

PERSPECTIVES

AFTER IRAQ

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After Iraq

Owen Harries

We are now close to the end-game in Iraq. By almost common consent, and even in the opinion of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, America's Iraq venture is a disaster. Only a few – those whose spiritual home is the last ditch, or who cannot for political reasons acknowledge what they know is true – still dispute the matter.

The disaster has a significance that reaches beyond Iraq itself, devastating as it has been for that country. It is hugely significant in terms of US policy. Exactly three years ago, in November 2003, I tried to explain why in the second of my Boyer Lectures:

“[T]he Iraq commitment has an importance that goes way beyond the fate of Iraq itself. If, in the end, it turns out successfully, it is likely that the setbacks that have occurred since the end of the heavy fighting will be seen as part of a learning experience, a breaking-in period for a new, revolutionary, strategic doctrine.

If, on the other hand, it fails at the first hurdle – if, that is, the United States finds that bringing about security, stability, a decent political order, and an improvement in the living standards of the Iraqi people, is beyond its capacity; if the whole thing becomes a ‘quagmire’then not only will there have to be a reconsideration of the whole global strategy, but the limits of the United States’ capacity will have been made evident, and the inclination to resist it greatly strengthened.”¹

¹ Owen Harries, *Benign or imperial? Reflections on American hegemony*. Boyer Lectures 2003. Sydney, ABC Books, 2004, p 29.

I spoke as a sceptical critic of the Iraq project. But *The Weekly Standard*, the influential house journal of American neo-conservatives and an ardent supporter of that project, concurred. Around the same time as I wrote those words it editorialised that:

“The future course of American foreign policy, American world leadership, and American security is at stake. Failure in Iraq would be a devastating blow to everything the United States hopes to accomplish, and must accomplish, in the decades ahead.”²

What gave the Iraq venture this significance was that it was not meant to be a singular and discrete event. Rather it represented the first application by the United States of an incredibly ambitious foreign policy doctrine. This was the Bush Doctrine, formally proclaimed in the presidential National Security Strategy of September 2002.³ It committed the United States, not only to combating terror, but to actively promoting democracy and a market economy in “every corner of the world” – that is, to transform the whole international system to conform to American values. To that end it would, where necessary, use its vast military force, not only defensively to contain and deter its adversaries, but actively, assertively and preemptively. And the document, prepared without any consultation with allies, made it clear that the United States would not hesitate to act alone if necessary.

This represented, and still does, an enormously ambitious and seriously intended project. Only someone ignorant of American history and political culture would have dismissed it as rhetoric. Americans take their doctrines seriously.

So what of the future of the Bush Doctrine now, after the fiasco and tragedy of Iraq? Does failure on its first outing spell an early grave for it, does it mean that it will have been but a brief passing episode in the history of American foreign policy?

I am not as sure about this as I seem to have been three years ago. In any case in considering these questions it is worth reflecting briefly on the circumstances and forces that gave rise to the Doctrine in the first place.

² Robert Kagan and William Kristol, Do what it takes in Iraq. *The Weekly Standard*, Vol. 8(48) 1-8 September 2003, p 7.

³ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, President of the US, 2006.

First, there was, of course, the shock of the terrorist attack of 9/11, and the tremendous sense of outrage and violation it created in a country whose mainland had not been subject to foreign attack for over a century and a half. And with the outrage came an urgent, angry demand for a decisive response.

Second, there was the fact of a new and inexperienced president having to cope with the crisis – a man who had virtually no experience in international affairs, but one who had strong convictions, including religious ones, and who tended to see things in terms of a single, sharp dichotomy, a Manichean world divided starkly into good and evil, with no middle ground. As a new man facing a major crisis he had much to prove, not least because he was the son of a president whose speciality had been foreign policy.

Third, there was the presence in and around the Bush Administration of some well placed, very articulate and intellectually persuasive neo-conservatives, with an ideological, moralistic and very assertive view of America's role in the world, and an agenda that had on it an attack on Saddam Hussein's Iraq as a priority item.

