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**Lesson in the limits of power**

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Comparisons may be odious and analogies tricky, but they are also indispensable. Which ones are chosen is a matter of some importance. In the debate on Iraq, the analogy of choice has been Vietnam. A much better one is the Suez crisis of 1956.

Consider: the dictator of a Middle East country incurs the wrath of two leading Western states. The threat he poses is grossly exaggerated and he is regularly compared with Adolf Hitler. The two states decide to take him out. They do so without consulting their main Western allies, causing a deep and angry rift between hitherto close friends. The question of UN approval assumes importance, as does that of the pre-emptive use of force.

The plan of attack involves the use of phony evidence. The implementation of the plan is strikingly inept. Popular support for the venture, initially strong, drains away. The whole episode ends with the two principal Western actors embarrassed and with their international reputation seriously damaged.

Oh yes, and at the insistence of its prime minister, Australia plays a disproportionately conspicuous role in the crisis. It enthusiastically supports the tough line, even to the point of Robert Menzies making himself available to be the principal negotiator with the dictator on behalf of the West (he is unsuccessful). Despite this loyalty, Australia is not consulted, is in fact kept in the dark about vital parts of the plans concocted by London and Paris.

The analogy is not exact, of course. Analogies never are. Britain and France did not succeed in removing Gamal Abdel Nasser, while the US did end Saddam Hussein's rule, and that is a big plus. On the other hand, the Suez crisis did not involve much bloodshed, while the present crisis has cost thousands of lives. Again, in 1956 US opposition to the Anglo-French initiative was decisive in thwarting it; in 2003-04, European opposition to the US-UK venture was troublesome for Washington but not decisive.

What the final balance of similarities and differences will be is uncertain. The Suez crisis caused the downfall of British prime minister Anthony Eden; whether in the end the Iraq crisis will destroy George W. Bush and Tony Blair remains to be seen.

Back in the more innocent days of the 1950s, the Westminster convention that if a minister strongly disagreed with government policy he would resign was still honoured. One of those who did resign over Suez was Anthony Nutting, the Foreign Office minister responsible for Middle East affairs. He subsequently wrote a book about the crisis, *No End of a Lesson*. It was a good title, for the British did indeed learn some hard truths from the episode.

It was brought home decisively to them that despite spending no less than 8 per cent of gross domestic product on defence and having conscripted military forces of 700,000, their claim to superpower status in the post-World War II world could no longer be sustained.

Very soon conscription was abolished and in little more than a decade Britain was to give up all pretence of a strategic presence east of Suez.

The second part of the lesson was spelled out by Charles Keightley, the general who had commanded the Anglo-French force in the Suez venture, when he composed the post

mortem: "It was the action of the United States which really defeated us in attaining our object. This situation with the United States must at all costs be prevented from arising again."

All subsequent British leaders have accepted that conclusion, even to the point of abandoning the traditional centrepiece of British policy: trying to create and maintain a balance against any prospective hegemon. (The French drew a different conclusion from Suez: that they should never again rely on the US.)

As well as the various similarities, there is one basic difference between the British experience of 1956 and the US experience of 2003-04. The former was the result of insufficient power, the latter of an excess of power, resulting in a hubris that combined dangerously with the profound shock of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Errors resulting from weakness are easier to identify and correct than those resulting from strength. Weakness, once recognised, leaves one with little choice but to adjust one's ambitions quickly if disaster is to be avoided. When things go wrong for the very powerful, on the other hand, there is always the inclination to blame not the unwisdom and impracticality of one's goals but the implementation of policy, or the lack of resolution and support on the part of others, or simply bad luck. Hegemons do not easily learn the lesson of modifying their ambitions. What they are most likely to conclude from failure is that they must pursue those ambitions more ardently and efficiently next time.

Conspicuous among those who will suffer politically from the Iraq episode are the second generation neo-conservatives, both inside and outside the Bush administration. It was mainly their influence that, in the space of a few months, caused the war on terror to metastasise into a commitment to remake the world in America's image. Polemically brilliant and tactically resourceful, they did not have a prudent bone in their bodies and were strategically reckless -- youngish men in a hurry, trying to get done in a year, and by the exercise of military power, what should have required at least a generation of patient, multifaceted effort to achieve.

These neo-conservatives will come out of this episode politically diminished. But the impulse they represented -- the impulse to bring American democratic and liberal values to the rest of the world -- will not die. They were merely the latest vehicle for that impulse, not its creators. The conviction that the US is destined to be the model and inspiration for the world runs deep and is as old as the country. For better or worse, it is unlikely to diminish while American power is at its zenith.

Suez forced the British to give up the pretence that they were still an authentic global power. The lesson that Iraq should teach the US is not that it should cease to be a hegemon, which is impossible, but that even the will of an authentic global hegemon will not prevail unless it is exerted with restraint, patience, a willingness to compromise and a respect for the views of other significant players.

Unless, that is, the hegemon makes a real effort to behave as a member of a concert of states. The success of the terrorists is that, by creating an understandable sense of outrage and a demand for swift retribution, they have made it much harder for Americans to accept this.

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