
to believe, as the ill-conceived Iraq war advances, that things will be much different than that bloody episode, but with other countries like Syria and Iran involved, shaky regimes shaken more, general Arab outrage inflamed to the boiling point, one cannot imagine that victory in Iraq will resemble any of the simple-minded myths posited by Bush and his little clique.

But what is truly puzzling is that the regnant American ideology is still undergirded by the view that US power is fundamentally benign and altruistic. This surely accounts for the outrage expressed by US pundits and officials that Iraqis had the gall to undertake resistance at all, or that when captured, US soldiers are exhibited on Iraqi TV. The practice is much worse a) than bombing markets and whole cities and b) than showing rows of Iraqi prisoners made to kneel or lie spread-eagled face down in the sand. All of a sudden, the Geneva Conventions are invoked not for Camp X-Ray but for Saddam, and when his forces hide inside cities, that is cheating, whereas carpet bombing from 30,000 feet is playing fair.

This is the stupidest and most recklessly undertaken war in modern times. It is all about imperial arrogance unschooled in worldliness, unfettered either by competence or experience, undeterred by history or human complexity, unrepentant in brutal violence and cruel electronic gadgetry. To call it "faith-based" is to give faith an even worse name that it already has. With its too-long and vulnerable supply lines, its lurching from illiterate glibness to blind military pounding, its poorly planned logistical inadequacy and its slick wordy self-explanations, the US war against Iraq is almost perfectly embodied by poor George Bush's groping to stay on cue and on top of the texts they've prepared for him and which he can scarcely read, and Rummy Rumsfeld's wordy petulance, sending out lots of young soldiers either to die or to kill as many people as possible. What winning, or for that matter losing, such a war will ultimately entail is almost literally unthinkable. But pity the Iraqi civilians who must still suffer a great deal more before they are finally "liberated." ■

GIVE US BACK OUR DEMOCRACY

Edward Said

In a speech in the Senate on 19 March, the first day of war against Iraq, Robert Byrd, the Democrat Senator from West Virginia, asked: 'What is happening to this country? When did we become a nation which ignores and berates our friends? When did we decide to risk undermining international order by adopting a radical and doctrinaire approach to using our awesome military might? How can we abandon diplomacy when the turmoil in the world cries out for diplomacy?'

No one bothered to answer, but as the American military machine currently in Iraq stirs restlessly in other directions, these questions give urgency to the failure, if not the corruption, of democracy.

Let us examine what the US's Middle East policy has wrought since George W. Bush came to power. Even before the atrocities of 11 September, Bush's team had given Ariel Sharon's government freedom to colonise the West Bank and Gaza, kill and detain people at will, demolish their homes, expropriate their land and imprison them by curfew and military blockades. After 9/11, Sharon simply hitched his wagon to 'the war on terrorism' and intensified his unilateral depredations against a defenceless civilian population under occupation, despite UN Security Council Resolutions enjoining Israel to withdraw and desist from its war crimes and human-rights abuses.

In October 2001, Bush launched the invasion of Afghanistan, which opened with concentrated, high-altitude bombing (an 'anti-terrorist' military tactic, which resembles ordinary terrorism in its effects and structure) and by December had installed a client regime with no effective power beyond Kabul. There has been no significant US effort at reconstruction, and it seems the country has returned to its former abjection.

Since the summer of 2002, the Bush administration has conducted a propaganda campaign against the despotic government of Iraq and with the UK, having unsuccessfully tried to push the Security Council into compliance, started the war. Since last November, dissent disappeared from the mainstream media swollen with a surfeit of ex-generals sprinkled with recent terrorism experts drawn from Washington right-wing think-tanks.

Anyone who was critical was labelled anti-American by failed academics, listed on websites as an 'enemy' scholar who didn't toe the line. Those few public figures who were critical had their emails swamped, their lives threatened, their ideas trashed by media commentators who had become sentinels of America's war.