These three factors in the shaping of the Bush doctrine were undoubtedly important. But they were also transient factors, and to the extent that one focused on them one might well conclude that the impulse that created the Bush Doctrine is now due to fade.

It is, after all, over five years since 9/11 and five years is a long time in politics. Anger and passion fade. Bush is now a lame duck president, with no control over Congress and low poll ratings. And the neo-conservatives are discredited, divided and with a much reduced influence.

So does this mean the end of what the Bush Doctrine stood for? Not necessarily. For as well as these three transient factors the doctrine also represented two more enduring and fundamental features of the situation – one structural, one cultural – that will not disappear when the Iraq venture ends: America's global hegemony and American exceptionalism.

The United States went into Iraq a confident hegemon, the 'indispensable nation' without which nothing important could be done, as Madeleine Albright used to lecture the world. It will come out of it a damaged hegemon – but still a hegemon, still far and away the strongest state on earth. It will remain such for at least a couple of decades. When the weak fail, they have no option but to accept the fact and usually there are no second chances. When the very strong fail, they tend to find excuses, regroup and try again, changing their methods and their

timetable but maintaining their goals. As hegemon, the United States will still want to impose its will on the world, and that will still represent American values as well as American interests.

Which brings us to the other enduring factor, a cultural one: American exceptionalism, the strange term used to identify the profound belief widely held by Americans since their beginning as a nation that it is their historical – indeed their divinely ordained – destiny to be, in the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, “tutors of mankind in its pilgrimage to perfection”⁴ – or in the words of President Woodrow Wilson, that Americans are divinely “chosen to show the nations of the world how they shall walk in the paths of liberty”. However condescending and presumptuous others may find this conviction, it is deeply held and as natural to Americans as apple pie. It will certainly survive the Iraq experience.

So what is likely to happen to American foreign policy post-Iraq? In my view there will not be anything like a 180 degree or even a 90 degree change of course, but there will be significant adjustments and alterations as certain lessons of recent experience and the validity of the realist critique of that experience are acknowledged. Among the lessons, I suggest, will be these:

- While the US military has tremendous destructive capacity in war, its constructive uses, and its capacity for anything resembling “nation building”, are quite limited.
- Largely because it is a huge, self-absorbed country with a strong commitment to its own values, the American capacity for understanding and interacting with other cultures, particularly non-Western ones, is not impressive. It is a common and profound mistake to think that all other peoples want the same things, have the same priorities, as Americans have. Differences of cultures and circumstances matter. (On this, instead of consulting Bill Kristol, the influential neo-con editor of *The Weekly Standard* and one of the principal supporters of the Bush Doctrine, consult his distinguished father, Irving Kristol, who once expressed the view that: “there are many nations where the American ideal of self-government in liberty is simply irrelevant. In those cases we simply have to accept that fact, while using our influence to encourage a little movement in the direction of political decency, as we understand it.”) For utopian bliss substitute a little common decency.

⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The irony of American history*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962.

