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

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Although President Bush has cast the war in Iraq as being about disarmament – and that is legitimate -- disarmament is not the most important prize there. Regime change is the prize. Regime transformation in Iraq could make a valuable contribution to the war on terrorism, whether [Saddam Hussein] is ousted or enticed into exile.

We have partners. Trust me, there is a part of every young Arab today that recoils at the idea of a U.S. invasion of Iraq, because of its colonial overtones. But there is a part of many young Arabs today that prays the U.S. will not only oust Saddam but all other Arab leaders as well.

Liberals need to take heed. Just by mobilizing for war against Iraq, the U.S. has sent this region a powerful message: We will not leave you alone anymore to play with matches, because the last time you did, we got burned. Just the threat of a U.S. attack has already prompted Hezbollah to be on its best behavior in Lebanon (for fear of being next). And it has spurred Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah to introduce a proposal to his fellow Arab leaders for an "Arab Charter" of political and economic reform.

Full Text (787 words)

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As the decision on Iraq approaches, I, like so many Americans, have had to ask myself: What do you really think? Today I explain why I think liberals under-appreciate the value of removing Saddam Hussein. And on Sunday I will explain why conservatives under-appreciate the risks of doing so -- and how we should balance the two.

What liberals fail to recognize is that regime change in Iraq is not some distraction from the war on Al Qaeda. That is a bogus argument. And simply because oil is also at stake in Iraq doesn't make it illegitimate either. Some things are right to do, even if Big Oil benefits.

Although President Bush has cast the war in Iraq as being about disarmament – and that is legitimate -- disarmament is not

the most important prize there. Regime change is the prize. Regime transformation in Iraq could make a valuable contribution to the war on terrorism, whether Saddam is ousted or enticed into exile.

Why? Because what really threatens open, Western, liberal societies today is not Saddam and his weapons per se. He is a twisted dictator who is deterrable through conventional means. Because Saddam loves life more than he hates us. What threatens Western societies today are not the deterrables, like Saddam, but the undeterrables -- the boys who did 9/11, who hate us more than they love life. It's these human missiles of mass destruction that could really destroy our open society.

So then the question is: What is the cement mixer that is churning out these undeterrables -- these angry, humiliated and often unemployed Muslim youth? That cement mixer is a collection of faltering Arab states, which, as the U.N.'s Arab Human Development Report noted, have fallen so far behind the world their combined G.D.P. does not equal that of Spain. And the reason they have fallen behind can be traced to their lack of three things: freedom, modern education and women's empowerment.

If we don't help transform these Arab states -- which are also experiencing population explosions -- to create better governance, to build more open and productive economies, to empower their women and to develop responsible media that won't blame all their ills on others, we will never begin to see the political, educational and religious reformations they need to shrink their output of undeterrables.

We have partners. Trust me, there is a part of every young Arab today that recoils at the idea of a U.S. invasion of Iraq, because of its colonial overtones. But there is a part of many young Arabs today that prays the U.S. will not only oust Saddam but all other Arab leaders as well.

It is not unreasonable to believe that if the U.S. removed Saddam and helped Iraqis build not an overnight democracy but a more accountable, progressive and democratizing regime, it would have a positive, transforming effect on the entire Arab world -- a region desperately in need of a progressive model that works.

And liberals need to take heed. Just by mobilizing for war against Iraq, the U.S. has sent this region a powerful message: We will not leave you alone anymore to play with matches, because the last time you did, we got burned. Just the threat of a U.S. attack has already prompted Hezbollah to be on its best behavior in Lebanon (for fear of being next). And it has spurred Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah to introduce a proposal to his fellow Arab leaders for an "Arab Charter" of political and economic reform.

Let me sum up my argument with two of my favorite sayings. The first is by Harvard's president, Lawrence Summers, who says: "In the history of the world, no one has ever washed a rented car." It is true of countries as well. Until the Arab peoples are given a real ownership stake in their countries -- a real voice in how they are run -- they will never wash them, never improve them as they should.

The second is an American Indian saying -- "If we don't turn around now, we just may get where we're going." The Arab world has been digging itself into a hole for a long time. If our generation simply helps it stop digging, possibly our grandchildren and its own will reap the benefits. But if we don't help the Arabs turn around now, they just may get where they're going -- a dead end where they will produce more and more undeterrables.

This is something liberals should care about -- because liberating the captive peoples of the Mideast is a virtue in itself and because in today's globalized world, if you don't visit a bad neighborhood, it will visit you.

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