A torrent of material appeared equating Saddam Hussein's tyranny not only with evil, but with every known crime. Some of this was factually correct but neglected the role of the US and Europe in

fostering Saddam's rise and maintaining his power. In fact, the egregious Donald Rumsfeld visited Saddam in the early 80s, assuring him of US approval for his catastrophic war against Iran. US corporations supplied nuclear, chemical and biological materials for the supposed weapons of mass destruction and then were brazenly erased from public record.

All this was deliberately obscured by government and media in manufacturing the case for destroying Iraq. Either without proof or with fraudulent information, Saddam was accused of harbouring weapons of mass destruction seen as a direct threat to the US. The appalling consequences of the US and British intervention in Iraq are beginning to unfold, with the calculated destruction of the country's modern infrastructure, the looting of one of the world's richest civilisations, the attempt to engage motley 'exiles' plus large corporations in rebuilding the country, and the appropriation of its oil and its modern destiny. It's been suggested that Ahmad Chalabi, for example, will sign a peace treaty with Israel, hardly an Iraqi idea. Bechtel has already been awarded a huge contract.

This is an almost total failure in democracy - ours, not Iraq's: 70 per cent of the American people are supposed to support this, but nothing is more manipulative than polls asking 465 Americans whether they 'support our President and troops in time of war'. As Senator Byrd said: 'There is a pervasive sense of rush and risk and too many questions unanswered ... a pall has fallen over the Senate Chamber. We avoid our solemn duty to debate the one topic on the minds of all Americans, even while scores of our sons and daughters faithfully do their duty in Iraq.'

I am convinced this was a rigged, unnecessary and unpopular war. The reactionary Washington institutions that spawned Wolfowitz, Perle, Abrams and Feith provide an unhealthy intellectual and moral atmosphere. Policy papers circulate without real peer review, adopted by a government requiring justification for illicit policy. The doctrine of military pre-emption was never voted on by the American people or their representatives. How can citizens stand up against the blandishments offered to the government by companies like Halliburton and Boeing? Charting a strategic course for the most lavishly endowed military establishment in history is

left to ideologically based pressure groups (eg fundamentalist Christian leaders), wealthy private foundations and lobbies like AIPAC, the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee. It seems so monumentally criminal that important words like democracy and freedom have been hijacked, used as a mask for pillage, taking over territory and settling scores. The US programme for the Arab world has become the same as Israel's. Along with Syria, Iraq once represented the only serious military threat to Israel and, therefore, it had to be smashed.

Besides, what does it mean to liberate and democratise a country when no one asked you to do it and when, in the process, you occupy it militarily while failing to preserve law and order? What a travesty of strategic planning when you assume 'natives' will welcome your presence after you've bombed and quarantined them for 13 years.

A preposterous mindset about American beneficence has infiltrated the minutest levels of the media. In writing about a 70-year-old Baghdad widow who ran a cultural centre in her home that was wrecked by US raids and who is now beside herself with rage, *New York Times* reporter Dexter Filkins implicitly chastises her for her 'comfortable life under Saddam Hussein' and piously disapproves of her tirade against the Americans, 'and this from a graduate of London University'.

Adding to the fraudulence of the weapons not found, the Stalingrads that didn't occur, the artillery defences that never happened, I wouldn't be surprised if Saddam disappeared suddenly because a deal was made in Moscow to let him, his family, and his money leave in return for the country. The war had gone badly for the US in the south, and Bush couldn't risk the same in Baghdad. On 6 April, a Russian convoy leaving Iraq was bombed; Condi Rice appeared in Russia on 7 April; Baghdad fell 9 April.

Nevertheless, Americans have been cheated, Iraqis have suffered impossibly and Bush looks like a cowboy. On matters of the gravest importance, constitutional principles have been violated and the electorate lied to. We are the ones who must have our democracy back. ■

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“The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) condemns the illegal invasion of Iraq in the clear absence of Security Council authority. This contributes a great leap backward in the international rule of law.”