

THINGS FALL APART

In a fast changing world, the most durable commodity is, often, one's delusions. The precipitous unraveling of Iraq is a golden opportunity to revisit some of our national blind spots.

Humanity spent the bulk of its evolutionary history--7 million years till ca. 8,000 BC--as wandering tribal bands. Such societies are marked by small size (25-150 members), extreme cultural, linguistic and genetic homogeneity, and an extreme brand of participatory democracy and consensual leadership. Their calculus of social cooperation is simple, brutal and effective: You cooperate with those you trust, you trust those you know, your flesh and blood, you in-group. On the outside, eternal vigilance and warfare. In such face-to-face societies, one surrendered a considerable portion of one's personal freedom for tangible benefits: protection, joint hunting-and-gathering, communal child rearing, spiritual communion. Welcome to the **Society of Intimates**.

Two related events, both ca. 8,000 BC, conspired to shift, irrevocably, our species' historical trajectory: We filled the earth to its hunter-gatherer carrying capacity. And we invented agriculture. The latter brought a quantum leap in the abundance and stability of food supply, larger permanent settlements, private property, and the accumulation of wealth. What followed was a rapid growth in the size of the social unit, and the abrupt end of the old consensual social order. The city-states, kingdom and empires that sprang up to replace the Society of Intimates were culturally and linguistically diverse and invariably coercive. The consent of the governed became a moot point.

Between 8,000 BC and 1,800 AD, Western history records only two major episodes of consensual democracy--the 50-odd years of Periclean Greece and the 100-odd years of republican Rome. Both were slave-based and imperial, with the franchise restricted to the privileged few, eerily reminiscent of our Founders' nascent republic ca. 1789.

Together with our European cousins, we have been struggling ever since with the conundrum of modern Democracy: How do you balance large size and cultural-linguistic diversity with the old prerequisite for social trust and cooperation--the assurance that your fellow citizen sees the world the way you do, shares your goals and aspiration, is flesh of your flesh and blood of your blood.

It is hardly an accident that the most enduring democracies the West has known, Iceland the Swiss cantons, are the ones that mimicked most closely the small size, face-to-face intimacy and cultural-linguistic homogeneity of human ancestral bands. Compare them, if you will, with those modern paragons of blood and mayhem: Ruanda, the Congo, Nigeria, Sudan, Yugoslavia, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine-Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan. It all boils down to a sad, politically-incorrect reminder--**diversity kills**.

To track the mind-set that brought us to the current implosion of Iraq, one may wish to start with our Western expansion into "empty" native lands, our Manifest Destiny. Or one may opt for a modern update, Stephen Kinzer's "The Brothers", a tale of the life and times of John Foster and Allan Dulles, who jointly ran our foreign policy cum Black Ops for fifteen years, 1945-1961. This dynamic duo gave us, in rapid succession, our sorry interventions in China, Iran, Guatemala, Chile, the Congo and Cuba; and last but not least--1954-1974--Viet Nam. Like our less publicized post-war capers, those were all pulled in the name of a convenient bogeyman--the Red Menace. Under the guiding hand of the Dulles brothers, any anti-colonial, pro-democracy movement on earth was interpreted as a Soviet conspiracy. With tireless zeal, we kept defending the global interests of empires, corporations, dictators and kings.

In the aftermath of 9/11, we switched bogeymen but retained the myopic mind-set that brought us Vietnam. And so we undertook to bring democracy and national unity to two tribal lands that had never been unified--except under repressive despot. Ignoring their long histories and diverse cultures, we poured trillions of dollars into these twin sinkholes of corruption, mendacity and disarray. We have barely gotten out of Iraq. Now the people who lured us there under false pretext are howling to get us back in.

Iraq has never been a nation, just a collection of tribes at each other's throat, held together by a succession of coercive masters: the Islamic Califate, the Ottoman empire, the Brits, murderous Saddam. We barged in and topple a minority Sunni dictatorship, replacing it with a majority Shi'a dictatorship allied with our Ayatollah-run nuclear nemesis to the east and Assad's blood-soaked dictatorship to the west.

From the moment we pulled out, Iraq has been splitting at its natural seams--the Kurdish north, the Sunni center, the Shi'a south. The ISIS Jihadis are surely real and repulsive. If they are a manifest threat to our security or real interests, we may yet need to clip their wings. To coin an obvious new verb, we can drone them. But that does not oblige us to spill more blood and treasure to preserve the fiction of Iraq's "national unity".

Is anything good coming out of the infernal toxicity of Iraq? Surprisingly, yes. But the breath-taking realignment that is taking place right now is flying under our radar, disdaining of our stated policy. An independent Kurdistan is aligning itself with Turkey, Jordan and Israel, setting clear boundaries to both the Sunni Califate and the Shi'a Fertile Crescent. They are busily re-drawing the military and commercial map of the middle East, linking with the Gulf monarchies and Egypt's military dictatorship. These countries, each in its own way, are all bucking our Quixotic agenda of "the new Middle East". Time and the enterprising natives are rapidly bypassing us, exposing both Barack Obama's surreal idealism and Dick Cheney's belligerent Imperium for what they truly are--anachronistic, irrelevant delusions.