

OPINION

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Claiborne Pell and the roots of Iraqi regime change

Politicians who qualify as statesmen are few and far between. Statesmanship requires poise and vision, so that detachment and far-sightedness do not become empty posturing. Such a person was Claiborne Pell, who died last January 1. The onetime chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was once asked for the secret of his success: "I believe in letting the other fellow have my way," he quipped. That sat well with his Rhode Island electorate, which he represented for 36 years.

Pell was a powerful figure in Washington, chairing the Foreign Relations Committee between 1987 and 1995. I met him in October 1991, when we participated together in launching, with two other senators, John McCain and Paul Simon, and with Congressman Stephen Solarz, the International Committee for a Free Iraq (ICFI). The ICFI included remarkable figures, including Jalal Talabani, now Iraq's president, Muhammad Bahr al-Ulum, the first president of the Transitional Governing Council, and Hoshiyar Zebari, the current foreign minister.

The small group that arrived from London for the occasion included Edward Mortimer, the foreign affairs columnist and author who was later an adviser to the United Nations secretary general, as well as the Iraqi politician Ahmad Chalabi, who had impressive access in Washington even then. We were joined

by Rend Rahim, who lived in the city and became the first ambassador of post-Saddam Iraq to the United States.

A recent biography of Chalabi was aptly titled "The Man Who Pushed America to War." It could just as legitimately have been titled, "The Man Who Ended Saddam Hussein's Dictatorship", and Pell's passing provides an occasion to recall the immense, collective endeavor that took place for over a decade-and-a-half to end Saddam's inhumane rule in Baghdad.

Pell's strong endorsement of the ICFI remained steady for the two subsequent years, shaping Saddam's containment on the international scene. One enduring consequence of this was the oil-for-food program that differentiated between the rule of Saddam and the interests of the Iraqi people. The ICFI advocated a number of practical measures to remove Saddam from power, short of invading Iraq, which many of us opposed as an unnecessary and immoral burden on the United States. The ICFI shaped Security Council resolutions on Iraq, monitored the first Kurdish elections of May 1992, and brought together all Iraqi opposition leaders in a democratic platform against the dictatorship, with the support of such international figures as Claiborne Pell.

That day in the Senate, Pell offered the most remarkable leadership possible. He was known, together with his chief assistant, Peter Galbraith, as a coura-

geous supporter of the Iraqi Kurds and for his belief that the 1991 Gulf war would remain unfinished business until the Baathist dictatorship was brought to an end. I remember that Pell delayed a lunch with the president of a Central American country to stay with us, and offered an additional statement to the one presented by the other congressional leaders who were founding patrons of the ICFI. The committee was disbanded in 1992, and in June of that year the Iraqi opposition coalesced into the Iraqi National Congress.

|| Conviviality through law – shorthand for democracy – needs to take root

The 2003 invasion of Iraq has been much decried, and rightly so. However, the 1991 Gulf war proved to be a hollow victory, because the invader of Kuwait was still in power. This was compounded by the massacre of Kurds and Shiites on an unprecedented scale in April 1991, while American and other troops were camped only a few kilometers away. The question, then and again in 2003, was how to protect Iraqis from the ruthlessness of Saddam Hussein's regime. A foreign official of the stature of Pell could only endorse human rights and democra-

cy as the way forward in Iraq. Regardless of the means, Pell's endorsement showed that the idea of regime change was both inevitable and correct. A similar logic was found across the board in Washington, and was even written into law in the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, passed under the presidency of Bill Clinton. The roots of regime change in Iraq ran far deeper in Washington than among the Bush administration's neoconservatives.

As Iraq continues its difficult transition in a hostile neighborhood ruled by authoritarian regimes, conviviality through law – shorthand for democracy – needs to take root. Iraqis will continue to require active bipartisan support in the US for this agenda. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who restored the rule of the state over extremist militias last year, is aware of the challenge. When I met him in Baghdad last October, Maliki asked for my help to strengthen support for Iraqi democracy in the US and elsewhere. Yet it will not be easy to find a person of the stature of Claiborne Pell in Washington to lead that effort. But one should try.

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