

## **Don't think it's over**

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As we near the end game in Iraq, the question arises: what will be the future of the Bush doctrine? Does failure on its first outing spell an early grave for it? Does it mean that it will have been but a passing episode in the history of US foreign policy? As 9/11 recedes into history, and as George W. Bush's period in office draws to an end, are we witnessing the end of what the Bush doctrine stood for?

Not necessarily. For the doctrine represents two enduring and fundamental features of the situation -- one structural, the other cultural -- that will not disappear when the Iraq venture ends: the global hegemony of the US and American exceptionalism.

The US 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 US 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", 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 and the demise of the neo-conservatives, who are merely its latest vehicle, not its inventors.

So what is likely to happen to US 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:

\* Although the US military has tremendous destructive capacity in war, its constructive uses, and its capacity for anything resembling nation building, are -- and will remain -- 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 people want the same things and have the same priorities as Americans. 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.)

\* Even the most powerful need the support of others. If you need 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 Donald Rumsfeld's dictum that "the worst thing you can do is allow a

coalition to determine what your mission is", 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 rather than throw its weight around and issue instructions.

\* Pre-emptive or preventive 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 a loss of control.

\* If you destroy an existing order, you are saddled with the resulting mess and the responsibility for putting something workable in its place. As Colin Powell succinctly put it to 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 towards 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 be high. Thus, if you claim to be promoting freedom, democracy and the rule of law, it will be damaging 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 the US to use its vast power in a non-threatening way, Americans should consider the extent to which they are prepared to trust other states, even states that have much less power than the US.

Trust is a scarce commodity in international politics.

There is nothing particularly novel or sophisticated about these lessons. It took unusual ignorance or a gross excess of self-confidence not to be aware of them before the event.

In any case, how well these and similar lessons will be recognised and learned in the near future remains to be seen.

On the one hand, in the past the US has been quick to correct its errors and to be impressive on the rebound. Think of its quick recovery from defeat in the Vietnam War.

It may turn out that this was the failure that the US had to have to bring its hubris under control.

After all, think where we might be now if Iraq had been the anticipated cakewalk, a quick and easy success. What, by now, might the Bush administration have chosen 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 US soil, something that many experts think is more than likely, all bets are off.

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