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Thinking About Iraq (II); [Op-Ed]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Let's start with one simple fact: Iraq is a black box that has been sealed shut since [Saddam Hussein] came to dominate Iraqi politics in the late 1960's. Therefore, one needs to have a great deal of humility when it comes to predicting what sorts of bats and demons may fly out if the U.S. and its allies remove the lid. Think of it this way: If and when we take the lid off Iraq, we will find an envelope inside. It will tell us what we have won and it will say one of two things.

In the first scenario, Iraq is the way it is today because Saddam is the way he is. In the second scenario, Saddam is the way he is because Iraq is what it is. Those are two very different problems. And we will know which we've won only when we take off the lid. The conservatives and neo-cons, who have been pounding the table for war, should be a lot more humble about this question, because they don't know either.

In short, we can oust Saddam Hussein all by ourselves. But we cannot successfully rebuild Iraq all by ourselves. And the real prize here is a new Iraq that would be a progressive model for the whole region. That, for me, is the only morally and strategically justifiable reason to support this war. The Bush team dare not invade Iraq simply to install a more friendly dictator to pump us oil. And it dare not simply disarm Iraq and then walk away from the nation-building task.

Full Text (819 words)

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In my column on Wednesday I laid out why I believe that liberals underestimate how ousting Saddam Hussein could help spur positive political change in the Arab world. Today's column explores why conservative advocates of ousting Saddam underestimate the risks, and where we should strike the balance.

Let's start with one simple fact: Iraq is a black box that has been sealed shut since Saddam came to dominate Iraqi politics in the late 1960's. Therefore, one needs to have a great deal of humility when it comes to predicting what sorts of bats and demons may fly out if the U.S. and its allies remove the lid. Think of it this way: If and when we take the lid off Iraq, we will find an envelope inside. It will tell us what we have won and it will say one of two things.

It could say, "Congratulations! You've just won the Arab Germany -- a country with enormous human talent, enormous natural resources, but with an evil dictator, whom you've just removed. Now, just add a little water, a spoonful of democracy and stir, and this will be a normal nation very soon."

Or the envelope could say, "You've just won the Arab Yugoslavia -- an artificial country congenitally divided among Kurds, Shiites, Sunnis, Nasserites, leftists and a host of tribes and clans that can only be held together with a Saddam-like iron fist. Congratulations, you're the new Saddam."

In the first scenario, Iraq is the way it is today because Saddam is the way he is. In the second scenario, Saddam is the way he is because Iraq is what it is. Those are two very different problems. And we will know which we've won only when we take off the lid. The conservatives and neo-cons, who have been pounding the table for war, should be a lot more humble about this question, because they don't know either.

Does that mean we should rule out war? No. But it does mean that we must do it right. To begin with, the president must level with the American people that we may indeed be buying the Arab Yugoslavia, which will take a great deal of time and effort to heal into a self-sustaining, progressive, accountable Arab government. And, therefore, any nation-building in Iraq will be a multiyear marathon, not a multiweek sprint.

Because it will be a marathon, we must undertake this war with the maximum amount of international legitimacy and U.N. backing we can possibly muster. Otherwise we will not have an American public willing to run this marathon, and we will not have allies ready to help us once we're inside (look at all the local police and administrators Europeans now contribute in Bosnia and Kosovo). We'll also become a huge target if we're the sole occupiers of Iraq.

In short, we can oust Saddam Hussein all by ourselves. But we cannot successfully rebuild Iraq all by ourselves. And the real prize here is a new Iraq that would be a progressive model for the whole region. That, for me, is the only morally and strategically justifiable reason to support this war. The Bush team dare not invade Iraq simply to install a more friendly dictator to pump us oil. And it dare not simply disarm Iraq and then walk away from the nation-building task.

Unfortunately, when it comes to enlisting allies, the Bush team is its own worst enemy. It has sneered at many issues the world cares about: the Kyoto accords, the World Court, arms control treaties. The Bush team had legitimate arguments on some of these issues, but the gratuitous way it dismissed them has fueled anti-Americanism. No, I have no illusions that if the Bush team had only embraced Kyoto the French wouldn't still be trying to obstruct America in Iraq. The French are the French. But unfortunately, now the Germans are the French, the Koreans are the French, and many Brits are becoming French.

Things could be better, but here is where we are -- so here is where I am: My gut tells me we should continue the troop buildup, continue the inspections and do everything we can for as long as we can to produce either a coup or the sort of evidence that will give us the broadest coalition possible, so we can do the best nation-building job possible.

But if war turns out to be the only option, then war it will have to be -- because I believe that our kids will have a better chance of growing up in a safer world if we help put Iraq on a more progressive path and stimulate some real change in an Arab world that is badly in need of reform. Such a war would indeed be a shock to this region, but, if we do it right, there is a decent chance that it would be shock therapy.

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