

James Fallows

A war of ideals adds sting to the never-ending Iraqi tale

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Here is one way to tell the US House of Representatives from its Australian namesake: boos, hisses, and calls of "Shame" rarely ring through the Capitol in Washington. Perhaps that is because the American rhetoric is more insipid. Probably it's because fewer members pay attention to speeches other than their own.

But last week, for the first time in decades, House deliberations were suspended amid shouts of rage, after the most junior of the 435 representatives, Jean Schmidt of Ohio, essentially called one of the most senior members a "coward" for advocating a rapid withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

That member, John Murtha of Pennsylvania, is a former Marine Corps drill instructor and colonel who won medals for combat in both Korea and Vietnam and has for decades been a hawk. "The US cannot accomplish anything further in Iraq militarily," Murtha said. "This is a flawed policy wrapped in an illusion. I believe we need to turn Iraq over to the Iraqis."

The rancour last week indicated the new level of divisiveness in the US over the war. The debate so far has been bifurcated — half of it looking backwards, half looking ahead. But the theme that ties all levels of the debate together is a question of what values the US is meant to defend.

The backwards-looking part of the argument is what has most nettled the President, George Bush. It involves the suggestion that he exaggerated, distorted and in general misled the nation into war. Bush and his associates have fought this accusation bitterly. Their main claim — that all legislators, opinion makers and even the quarrelsome French were working from the same flawed findings about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction — is itself misleading.

In the year before the war, statements from Bush and especially the Vice-President, Dick Cheney, boiled down to: if you knew what we knew, you'd be just as concerned. This was the importance of Cheney's claim in August 2002 that "there can be no doubt" that Saddam Hussein "now" had stocks of weapons of mass destruction.

But on all available postwar evidence, Bush and Cheney believed the weapons warnings they issued — as well as believing what was, for them, the even stronger case for war: that by transforming Iraq into a modern democracy, they could begin reforming the entire Arab-Islamic world.

It's not working out that way so far — but the Administration is so furious about attacks on its motives precisely because, in its view, those motives were so lofty and true to its country's values.

The debate about what comes next also turns on questions of values. Through the past year, the Administration has assured Americans that their country would be able to have it both ways. It could reduce the mounting strain on its own over-extended military, to say nothing of the financial and diplomatic costs of its presence in Iraq, by fostering the growth of Iraq's new constitutional system while also training a self-sufficient Iraqi military.

And it could consider its democratising mission complete when it turned the management of the new, free Iraq over to these indigenous institutions.

This is not working out quite as planned, either. Although the difficulties with Iraq's constitutional process are obvious, they are not the real problem. Based on recent evidence (described at length in my cover story in the new issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*), Iraqi security forces are moving further from self-sufficiency, not closer.

US training tactics have improved in the past year — but Iraq's insurgency problem has become much, much worse. America's hopes today for an orderly exit from Iraq depend completely on the emergence of a viable Iraqi security force. But there is no indication that such a force is about to emerge.

Frustration, even desperation, over that stark fact helps explain the new acrimony of the US debate. And, although the argument has not yet been clearly cast this way, soon it will take form as a struggle between competing values in American foreign policy.

Does the country care more about honouring its promise to sustain a new government and create a new military — even if that means hundreds of billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of troops, through an open-ended period that will surely extend past Bush's time as President? Or does it care more about redressing the grievances — domestic and international, among its allies, within the Muslim world — created by its policy? That is the choice introduced in such noisy fashion in the Capitol five days ago.

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