide bombing terrorism in the country which went from zero in 2004 to 25 in 2005, 116 in 2006, 143 2007, 118 in 2008.

He said there is no comprehensive strategy to bring things together and that the NGOs remain in Kabul whereas 80% of the Afghan population in Afghanistan is rural. He underscored the fact that the allied forces do not consult the Afghan people before acting and stressed the need to engage the Afghan people in the decision making process. Mr. Karzai advanced a two pronged approach: Military and Political.

Military: Train the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National police; stop using air power and heavy handed tactics.

Political: Involve the Afghan people in a lead nation strategy where the lead nation is Afghanistan itself along with continuous internal engagement; develop a strategy for Pakistan including addressing the 'safe haven' there; engage the moderate Taliban 80 to 85% of whom only fight because it's the only culture they know; create jobs and opportunities particularly in agriculture.

Marvin G. Weinbaum

The final speaker was Marvin G. Weinbaum, Scholar-in-Residence at the Middle East Institute in Washington D.C. Mr. Weinbaum stressed the deteriorating security situation, the need for change, and the need for a new strategy for Afghanistan. Mr. Weinbaum was a proponent of limited reengagement with an exit strategy.

He said that the United States overloaded the Afghan systems with systems that they don't understand, but thinks if America were to leave it could become easy prey to other extremist forces. "Whatever was possible 5 and 6 years ago, I would argue, is not less important, but more difficult."

After noting the rise of the suicide bombers in 2005 he said America needs to do its clarify its objectives understanding that the war in Afghanistan is not an anti-terror campaign, but a counter-insurgency campaign which can only be defeated when the native people themselves want it. He underscored four types of engagement which thinks are necessary: Military, Broad, Local, and Regional. He said that the United States needs to convince Afghan neighbors that they will be better off with a peaceful Afghanistan. He stressed the need for a strong central government.

"What we need is a fresh start...we need a game changer," he said.

He said that American forces should work from the counter-insurgency textbook: Clear, Hold, and Build. He went on to say that on account of the terrain the war in Afghanistan is much more difficult than the war in Iraq. "We do need more forces," he said.

Mr. Weinbaum went on to say that in addition to a new strategy and more forces America needs a new contract with its partners there who are planning to leave in two years.

He said America needs to develop assistance for the Afghan people, stressing Agriculture, and that America needs a dual strategy which includes community policing to deal with crime and a strong central government to combat the insurgency along with better communication between the center and the periphery.

He said America needs to engage Iran. He said that Iran hates the Taliban as much as we do and that Iran almost went to war with Afghanistan in 1998. He did note however that some of the weapons that the Taliban is using have come from Iran, but did not point any fingers on account of the fact that Iran has "many centers of power."

He said that the idea that the Afghans are xenophobic is a myth, but that they are concerned that foreigners are there to exploit them and rule them.

"It's not the graveyard of foreigners, it's the graveyard of invaders," he said.

He went on to say that America in order to succeed in Afghanistan needs more than 17,000 troops and even more than 30,000 troops, but underscored the need for America to engage Afghanistan's people and leadership. He said that the moment America hints that it may be leaving, the

Afghan people will immediately find their interest with those who they perceive will be around the longest, that it will become a launching pad for terrorism if America leaves which could precipitate a full blown insurgency in Pakistan.

He concluded that what America should seek in Afghanistan before it leaves should be “a minimally effective state able to defend itself...a normal low income state.”

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