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[EDITORIALS](#) [COLUMNISTS](#) [CONTRIBUTORS](#) [LETTERS](#) [THE PUBLIC EDITOR](#) [GLOBAL OPINION](#)**Whose side are we on?**

Graham E. Fuller

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WASHINGTON — No friends in Iraq

The United States is reaching a breaking point with the Shiites in Iraq. The quiescence to date of this dominant and relatively united sectarian force has been the key factor in America's ability to keep the lid on in Iraq so far.

That is now changing.

The Shiites have never had any particular love for the United States. They are bitter about what they saw as their betrayal by the United States after the first Gulf war, when the elder President George Bush called for uprisings against Saddam Hussein and then stood by while Saddam's forces brutally put the insurrection down, with huge Shiite losses.

As for the United States, after the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the crisis of American diplomats held hostage in Tehran, a mantra developed in Washington: "Shiite bad, Sunni good." The Shiites were the anti-American revolutionaries in the region.

But after the emergence of Al Qaeda, 9/11, the outbreak of the Sunni insurrection against the U.S. occupation in Iraq and Iraqi Shiite quiescence, Washington's working mantra was reversed: it became "Shiite good, Sunni bad." Today it is hard to tell who the good guys are.

One thing was clear on the eve of the war in Iraq: The Shiites would favor the overthrow of Saddam and a brief U.S. occupation only if Washington promised to deliver power into the hands of the Shiite majority via the ballot box.

This has now come to pass. As far as most Shiites are concerned, the United States has basically fulfilled its mission and should go home.

The Shiites, however, are tactically divided as to when the United States should go home. Some still want America to stay on a bit longer to help put down the insurgency and stabilize the country, thus making the Shiites' rule more secure. Others - now maybe a majority - fear that their dependence upon the U.S. sword is damaging to the very legitimacy of Shiite governance. Under these conditions, the Sunni minority can claim the mantle of "the one force that stood up to American occupation."

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Thus for most Shiites the quickest way to gain national legitimacy and acquire nationalist credentials may be to join the call for an end to the U.S. occupation.

The Shiite firebrand Moktada al-Sadr grasped this a long time ago and is, in fact, trying to forge a Shiite- Sunni coalition based on the common interest of ending the occupation now.

Now that Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, has delivered President George W. Bush's jarring message that the current Iraqi prime minister, Ibrahim al- Jaafari, is not acceptable to Washington and should not seek a second term, the Shiite break with Washington may be nearing.

By no means do all Shiites want Jaafari as prime minister. But the United States in their view has delivered a fairly naked diktat by telling the Shiites who should or should not run their ostensibly sovereign government. U.S. pressure on the Shiites to give up control of such vital power ministries as Intelligence and Interior are certain non- starters; the Shiites have not waited for half a century to get power only to yield these vital security functions to their erstwhile oppressors and current rivals. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani will work mightily to ensure the Shiites do not break ranks on these issues.

It may be that the Shiite alliance will switch candidates for prime minister, if only in the name of preserving unity. But any new candidate, in an agreement likely to be forged by Sistani, must also placate the many Shiite elements cool or hostile to the United States - including Jaafari, Sadr and the pro-Iranian Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

It may make some sense for the United States to help overcome Sunni fears and grievances by siding with their calls for more Sunni power. But the current Shiite political dominance is quite legal, based on a constitution the United States helped draft. It reflects the absolute demographic majority of Shiites. And for the moment at least, sectarian loyalties are the coinage of daily politics and the primary source of security for each citizen. That leaves scant room for compromise.

Even if Washington at this point tilts toward the Sunnis, they would offer precious little consolation for Bush's woes.

The Sunnis are even more anti- U.S. and more pan-Arab than the Shiites. They are determined to end the occupation as soon as possible. The Sunni clerics are hard- line anti-U.S., and their only serious rivals are secular Baathists. Placating the Sunnis now will thus do little more than hasten a public Shiite break with Washington. It will not lessen insurgent actions to push the United States out.

However clever Ambassador Khalilzad's efforts at divide-and-rule may be, few of his options are good. The sad truth is that Sunnis and Shiites have come to vie with each other in pushing to get rid of the Americans. Neither variation of the "good-bad" mantras is reliable any more.

(Graham E. Fuller is a former vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council at the CIA. His most recent book is "The Future of Political Islam." This article was distributed by Tribune Media Services.)

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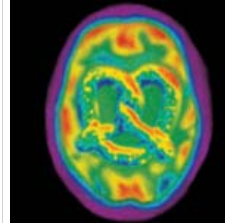
There was plenty in the background-checks measure blocked by the Senate that gun-rights proponents could embrace.

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