

Home from Iraq — with regrets

by [Carol Goar](#)

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"It seemed like a good idea at the time," said Jim Beaulieu in a voice chastened by experience.

Six months ago, the former Manitoba bureaucrat arrived in Iraq, eager to impart Canadian notions of ethnic tolerance, minority rights and inclusive federalism.

Three months later he left, dubious that Iraq was on the path toward stable self-government and worried about its future.

Beaulieu's story provides a sobering glimpse into challenges facing post-war Iraq and the flaws in the American-led reconstruction program.

The Winnipeg development specialist was hired by a North Carolina firm called RTI International. It had won one of the United States government's large contracts to help Iraq make the transition from a broken dictatorship into a workable democracy.

RTI (which stands for Research Triangle Institute) was given the task of setting up and supporting local councils in each of Iraq's 18 provinces.

Beaulieu, who had worked on similar projects in China, Southeast Asia and Ukraine, was one of three Canadians involved in the project. He was assigned to Najaf, the religious centre for the Shiite majority in southern Iraq.

The city, the site of one of the deadliest bombings of the war, was struggling back to its feet after decades of political and religious repression.

Although Beaulieu was never attacked or threatened during his time in Najaf, he was acutely aware of the risk he was running. More than 150 foreign contractors, employees of non-government organizations and U.N. workers have been killed in post-war Iraq. "Everyone is in physical danger," he said.

It quickly became clear to Beaulieu that Canadian-style federalism, with an overarching national government and provinces with their own revenues and responsibilities, was going to be difficult to transplant to Iraq.

For one thing, the country relies on oil royalties for 90 per cent of its public spending and these revenues are controlled exclusively by Baghdad. Without access to resources of

their own, provincial governments can do little more than deliver what the central authority doles out.

Moreover, the Americans seem intent on replicating their own form of government, with a strong presidency and weak, though democratically elected, provincial governments. "This system would not serve the Iraqi people well," Beaulieu said. "Iraq will not make real progress unless the power of money is shared with the provinces."

He watched in frustration as American-paid experts trained local politicians to handle citizens' complaints, manage public funds, create jobs and supervise the rebuilding of shattered infrastructure, knowing that such skills would be of little value without independent spending power.

He listened, with rising concern, to reports that it might be years before the provincial governments were ready to manage their own affairs. Such a delay, in Beaulieu's view, would only exacerbate Iraq's ethnic tensions and allow the new cabal in Baghdad to become as arrogant and authoritarian as the old regime.

"I think Iraq will suffer from all the problems that were there before," he said.

In late December, Beaulieu resigned.

Since then, he has done a lot of thinking about the kind of constitution Iraq needs to develop into a successful multi-ethnic democracy.

First, it would have to impose checks and balances on all those who held power, from the president to the lowliest functionary, to prevent a return to dictatorship. One of the most important safeguards would be a legal requirement that the armed forces be kept under civilian control.

Second, it would ensure that the central government was strong enough to hold the country together, keep the oil flowing and deliver national services such as health care, transportation and defence.

Third, each of Iraq's 18 provinces would have democratically elected governments, reflecting the dominant ethnic and religious group in the region: Kurds in the north, Sunnis in central Iraq and Shiites in the south.

Fourth — and critically in Beaulieu's view — each province would be unconditionally guaranteed a share of the nation's oil revenues to spend as its government saw fit.

"Provinces may make mistakes, but they will be much smaller than national mistakes and much more easily corrected," he said. "It is the sharing of money as well as electoral power that can help create a democratic culture."

He holds out little hope that this sort of decentralization will happen in the near future.

It is alien to American experience to empower minorities, rather than trying to make them part of the mainstream. It is risky to entrust fledgling provincial governments with money and authority that might be used to build separatist movements. And it is messy to have 18 different power bases within one country.

Beaulieu wishes his former co-workers at RTI well as they spend \$167 million of Washington's money to bring their version of democracy to Iraq.

He had hoped to temper it with a bit of Canadian pragmatism. He still hopes the U.S. will one day listen to its friends.

Carol Goar's column appears on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

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