A lot less optimism about Iraq war

by Lionel_Van_Deerlin

It's 70 years since Nazi Germany invaded Czechoslovakia - for some reason expecting the Czech populace to be grateful. A cartoonist of that era depicted Adolf Hitler motoring into downtown Prague, the ever-faithful Joseph Goebbels at his side.

"Surely mein Fuehrer is pleased that the people throw flowers to us," Goebbels gurgles.

"Ja," Hitler replies. "And even more pleased if the flowers were first removed from their pots!"

Times change, and today's would-be conquerors may have become a trifle more skittish in choosing the right time and place for victory parades. It was five years ago this week that U.S. forces sashayed into Iraq, guns blazing and bombs flying. It had been a long time since our country waged "preventive war" - i.e., attacking a nation even though it had done nothing threatening toward us. But Iraq was led by the despot Saddam Hussein, who oppressed his own people. Getting him out of the way would benefit all concerned - making our 2003 invasion truly a war of liberation for the downtrodden of Iraq.

Vice President Dick Cheney seemed determined to make that abundantly clear. "... We will be greeted as liberators," Cheney asserted repeatedly on TV or in print. And who might we believe if not the No. 2 man in government?

Heady stuff, that, and a reminder of America's noblest moments as liberators. Of smart-marching American forces cheered by thousands of Parisians crowding their Arc de Triomphe, painfully long weeks after the landings in Normandy. Of our welcome by the people of Rome just a day after Hitler's occupiers headed for the hills. Or of the cheers from long-suffering Filipinos upon America's return to Manila, ending four years of Japanese oppression in World War II.

And this week Dick Cheney had his chance to savor the appreciation he felt yet another nation must feel toward the United States - the throngs of Iraqis who, as Cheney sees it, should feel forever in our debt.

But somehow, things didn't work out quite the way he'd imagined. This spiritual leader of the Bush team's war hawks - the man whose vision of liberation and Baghdad's bravos had seemed so certain back in March 2003 - surely knows better now. On Monday the veep flew into Baghdad for what The Associated Press termed "an unannounced visit."

Can this mean there were no cheering multitudes, no whistles, no confetti? Consider instead the contrast suggested, word for word, by the AP report of this top official's furtive visit.

"Cheney landed at Baghdad international airport," it read, "then flew by helicopter into the heavily secured Green Zone. ... For security reasons, Cheney's aides gave few details about the vice president's schedule."

But behind the protective walls of our fortress embassy, the TV networks had been tipped off the big guy was coming. He had to say something.

Cheney chose his words carefully. "I find the increased security here phenomenal," he said.

Meanwhile, President Bush's vaunted Coalition of the Willing, a multination front he had put together when the United Nations declined to approve military action against Iraq, continues to deflate like a spent tire. Most of the 48 nations that were with us originally made it clear they didn't mind joining the war, so long as it involved no rough stuff. Many of them maintain no military forces they could share (such as the tiny Pacific island republic of Palau, which dispatched three of its 20,542 citizenry to do their bit).

Except for Great Britain and Poland, the nations of Europe proved highly disappointing. Two of our firmest allies, France and Germany, both expressed regrets. Italy and Spain joined for a while, but even the light casualties they sustained cost those governments whatever public support had induced them to join up. (Spain, it must be remembered, experienced a costly terrorist attack on railroad trains, widely blamed on the unpopular alliance with U.S. forces in Iraq.) Two prime ministers - Britain's Tony Blair and John Howard in Australia - met defeat after supporting the war.

Neither of our North American neighbors, Canada and Mexico, is with us. Canada's reluctance may stem from the loss of nine soldiers' lives to "friendly fire" from U.S. forces in Desert Storm action a decade earlier. Ottawa officials thought the incident resulted from wanton carelessness, for which Washington was deemed insufficiently apologetic.

A Coalition of the Willing? Casualty figures tell the story: American dead nearly 4,000. Great Britain 175. All others combined, 127.

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