- Even the most powerful need the support of others. If you need and want that support, and you do, consult them before you set out on a grand project, not late in the game when you are in difficulties. If you accept former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's dictum that "the worst thing you can do is allow a coalition to determine what your mission is"⁵, be prepared to have a certain sense of loneliness and desertion if and when difficulties arise. To ensure support, a hegemon, however powerful, would be well advised to act as first among equals – *primus inter pares* – rather than throw its weight around and give instructions.
- Pre-emptive or preventative wars, if engaged in at all (and they may sometimes be necessary) need to be short, quick and not very costly in blood and treasure. The American people will not support protracted and expensive conflicts that are not clearly defensive responses to aggression and/or serious provocation. That includes "humanitarian wars".
- The grander and more sweeping the goals of a political enterprise, the greater the likelihood of unintended consequences and consequently a loss of control.
- If you destroy an existing order, you are saddled with mess and the responsibility for putting something workable in its place. As former Secretary of State Colin Powell succinctly put it to President George W. Bush before Iraq, quoting the warning displayed in china shops: "You break it, you own it." It will be particularly important to keep this in mind in formulating policy toward Iran, a bigger country than Iraq, in the near future.
- It is prudent not to allow too blatant a discrepancy to develop between your ends and means. The moral costs of doing so are likely to come high. Thus if you claim to be promoting freedom, democracy and the rule of law, it will be dangerous to your image and credibility to engage in torture, or "extraordinary rendition", or to violate *habeas corpus*. The more elevated your moral claims, the more blatant the discrepancy.
- The claim that double standards in one's favour are justified – a claim often made by neo-conservatives – fits badly with claims of moral superiority. To say that I am justified in behaving worse than you because I am morally superior to you does not really carry conviction.
- In considering the extent to which other countries should trust America to use its vast power in a non-threatening way, Americans should consider the extent to which they

⁵ Secretary Rumsfeld interview with Larry King, CNN, 5 December 2001.

themselves are prepared to trust other states, even states which have much less power than the United States. Trust is a scarce commodity in international politics.

How well these and similar lessons will be recognised and learnt in the near future, I do not know. On the one hand, America has in the past been quick to correct its errors and to be impressive on the rebound. It may turn out that this was the failure that the United States had to have in order to bring its hubris under control – after all, think where we might be now if Iraq had been a walk in the park, a quick and easy success. What might the Bush Administration have been determined to take on in that event?

On the other hand, there is little reason to place great faith in the Democrats, who are divided and illusion prone on foreign policy.

And, of course, if there is another serious terrorist episode on American soil, something that many experts think is more than likely, all bets are off.

I'd like to turn briefly now to say something about Australia and Iraq.

If one considers the grand strategy of Australian foreign policy over the last century what strikes one is its essential simplicity and consistency. It has always consisted of allying oneself closely with a great power that is committed to preserving the existing international order against those who want to change it radically.

For the first forty years of Australia's existence that power was Great Britain. After 1941 it was for a period Great Britain and the United States. For the last half century it has been the United States. Between them those states strove to maintain the international status quo against those revisionist states – Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union – who sought to change it radically.

This policy may not always have satisfied the Australian sense of independence and pride – “All the way with LBJ” was not after all an inspiring cry with which to send Australian men off to war – but in realist terms it made good sense. Australia was and is a satisfied, status quo state. A huge, well-endowed country with a population of only 20 million, it has a lot more than its share of the world's good things. It does not want that state of affairs to change. It can not sensibly hope to get even more than it has got, but upheaval and turbulence could easily result in its having less. So aligning itself with the leading status quo countries made good realist sense. The fact that Australia shared certain important values and institutions with

those countries made that a very acceptable and congenial policy, an easy one to explain and defend in the non-realist terms that many preferred.

When, on the day after 9/11, Prime Minister John Howard promised full Australian support for the United States, even before he knew what the policy response of that country would be, he was being true to that tradition. Howard had no great experience in foreign policy, no desire to be an innovator. He merely walked an established path. Or so he assumed.

But there was one fundamental thing that Howard did not anticipate: that, with the Bush Doctrine (not yet enunciated when he made his promise) the United States was about to change from being a status quo power to a revolutionary one, solemnly and seriously committed to changing the world radically. Howard committed Australia to going along with the first manifestation of that commitment, the invasion of Iraq. As a result, Australia, a quintessential satisfied country, has found itself engaged in an ideological war against a country that, however vile its regime, did not in any way threaten us or the international status quo – and was, as we now know, our best wheat customer.

