

July 16, 2003

Winning the Real War

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

Last Sunday was the most important day in Iraq since the start of the war, and maybe the most important day in its modern history. It was the first day that one could speak about the "liberation" of Iraq. It was the day that a multireligious, multiethnic Governing Council of Iraqi men and women began to assume some power and responsibility for their own country — the most representative leadership Iraq has ever had.

And what was their first act? It was to declare that April 9, the day Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled, would be a national holiday. President Bush, Gen. Tommy Franks and The Weekly Standard could all call April 9 Iraq's V-E Day, but it became real only when the first representative Council of Iraqis embraced that day as their liberation. It is way too early to know whether this appointed Iraqi Council will flourish and pave the way for constitutional government and elections in Iraq, which is its assignment. It will first have to prove itself to the Iraqi people — and prove that while most Iraqis may not want us or Saddam, they do want one another. But these are not quislings, and therefore the Council's formation is a hugely important first step. This is what we came for. There is hope.

Had you been watching most American news shows or cable TV last Sunday, though, you would not have gotten a sense of this. They were focused almost exclusively on who was responsible for hyping Saddam's nuclear arms potential. This is understandable. The notion that the president may have misled the nation into war, and then blamed it on the C.I.A., is a big story.

For me, though, it is a disturbing thought that the Bush team could get itself so tied up defending its phony reasons for going to war — the notion that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction that were undeterrable and could threaten us, or that he had links with Al Qaeda — that it could get distracted from fulfilling the real and valid reason for the war: to install a decent, tolerant, pluralistic, multireligious government in Iraq that would be the best answer and antidote to both Saddam and Osama.

If the Bush team wants to win the real war, it must keep its eyes on the prize and that means the following:

First, U.S. forces need to finish the war. Sorry, Mr. President, but "major combat" is not over as you declared. Because major combat never happened in the core Sunni Muslim areas of Baghdad and the Sunni triangle to the west, where 80 percent of the attacks on U.S. forces now come from. What happened instead is that two divisions of Saddam's Republican Guards, which dominated these areas, simply melted away, and are now killing U.S. troops. These regions need to be reinvaded and then showered with reconstruction funds.

Second, we must provide massive support for the new Council in Iraq to enable it to assume more powers as quickly as possible. The more power it assumes, the more it speaks for Iraq and Iraqis to the

Arab world, the more it will be clear that America is the midwife of Iraq's liberation, not its occupier, and those who shoot at us are shooting down Iraq's (and the Arab world's) future. Russia, France and Germany hold most of Iraq's \$60 billion in foreign debt. Most of this needs to be forgiven. The Bush team needs to get off its high horse and challenge, and reach out to, Russia, France, Germany and the Arabs — to get those who were so ready to coddle Saddam's dictatorship to support a self-governing Iraq.

Third, according to Peter Bouckaert, senior researcher for emergencies at Human Rights Watch, over 20 mass graves have already been uncovered in Iraq, and there may be as many as 90. One grave alone in Hilla is estimated to contain 10,000 people murdered by Saddam's regime. Human Rights Watch estimates that there are 300,000 people missing in Iraq. President Bush is flailing around looking for Saddam's unused weapons of mass destruction, when evidence of his actual mass destruction is all over the place in Iraq. Yet the Pentagon has done almost nothing to help Iraqis properly exhume these graves, prepare evidence for a war crimes tribunal or expose this mass murder to the world.

Eyes on the prize, please. If we find W.M.D. in Iraq, but lose Iraq, Mr. Bush will not only go down as a failed president, but one who made the world even more dangerous for Americans. If we find no W.M.D., but build a better Iraq — one that proves that a multiethnic, multireligious Arab state can rule itself in a decent way — Mr. Bush will survive his hyping of the W.M.D. issue, and the world will be a more hospitable and safer place for all Americans.