

A cut-and-run transition

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When the "transition" moment occurred in Baghdad -- so tightly was the secret held that not even comrade-in-arms Tony Blair knew the schedule -- George Bush, in Turkey for the NATO summit, is reported to have turned to the British Prime Minister. **"Stealing a glance** at his watch to make sure the transfer [of sovereignty] had occurred, Bush put his hand over his mouth to guard his remarks, leaned toward Blair and then put out his hand for a shake."

That was in keeping with the moment. And momentary it was. An unannounced five-minute, **"furtive" ceremony**, two days early, on half an hour's notice, in a "nondescript room" in the new Iraqi prime minister's office, under a blanket of security, with snipers on adjoining rooftops in the heavily fortified Green Zone, **"before only a handful** of Iraqi and U.S. officials and journalists." A few quick, polite lies (L. Paul Bremer III: "I have confidence that the Iraqi government is ready to meet the challenges that lie ahead"), a few seconds of polite clapping by the attendees. That was it. Sovereignty transferred. The end.

Other than L. Paul Bremer, not a significant American official was in sight, even though the President, Secretary of Defense, National Security Advisor, and Secretary of State were all in Turkey, not 90 minutes away. There were no representatives from other governments. No flags. No bands. No cheering crowds. No marching troops. No hoopla. Nothing at all. And two hours later, Bremer, the erstwhile viceroy of Baghdad, his suits and desert boots packed away, was on a C-130 out of the country.

Talk about "cutting and running," he didn't even stick around the extra five hours for the swearing in of the new interim administration. That's not a matter of catching a flight, but of flight itself. I'm sure Bremer is already heaving a sigh of relief and looking forward, **as Time magazine tells us**, to enrolling in "the Academy of Cuisine in Washington." As for the "psychological boost" provided by the transfer of sovereignty, Prime Minister Allawi and friends are not likely to be its recipients. It looks as if the Bush administration engaged in a game of chicken with a motley group of insurgents and rebels in urban Iraq -- and at the edge of what suddenly looked like a cliff, the Bush administration flinched first.

This is a victory, certainly, but not for Bush & Co. or for their plan to, as they like to say, put "an Iraqi face" on Iraq. It may be spun here as a brilliant stratagem to outflank the Iraqi insurgency, or as Carol Williams and Alissa Rubin of the *Los Angeles Times* put it, a "ploy to pre-empt disruptions," or as proof that the interim administration was ready

ahead of schedule, but the word that most fits the moment is actually humiliation. Ignominious humiliation.

Imagine if, on May 1, 2003 as George Bush landed on the *USS Abraham Lincoln* in color-coded triumph, someone had leaned over and, behind a cupped palm, whispered that he would not attend the crowning triumph of his first presidential term, the official recreation of an Iraqi government in our image. Imagine if someone had then told him that an insurgency, evidently without a central command, armed with nothing more powerful than Kalashnikovs and RPGs, and made up to a significant degree of ordinary, angry Iraqis (as [Edward Wong of the New York Times](#) vividly reported today,) would stop his plans in their tracks; or that our sheriff in Baghdad would, hardly a year later, flee town tossing his badge in the dirt. What would George Bush have said then? Who among his followers wouldn't have had the laugh of their lives?

And yet, here we are. You won't read this in your daily paper or see it on the nightly prime-time news, but I assure you that what we're witnessing in slow motion is likely to be one of the great imperial defeats in history.

Being alone

In 2002, the Bush administration released [the National Security Strategy of the United States](#) in which it codified the idea of preventive, not preemptive, war -- if we even think you may be thinking... we'll take you out -- and the idea that our country should feel free to act alone to preserve its unparalleled and historically unique position as sole planetary superpower. It would be the global sheriff ("dead or alive"), the global hyperpower, the planet's military hegemon, "the New Rome." It took less than a year for that "New Rome" label to drop into the ashbin of history; now, the belief that nothing can stay our military might has been shown to be a hollow claim (no matter the destructive power we're capable of raining down on another land).

At bottom, Bush's neocon strategists profoundly misunderstood the nature of American power; too many war movies in childhood perhaps, but they believed their own propaganda about the ability of high-tech military power to pacify and reorganize the world. They simply had no idea how hard it was for a giant to stand alone and on one foot, while mites, poorly armed, scurried around below making mischief and causing havoc.

It's hard to believe that, in such a brief span, we've gone down the imperial rabbit hole and out the other side of who knows what, so that when the moment that would validate everything came in Iraq, though it was morning, it had the feel of the dead of night. Who would have believed that the administration which declared, in Greta Garbo's famous

phrase, "I want to be alone," would find itself so profoundly alone -- and undoubtedly fearful.

Be careful what you wish for, they say. The Bush administration talked the talk, but when it came to the walk, they bogged down on only the second stop in their armed stroll across our planet, and their representative in occupied Iraq had to make a mad dash for the exits.

George Bush himself now exists inside an ever-shrinking bubble of emptiness. This week the President and his entourage toured the emptied streets of Europe. Here's how [Alec Russell of the British Telegraph](#) described it:

"From Co[unty] Clare's cliffs to the Anatolian plain; from medieval battlements to Ottoman minarets; from the slate grey Atlantic to the Golden Horn; from armoured cars on deserted streets to, er, armoured cars on deserted streets... The only difference was the colour of the armoured cars: in Ireland they were khaki; in Ankara and Istanbul they were black. Otherwise the impression from the motorcade was the same: anti-Bush graffiti, lines of armed policemen, roadblocks, and emptied roads."

Soon, the President will return to Washington's Green Zone to find himself further embattled, more alone, his "war on terror" in tatters: grand juries, investigations, angry leakers in the bureaucracy, mocking films, devastating committee reports, congressional hearings, lawsuits. Today, even the Supreme Court weighed in, declaring that this President's claims of unconstrained power as commander-in-chief cannot put our prison in Guantanamo, Cuba beyond the reach of the courts or Congress, even when the prisoners in question are not American citizens. ("[Justice O'Connor wrote](#) that the campaign against terrorism notwithstanding, 'a state of war is not a blank check for the president when it comes to the rights of the nation's citizens'... Representative Jerrold Nadler of New York, ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on the Constitution [said the court], 'reaffirms that even in a time of war, the president does not have the authority to act as a tyrant.'")

In Iraq, L. Paul Bremer is history and, as the State Department inherits the Pentagon's mess, the new ambassador John Negroponte arrives. (It couldn't happen to a nicer fella.) Our press, now acknowledging Iraqi reality, writes that, though "sovereignty" has been transferred, nothing's really changed, which in a sense it hasn't. And yet, though we turned over little real power to our Iraqis, in another sense much has changed. After all, for the last half-year the "transition" has been the administration's trump card. Now, it's been played, hurriedly and in the dark. What are they going to do, when things get worse? What will happen then?

Bremer, of course, did what he could do. He took the first flight out to cooking school. George Bush can travel anywhere in splendid isolation, and for him, there's always Crawford, Texas. But for our troops, 138,000 of them, in desperate danger, no such handy options exist. And what in the world are they supposed to do, while our leaders, who cut and ran in their moment of truth, continue to eye November and claim that no one will ever drive us from Iraq?