

French General Looks At U.S. Iraq Policy

General Christian Quesnot (ret.) was Chief of Staff of French President François Mitterrand, in the crucial period between April 1991 and September 1995, during which the Rwandan genocide and the Serbian genocide against Srebrenica occurred. In testimony to the parliamentary commission investigating the failure of the international community in preventing the genocide carried out by the Serbs against the Bosnian population of Srebrenica in July 1995, Quesnot stated the West was “completely capable of preventing the capture of Srebrenica or of retaking the enclave.” He proposed a plan for military intervention which could have saved the Srebrenica population. “We had at least 30 times the armor and 100 times the artillery of the Serbs; it was completely within the capacity of the Americans, the British, or the French,” he said. He then challenged the claim of technical unfeasibility of Admiral Lanxade, former chief of staff of the French Army, during his interrogation the previous month by the parliamentary inquiry. General Quesnot denounced the prevarication of the UN in proclaiming the Muslim enclave a “safe area,” without furnishing the means to protect it. He defended the French and foreign officers who served in Bosnia, as “among the best of their generation,” but victims of the mandate imposed by the UN, which “violated not only the principles of warfare but threatened their basic security.”

After it was learned on July 11, 1995 that Srebrenica had fallen, Quesnot was asked by Prime Minister Jacques Chirac to devise possible means to retake it from the Serbs. He proposed an airborne operation, outside of UN control, for which he was asked to evaluate the risks. “I estimated them to be the loss of an airplane and of two helicopters, that is to say between 25 and 100 men,” he said. Most of the French political and military officials questioned by the parliamentary commission agreed with Quesnot’s plan, but the French proposal had to be abandoned because of lack of support from the United States and Great Britain.

General Quesnot is today president of the Commission on National Defense Studies, and editor of Revue Défense Nationale. He gave this interview to Christine Bierre in Paris on June 8. It has been translated from French.

EIR: The Iraqi debacle is causing a severe crisis in Washington. As a military man, you have led several of France’s foreign deployments which have given to you a good deal of experience on these questions. What are your thoughts about

the American situation in Iraq?

Quesnot: This situation provokes thoughts at different levels. The first is political and concerns the reliance on “state lies”—possession of weapons of mass destruction and affirmation of a strong link between Iraq and terrorism—to mobilize public opinion. If the United States attacks Iraq, whether you agree with that or not, is their responsibility, but the fact of giving false arguments to convince public opinion is an error which reduces the credibility of the officials.

As for the war itself, I think that the strictly military part of the conflict, that is the eviction of the Saddam Hussein regime and the battles which ensued, were carried out remarkably by American military officials in the utilization both of intense firepower and maneuvering in the field with the armored raid against Baghdad, by putting a screen in front of various cities, and taking the bridges at specific moments with special forces, and taking into account overall the whole logistical effort needed to revise the planning, after Turkey decided not to allow them to cross its territory.

On the contrary, the problem of the post-Saddam period, which, from my own standpoint, is a purely political responsibility, was not anticipated with the necessary imagination and forethought. It is obvious that the control of Iraq after a certain point, needs the presence of a much larger number of troops than those deployed for the military action as such. I don't want to give figures, but their order of magnitude, in order to reduce violence to a level where negotiations can start, it seems to me, would be closer to 300,000 men than 130,000. Experience has shown me, that stationing military forces in a foreign country, whatever country that might be, gives political leaders a lead time of approximately six months. If within those six months, there is no elaboration of a viable political solution for all parties, the foreign army which had been thought of in the beginning as a liberation army, becomes then an occupation army, and from that moment on, the people living there put up resistance, and the army which originally freed the country, becomes the target.

The aim of those resistance fighters—who are not all terrorists, even though the latter profit from the situation—is to cause enough losses among the occupation army troops to create a domestic political problem back home. I lived through all that in Beirut, in the company of American troops, as well as in other places. From the moment it becomes a domestic political problem with more and more casualties, the question for the government is raised in the following way: Either one shoots or one withdraws; or, in other terms, does one bring in reinforcements and attempt to establish total control, or does one withdraw? The present American administration is facing that dilemma. It is not up to me to judge and say what it should do, but it is clear that this question is a fundamental question for the image of the American nation and for its political weight in the world.

EIR: After this first phase of military takeover, the Ameri-

cans seemed to have done everything to set up Iraq against them: by not calling upon the local men to secure military and police activities, by not carrying out any reconstruction effort which would have shown Iraqis that the U.S. was on their side.

Quesnot: I believe that the post-Saddam period was dealt with in too ideological a manner; the American civilian officials, willingly intoxicated or not by the Iraqis who had been in exile for several years, and who had no credibility, being persuaded that they would be received as liberators. I think also that the demobilization of the Iraqi Army was a real mistake committed by the American administrator. Because when you know the country's history well, the Iraqi army has a legitimacy going back long before Saddam Hussein, because it was the instrument both of integration and promotion, in spite of the fact that the majority of its officers were Sunnis and the majority of the soldiers were Shi'ites. Saddam Hussein himself had no trust in that army; he always favored the Republican Guards, which did not live up to the high hopes that he had placed in them, any more than the 10,000 immortals of the Shah in Iran had done in their times. These praetorian guards always end up abandoning their dictators.

