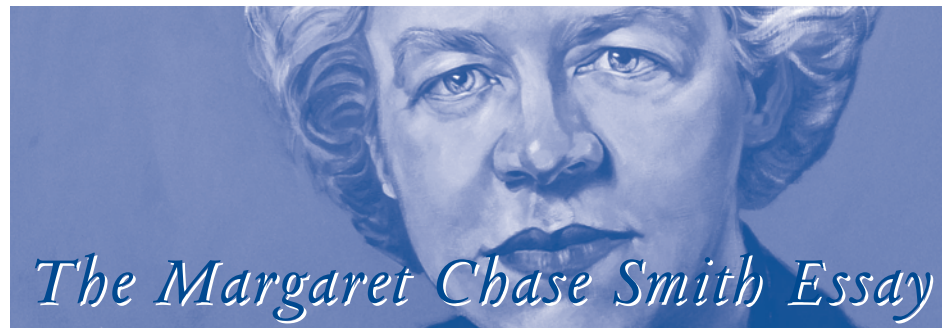




The Other Iraq

by Wayne Myers

In May 2004 I was one of three rural health specialists visiting northeastern Iraq, the home of 4.5 million Kurdish people. This region, friendly to America, secular, self-governing and fully functional, is very different from the parts of Iraq that dominate the news. These differences beg the questions, "What is it that so many troops from Maine are being asked to accomplish in Iraq? Can we recognize and nurture regional success in a deteriorating national situation?"

The Kurdish homeland is the mountainous region shared by Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Armenia. The Kurds have been there for millennia. They fought Alexander the Great on his way to India, and appear in the Old Testament as the Medes. In Kurdish history, the arrival of the Arabs from the south in the seventh century and the Turks from central Asia in the 13th century are relatively recent developments.

Today, there are about 25 million Kurds, half of whom live in eastern Turkey. The Kurds claim to be the largest ethnic group in the world without its own country. Each of the five nations controlling a part of the Kurdish domain is strongly opposed to autonomy for any Kurdish population, particularly its own. This issue is intense in Turkey, where the Kurdish areas are heavily militarized.

Iraqi Kurdistan is an area about the size of New Hampshire plus Vermont. Mountain ridges separate broad fertile valleys. Most of Iraq's rain falls in these highlands. Goats and sheep and a few cows graze. Row crops, including some rice, are grown using old Iraqi-built tractors and much hand work.

The Iraqi Kurds suffered terribly under Saddam Hussein. The central Baathist government had several agendas leading to the common policy of displacing parts of the Kurdish population, living or dead. Baghdad wished to depopulate its border with Iran, to eliminate local support for resistance fighters, the Peshmerga, and to consolidate small villages into larger centers, where surveillance and conscription could be more effective. Thousands of villages were destroyed. Sunni Arabs were resettled into Kurdish population centers, including Mosul and oil-rich Kirkuk. A young physician describes his student years, "We studied hearing shots and screams."

In 1988 Halabjah was an agricultural hub town with over 50,000 people. The Iraqi army attacked with poison gas, killing over 5,000 men, women and children. Halabjah was one of 280 towns and villages attacked with chemical weapons. Western journalists and photographers happened to be in Halabjah at

the time and made the atrocity known to the outside world. The Baathist government regarded the resulting outcry as indication of ties between the Kurds and the United States. Following the first Gulf War, the Kurds, with U.S. encouragement, rebelled against Saddam Hussein, as did other Iraqi groups. Saddam retaliated, pushing Kurdish civilians toward closed borders with Turkey and Iran. The suffering and death of many led to the establishment of the “northern no-fly zone.” Unable to protect his forces, Saddam withdrew in 1992 the Iraqi military, Baathist civil government, education and health personnel from the three Kurdish “governorates,” or states. About 800,000 Kurds died as a result of Saddam’s programs, a number similar to the death toll in the Rwanda genocide.

Since 1992, Iraqi Kurds have been largely self-governing. We found the region quiet but vigilant. Check points maintained by governorate militia were numerous. Neighborhoods where government officials or foreigners live were heavily guarded. Favorite mental images include the young guard with AK-47 in hand playing soccer with street kids; the older guard with submachine gun in one hand hosing flower petals off the sidewalk with the other.

