Owen Harries
Costs of a needless war
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The lesson of Iraq, argues Owen Harries, is that deterrence still works against states in the post-9/11 era and that Washington's ready resort to force carries a lot of adverse consequences at home and abroad.

At the risk of being labelled a male chauvinist, I wish to point out that two of the most unfortunate -- and dangerous -- political comments made over recent decades have been made by women: Madeleine Albright and Margaret Thatcher.

Start with the former. In 1994, Albright -- the then US ambassador to the UN, past professor of international affairs, future US secretary of state -- asked an astonished General Colin Powell ("I thought I would have an aneurysm") a question: "What is the point of having this superb military that you're always talking about if we can't use it?"

Whether the question was genuine or rhetorical, Powell had every right to be startled, for it was an amazing one for a person of Albright's background to have posed. Because for the previous half century her country had followed a policy that demonstrated powerfully the wisdom of having immense military power and not using it.

That policy was called "deterrence", and its very point was to make recourse to the actual use of force unnecessary. It was brilliantly successful. It saw the US, and the world, through several tense decades without disaster and led finally to the collapse of America's adversary. (The most serious US setback during these years occurred when it did resort to committing its military force actively in Vietnam.)

In response to all this, and in support of Albright and the legion of others who have more recently advocated the energetic use of the US's military might, it could be argued (and has been in the US official document, The National Security Strategy of the United States) that that was then and this is now. There is no longer a threatening (but rational) adversary that should be (and could be) deterred; there are only fanatical terrorist organisations, which cannot be deterred but which should be (and can be) destroyed.

There is some truth in this, but it is very important to establish its limits. Yes, after 9/11 al-Qa'ida had to be hunted down and destroyed, and that hunt should continue until Osama bin Laden is either captured or killed.

But there is no reason to believe that Iraq could not have been dissuaded from using its (as it happens, non-existent) weapons of mass destruction by a policy of deterrence. Saddam Hussein was a vile and cruel tyrant, but he was not a suicidal fanatic and he did possess vulnerable fixed assets.

It is still a fundamental strategic axiom that the availability of means should not determine ends, and there are very powerful reasons why the US, even

as the "sole remaining superpower", should be very parsimonious in using its military force actively.

One is that it is only thus that it can preserve the invaluable mystique of its military power. Consider the prestige that US military had in the year 2000 and compare it with its standing now. Then, US military power was universally considered to be awesome in its scope and irresistible in its application.

Today, after its deployment in Iraq, the world is much more aware of its limitations and less impressed: aware that while it has an enormous capacity to crush and destroy, its ability to control, to impose and maintain order is far less; that while its technology is superb, the human resources at its disposal for protracted occupation or multiple engagements is seriously limited, and the quality of its civilian and military leadership questionable.

The US's military prestige -- and therefore its ability to impose its will without recourse to force -- has been seriously diminished by Iraq. This will encourage rather than deter its potential enemies.

A second reason why the US should be extremely reluctant to share Albright's enthusiasm for the ready use of force is that its internal consequences are almost certain to be adverse.

American wars that result from anything less than a direct attack on the US, and which continue for any length of time, are more than likely to divide the country bitterly.

This happened in the case of Vietnam and it is happening now. The army and even the marines are finding it difficult to attract recruits, and have found it necessary to compel soldiers to stay in the service beyond the terms of their contracts.

Barry McCaffrey, a well-informed and, up to now, dedicated supporter of the war, has recently maintained: "The US Army and the marines are too under-manned and under-resourced to sustain this security policy beyond next [autumn]. They are starting to unravel."

But these are not the only adverse consequence of a ready resort to the use of military force, not at least in the eyes of those who are hostile to big government. For one of the consequences of war is that it inevitably increases the scope and power of the central government responsible for waging it.

It is one of the internal contradictions of American neo-conservatism that it simultaneously pursues a domestic policy that seeks to reduce the scope of government and a foreign policy that is bound to increase it.

Today we are witnessing in the US not only substantial increases in government expenditure, but a serious diminution of the rule of law in the form of a partial suspension of habeas corpus, a circumventing of the Geneva Convention, a justification of the use of torture, and greater secrecy.

(As I write, it is reported that the Bush administration is classifying documents at the rate of 125 a minute or, if my arithmetic is accurate, 180,000 a day!)

One last, but vital, adverse consequence of a ready resort to force by the US: It will provide an extremely unfortunate standard of acceptable behaviour for emerging great powers -- the Chinas and Indias and Pakistans and Brazils -- that will be leading players in a decade or two. Much has been written about the US's leading role as the setter of new "norms".

But what norms are being set by ventures such as Iraq and by claims to greatly expanded rights to initiate preventative or pre-emptive war? And how much will they come home to haunt future generations who have to live with them?

Which brings me to the second unfortunate and potentially dangerous remark to which I referred in the introduction.

In 1980, early in her prime-ministership, Thatcher made a speech at the Conservative Party conference in which she famously said: "The lady's not for turning".

It was said in a particular context and in that context was unexceptional.

But the phrase was, with her encouragement, to become emblematic of Thatcher's whole political style, to her admirers evidence of conviction, courage and authenticity, of rising above compromise and calculation and mere "politics". It represents the qualities that make Thatcher such an idolised figure among American neo-conservatives today.

The point I wish to make is a simple one: while it may be appropriate and even admirable in a particular situation (for example, in 1940, when the stark choice was either defiance or disaster in the form of surrender to Nazi Germany), as a general approach to political action a commitment to hold undeviatingly to a line of action, regardless of circumstances or consequences, is foolish and dangerous.

Napoleon showed iron determination and undeviating dedication when he marched on Moscow.

The British generals of World War I showed the utmost steadfastness in sending men across the open fields of the Somme and into the bottomless mud of Passchendaele. Hitler was not for turning at Stalingrad.

At another level, Thatcher's own insistence on doing it her way, and her contempt for the collegiate responsibility and compromises of cabinet government, were ultimately to cause her downfall a decade after she made that remark.

Today, as President Bush insists over and over again that we must "stay the course" and "complete the mission", it is worth emphasising that the issue is not some test of character but a matter of cold political calculation. In

themselves, firm resolution and unbending determination are not political or military virtues.

Before deciding to complete what one has started, it is necessary to give serious consideration to a number of vital questions: Is the "mission" a realistic one? Is it vital for the US's (or Australia's) national interest? Do circumstances favour its completion within an acceptable time frame? How great a cost -- in terms of blood, treasure, moral standing, political reputation, alternative use of resources, domestic harmony -- does it justify? And, in the specific case of Iraq, is the mission reducing the threat of terrorism or creating its most fertile breeding ground yet?

As always in politics, circumstances are crucial. To ignore them and to insist that the mission must proceed regardless is to invite recourse to that old play on Kipling's lines: "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs, you have probably misunderstood the situation."

Indeed, prominent US Republican senator Chuck Hagel virtually said as much last month: "The White House is completely disconnected from reality. It is like they are making it up as they go along. The reality is that we are losing in Iraq."

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