The fact that the Iraqi Army was dissolved pushed a certain number of officers, junior officers, and soldiers, which the American administrator could have well rehabilitated, to join the resistance. The case of Fallujah is exemplary in that sense. The American administrator should also have relied more on the Ba'ath Party. I agree that the top officials of the system had to be discarded, but they should not have gone far beyond that and rehabilitated anyone with the experience and authority necessary to re-establish security and respond to the demands of Iraqis for water, electricity, work, and housing.

EIR: How do you compare the attitude of Coalition Provisional Administrator Paul Bremer in Iraq, to Gen. Douglas MacArthur's and the way he dealt with the question of Japan after the war?

Quesnot: The context is very different: I do not want to diminish the merits of Mr. Bremer, but it is true that MacArthur had a professional experience and a background which were far superior. He had a world strategic vision and understood that you cannot take away the unifying symbol of the Japanese Empire, the Emperor, even if he had been in strong harmony with the Japanese military regime. Acting with a lot of autonomy from Washington, MacArthur played a very important role in transforming Japanese society, and in my view, it was a great success.

EIR: You earlier raised the ideological character that Pentagon civilians imprinted on the Iraq War, a fact which is confirmed by increasingly strong opposition to them from retired military officers, such as Gen. Anthony Zinni, and some active military.

Quesnot: It is true that the Rumsfeld/Wolfowitz team has a vision of that type of conflict, which is both ideological and “hyper-technological,” and that the extremely strong personality of Mr. Rumsfeld brooked no professional advice to prevail. While he was right, in my view, to accentuate the modernization of the military equipment, he committed a deep error in underestimating the number of men necessary to the secure Iraq after the fall of the regime. Gen. Eric Shinseki, the former Army Chief of Staff, who resigned shortly before the war, was right on this issue.

My general sentiment, taking into account my experience, is that the intelligence services did their job, even if they did not collect all the information. On the contrary, the interpretation of the findings and their reworking by specialized, biased cells had perverse consequences, leading Colin Powell, for instance, to compromise himself at the UN by presenting as proven facts information that didn’t correspond to reality.

EIR: How did you react to the news that there was torture in Iraq? France also faced that in other periods.

Quesnot: I was both surprised and personally shocked. I have always opposed any form of torture. Aside from any question of morality, what happened in that Baghdad prison is both awful and pathetic. Average Americans were faced with peasants from the Euphrates, and the act of humiliating them in the way it was done, couldn’t produce anything; those people held no secrets which could justify that behavior. That men like Saddam Hussein and his top collaborators, without being tortured, could be subjected to particular treatment, and strong moral or psychological pressure, can be debated, because it was a significant issue, but here, there was no issue at all. I find it regrettable and distressing.

EIR: All wars are horrible. How can that type of situation be avoided? What makes the difference between war where battle takes place with a certain elevation of character, and those where the situation degenerates to torture?

Quesnot: There are never wars without excesses on both sides. But the quality of training, determination, and personal commitment in supervision, at all levels, allows drifting to be limited. Good leaders must exert absolute control over the behavior of their subordinates. If they react firmly to any infraction of regulations, it will stop happening. The situation is extremely complex, and I don’t want to throw a stone at the American command. The presence of a large number of reservists, who lack the training of the professionals, as well as the reliance on mercenaries and contract intelligence agencies, created a situation where strict control of their actions was difficult, the more so, because, undoubtedly, it was demanded that they get results.

EIR: During the Algerian conflict, General de Gaulle was able to take the right decision to withdraw from an increasingly poisoned conflict, which had no just political solution.

Quesnot: Taking into account the present situation, I would not like to be in President Bush’s position, because no matter what he decides, the consequences will be grave. The American administration is engaged in the political, economic, and religious remodeling of the Greater Middle East, if not the Muslim world from Marrakesh to Bangladesh. However, you cannot propose that kind of reform, and at the same time give a carte blanche to Prime Minister Sharon, in the Israeli-Palestinian problem. I am not saying that educating young women in Saudi Arabia and in the Muslim world, is conditional on solving the Israeli-Palestinian problem, but the fact that the American administration has a double standard on that problem does not give credibility to its actions. Success of this ambitious project requires, aside from the means a great power has, a moral authority that the United States had in September 2001, and which it to a large extent degraded in the way it managed the the post-Saddam period.

EIR: Lyndon LaRouche has just proposed a new doctrine, a top-to-bottom reform of American policies for the entire Southwest Asia region, which corresponds to the concern you just expressed. He proposes to withdraw American troops, in the context of a new policy in which the United States, and all the countries in the region, would work together to solve the grave economic problems in this part of the world.

Quesnot: For sure, the Greater Middle East needs to change. It is obvious that in a globalized world, the behavior of regimes towards their populations cannot leave us indifferent. There is a problem in the education of women and girls, and in economic development. The obscurantist and intolerant interpretation of Islam by the fundamentalists, creates a fundamental problem in the Muslim world. But, to establish democracy in the Muslim world, you need democrats. Yet, we don’t have them in sufficient numbers that the idea of “democracy right away” would make any sense. A realistic intermediate step consists in putting the emphasis on world economic development and the creation of a middle class. That is the Chinese method. With that as a starting point, there will be a tendency towards a certain democracy. But the American and European systems are not directly transposable. In the name of what legitimacy could we impose our model on the Muslim, Indian, and Chinese worlds, which are great civilizations but different from our own?

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