Saddam’s military bases have been replaced. The site of one in Erbil is now a memorial, with a reflecting pool, restaurant and an elaborate rose garden. The base in Sulimania is now a university campus. Dohuk’s base has become a diverse park with something for every family member: brightly lighted carnival rides, lawns with fountains, and a modern shopping center. The burned out shell of

a Baathist police station has become a rural health clinic.

Ordinary life is approaching normality. One holiday morning a city park was populated with high school students studying for graduation exams. Later, picnicking families enjoyed olive groves across the countryside. Rural villages are being rebuilt as large modern “collective villages” of several thousand people. A building boom is in full swing. Whole blocks of large homes are being built. Many are said to belong to Kurds returning from Istanbul, Europe and the United States. New roads are being built. Reforestation programs are evident all through the mountains.

On the other hand, many elements of infrastructure are lacking. Safe water is available in most communities, but the quality is not reliable and reasons to use it are not widely understood. Pasteurization of dairy products is nonexistent. Of every thousand babies born, 55 will die before their first birthday, half the infant mortality rate for the rest of Iraq but nearly 10 times the rate seen in suburban white America. About half of all deliveries are out of hospital. Landmines threaten many rural activities.

Americans are well thought of. We saw a homemade American flag flying alongside a Kurdish flag over a military mountain outpost. We Americans felt comfortable roaming the markets. Keepers of small businesses invited us in for tea. Children practiced their English with shouted greetings.

Americans regard Baghdad as the capital of Iraq. The Kurds are ambivalent at best. They do not believe that the interest of the Arab majority in Kurdish

land, water and oil ended with Saddam’s rule. It has been a fact of life for generations and will continue. The management of the country by the Coalition Provisional Authority was severely criticized as oblivious to Middle Eastern issues and social patterns. “We know men are from Mars and Women are from Venus, but what planet is Bremmer from?” The “One Iraq” mantra of American officials drew an ominous comment from Kurds: “You want to unify Iraq? All you have to do is turn us Kurds against America. Then you’ll have national unity.”

Many professionals expressed wishes for ongoing U.S. protection: “Why can’t Kurdistan be your next Israel?”. Or, “We know Puerto Rico will be the 51st state. We’ll settle for number 52.”

The “Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transition Period” (the LAT) described the structure of Iraqi government before the transfer of sovereignty. That document recognized the Kurdish language, and the region of Kurdistan with its elections, courts and powers to tax and spend. Those provisions and recognitions disappeared with the transfer of sovereignty in late June. The Kurds regard the LAT as in force until superseded by a new constitution. Leaders of the Shia majority in the rest of the country reject continuation of the LAT. The current government in Baghdad, preoccupied with widespread insurrection, continues *de facto* recognition.

The Kurds are suspending judgment and action until a definitive pattern of government is established following the elections held in January. They seem willing to collaborate and cooperate but not capitulate. Kurdish defense forces, the

Peshmerga, are well organized, experienced and utterly committed to their people and homeland.

As Iraq evolves, it seems desirable for the American people and policymakers to be aware and supportive of the Iraqi Kurds. Within Iraq, theirs is a uniquely functional society where ordinary people of various faiths can lead ordinary lives. History suggests it will not fare well if it is entirely subject to the Arab majority of the rest of the country. The Kurds will fight to protect their society if it is again threatened by the Arab majority.

American policy in Iraq seems to have been guided by Washington doctrine rather than Middle Eastern reality. If we continue a steadfast "One Iraq" policy, Maine's National Guard members and reservists may be asked to fight our only real friends and allies in Iraq.

Iraqi Kurdistan is a highly functional Middle Eastern society similar to what we claim as the goal of "nation building" in the Middle East, a democratic secular society with a free market economy where westerners are welcomed. We should see that it becomes a model rather than a casualty. 🐉



Wayne Myers is a retired pediatrician. He spent most of his career developing rural health programs in Alaska, the Pacific Northwest and Kentucky, including ways for medical and allied health students to study in rural communities. He directed the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy from 1998 through 2000, and was the president of the National Rural Health Association in 2003. He and his wife, JoAnn, raise heritage livestock and organic produce on Beau Chemin Farm in Waldoboro.

