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## Perennial struggle between China's centre and the provinces continues to resonate

By Daniel Aronoff

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From Mr Daniel J. Aronoff.

Sir, Martin Wolf's thoughtful essay on China's political situation focuses on the shifting balance of power between the emperor and the bureaucracy that runs through Chinese history and its implication for contemporary political prospects

("An autocracy of bureaucrats can only crush China's growth", May 31).

I wish to suggest another perennial source of tension that will crucially affect China's future.

The China scholar John King Fairbank wrote of the evergreen struggle between the imperial court, which controlled the centre, and the provinces. A weakened emperor not only lost control to rent-seeking bureaucrats, but also lost control of his hinterland and the revenues and perquisites that flowed from it.

Periods of decentralisation have been feared above almost all else in Chinese society as a breeding ground for chaos or destructive warlordism. A fundamental value of Confucian philosophy is the preservation of order, from the household to the state.

If Mr Wolf means to suggest that China would be better off with a strong, autocratic leader than a weak one, I think he is mistaken. There are clearly trade-offs.

In the brief period of the Chinese republic of the early twentieth century, weak central control resulted in chaos and profiteering, but it also created the space for a flourishing of culture, political expression and economic growth beyond anything attained in all prior Chinese history.

Today, the relative autonomy of the provinces has led to unchecked pressure on banks to lend to crony corporations controlled by provincial chieftains, an under-appreciated dimension of China's banking problems, but it has also engendered inter-regional competition for foreign investment that has increased economic growth.

Chinese people have feared decentralisation in part, as Mr Wolf points out, because Chinese society has lacked the underpinnings of western civil society that allow for a "spontaneous order" to emerge leading to prosperity and freedom without descending into chaos, corruption or warlordism.

The hope of China's future lies in the spread and belief in such civil values among the emerging educated middle class and the likelihood of people with these values ascending to power.

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### Allies must stay in Iraq for years

By Daniel J Aronoff, Financial Times  
Published: Jan 03, 2004

*From Mr Daniel J. Aronoff.*

Sir, Martin Wolf ("Bush is all big stick and no soft speech", December 24) aptly contends that the Bush administration "has returned to Woodrow Wilson" in pursuing the same kind of democratic transformation in Iraq the US successfully effected in western Europe after the second world war. But there is an important lesson to be learned from the failure of the Wilsonian vision when first tried in the aftermath of the first world war.

Wilson's 14 Points displayed a compelling, high-minded vision of a democratic and free order among European states. Unfortunately, by the time Wilson left Versailles he had acquiesced in the imposition of punitive reparations on Germany widely perceived as designed to prevent it from re-emerging as an industrial nation, left British and French war debts to the US intact and withdrawn US troops from the continent. In the event, the economies of Europe remained shattered, the Germans remained unreconciled to the terms of the settlement and the US was without any influence to implement Wilson's vision.

The US behaved differently after the second world war. War debts were forgiven, the Marshall Plan ignited economic recovery, the vanquished were re-integrated into the community of nations after their leaders were captured and executed and US troops remained in western Europe for many years, overseeing the creation of a new political order.

In Iraq today, the US and Britain have focused on economic reconstruction through aid and the promotion of debt forgiveness, but they have displayed ambivalence about the extent to which they wish to place their imprint on the new political order and their lack of commitment to maintain a military presence for the long haul can only give succour to their enemies and make fearful those who might join the allied cause. In particular, it seems the allies want to create a centralised Iraqi government that will be dominated by a majority, in the hopes that a hitherto undisplayed sense of national unity will prevail. This ignores the historically violent conflicts among Iraq's three contending groups - Sunnis, Shias and Kurds.

Why not promote a political framework that provides maximum autonomy to each of the three regions in which the groups reside? That way the former Sunni middle class will have a stake in the new order, the Shia need not fear them and the Kurds can continue their successful way of life. This should feel natural to Americans who were formed out of a compromise between 13 colonies that involved the establishment of a bicameral legislature designed to protect small-population states from domination by those with large populations.

To make this vision work the allies must be willing to assert themselves in the

creation of the new political order in Iraq and to commit military resources for many years. That will be difficult to carry off in the current climate of world opinion.

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