An alternative interpretation is that Howard did indeed understand the direction in which US policy was moving, but that he was so convinced of the effectiveness of US power that he assumed that the whole Iraq venture would be so quick and easy that the rewards for Australia – praise and appreciation in Washington, a free trade agreement – would easily outweigh the costs. In either case it was, in my opinion, an example of misplaced realism. And in either case it is extremely dubious whether uncritical, loyal support for a bad, failed American policy will have enhanced our standing as an ally in the long run. A reputation for being dumb but loyal and eager is not one to be sought.

As far as Australia's participation in the war has been concerned, there has been a marked discrepancy between the rhetoric and the commitment. The rhetoric has insisted that the stakes are high and the issues vital. "Our very freedom is at stake," declaimed Foreign Minister Alexander Downer in a speech earlier this year. But our military commitment in Iraq has been extremely modest – some 700-800 personnel on the ground. And not only are the numbers small but Australian forces have not been deployed where the action is hottest, where the Americans have been taking serious losses and the British significant ones. Indeed, this may well be the first war in which Australian forces have been engaged in which they end up not suffering a single battleground fatality.

This undoubtedly makes it easier for government spokesmen to scorn “cutting and running” and failing to “stay the course”. Such sentiments would be harder to express were there significant Australian losses. To take the ultimate example, no one spoke scornfully of “cut and run” when the withdrawal from Gallipoli occurred, after it had become clear that the venture had failed. There is nothing shameful about recognising the fact and acting appropriately when failure has occurred, as it surely has in Iraq. The shame, if any, attaches to the original bad policies, not to the withdrawal. There is plenty of scope for discussion as to what is the best course of action, the order and tempo of events, but simply yelling “No cut and run” and having no apparent plan for ending one’s participation in the business, beyond making our decision entirely dependent on the decision of an inept and demoralised Bush Administration, is surely a pathetic sign of political and intellectual bankruptcy.

The US-Australia alliance will endure, both because it serves real interests and because the need for a “great and powerful friend” is deeply embedded in the Australian psyche. But for a middle power to maintain successfully a close relationship with a superpower is not an easy business. When that superpower is the only one in the world – the global hegemon – it is harder still. And when the hegemon is badly rattled and internally divided by a recent failure, it is going to be even more difficult.

The relationship is inherently unequal and there is always the danger for the weaker party of becoming so enmeshed in the affairs of the senior partner as to lose its autonomy. Nothing comes for free: privileged access to intelligence; participation in contingency planning; interoperability in weapon systems – all these bind one closer. And the desire to be liked can come to take precedence over the insistence on being respected. Saying “no”, however politely, can get to be hard.

It may seem to be odd to speak in these terms during the tenure of John Howard, one of the most tough-minded politicians Australia has ever produced. But Howard came to foreign policy late. It is not his *métier*. He is approaching the end of his career, seeks and enjoys international recognition, and the seductive power of Washington and the White House are considerable.

In any case I believe that the days when Australian foreign policy was a relatively simple affair are coming to an end. Dealing with an unsettled superpower ally, while simultaneously adjusting to the rising importance of China as a regional power and a trading partner, is going to require skills that Australia has not had much cause to practise until now.

Let me end by reminding you that exactly fifty years ago another great crisis – and consequent fiasco – occurred in world politics: the Suez Crisis. During it the United States managed to humiliate both its major allies, causing them to abort their attack on Egypt and orchestrating their humiliation at the UN.

A British minister, Anthony Nutting, who resigned over the issue, wrote a book about it, calling it *No End of a Lesson*. But different countries learned different lessons: France, never to trust America again; Britain, never to cross America again. Both lessons were too extreme.

Every alliance requires a degree of trust. It also requires discrimination and balance – and a touch of scepticism. What Australia must learn from the Iraq experience is that it should not commit itself to marching in lock-step with anyone – let alone a superpower which is simultaneously committed to an incredibly ambitious program of global change, deeply divided domestically, and has the most inept president since Warren G. Harding in its White House.

It must learn to be as good an ally as it can be while maintaining its freedom of choice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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