

POLITICS & PROSE

History's Fools

In the wake of Iraq, the term “neo-conservative” may come to mean “dangerous innocence about world realities”

by Jack Beatty

Paul Wolfowitz could not come up with the right number when he testified on Capitol Hill recently—he was off by about 30% in his estimate of the number of Americans killed in Iraq, which at this writing is 786. He's a busy man. You can't expect him to remember how many young Americans have died for the ambition of his adult life. Had he been asked what they died *for*, he would not have repeated what he told *Vanity Fair* last year. He would not have said, “For oil.” By now, on message with the rest of the administration, he'd have said, “For democracy.”

Tragically, any good the US could have obtained from bringing democracy to Iraq has been vitiated by the mayhem Wolfowitz's obsession with toppling Saddam Hussein has inflicted on the Iraqi people—the 7,000 to 10,000 civilians killed, the torture victims, the populace so brutalized and humiliated by an occupation to which Wolfowitz appears not to have given a thought that over 80% want us out *now*. And those are just the short-term, intra-Iraq harms. Long-term, according to the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Joseph Biden, US interests in the Middle East have been set back a decade by Abu Ghraib.

Shortly after September 11, Sir Michael Howard, the British military historian, issued what sounded then like an apocalyptic warning: that in the context of the “war of civilizations” between radical Islam and the West a US occupation of Iraq would be tantamount to a nuclear exchange between the superpowers during the Cold War. It sounds like realism now. The fallout from the photographs will poison Muslim minds against the US, and possibly against democracy, throughout this century. Before the war, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak cautioned that a US invasion of Iraq would create “a hundred Bin Ladens.” That is likely to prove a conservative estimate.

As for US credibility beyond the Middle East, a friend writes: “I'm guessing that another result of this adventure is that much of the world will now see us as a paper tiger (which has both good and bad aspects). After seeing how incapable we are, with our 135,000-man army, of dealing even with a weak, backward little country like Iraq, is any heavily armed tyrant quaking in his boots? All we can do is blow up things. Don't our hinted warnings to China (China!) about Taiwan sound hollow now? If China decides to take Taiwan, we will . . . what? Send Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle over there with a company of Marines?”

Paradoxically, the very scale of the debacle in Iraq may yield one long-term good: the repudiation of neo-conservative “democratic imperialism.” The Americans killed in Iraq will not have died in vain if their sacrifice keeps other Americans from dying in neo-con wars to “remediate” Syria, Iran, or North Korea. After Iraq, “neo-conservative” may achieve the resonance of “isolationist” after World War II—a term of opprobrium for a discredited approach to foreign policy, shorthand for dangerous innocence about world realities. Like the isolationists, the neo-cons are history's fools. The strategy they championed was the wrongest possible strategy for the wrongest possible moment in the wrongest possible region of the world.

History showed what worked against threatening states—containment and deterrence. Behind them, confident of the melting power of its way of life, the West waited out Soviet Communism. Containment had its critics—a wing of the Republican Party demanded a “rollback” of Soviet power from Eastern Europe. The neo-cons are the heirs of rollback. They ditched the strategy that worked against a nuclear-armed super-

power to launch a pre-emptive war against a toothless Iraq, which has been contained and deterred—and disarmed—since the Gulf War. They identified the wrong enemy (a state), attacked it for the wrong reasons (WMD), and in a way that strengthened our real enemy, the transnational terrorists of September 11. America has made mistakes in foreign policy, but nothing compares to this. In the larger context of the Cold War, Vietnam made a kind of sense. In the context of the struggle against Islamist terrorism, Iraq is an act of self-sabotage. Of the neo-cons and their neo-con war Auden might have written: “Intellectual disgrace stares from every human face.”

Last week, on the NPR public affairs program *On Point*, Ian Lustig, a Middle East scholar, saw another filament of hope emerging from the ruin of Iraq: The US may be so desperate to recoup a measure of good will in the Arab world that it will force a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians.

The outlines of a two-state solution were agreed upon by former Israeli government officials and moderate Palestinians at Geneva last year. Secretary of State Powell welcomed their initiative. But progress toward peace cannot happen so long as Ariel Sharon’s Likud Party remains in power in Israel. President Bush’s father helped bring down an earlier Likud government by withholding aid. The issue was the building of more Israeli settlements on the West Bank. The settlements remain the issue on which the US still has leverage and over which it still has responsibility, and, along with Palestinian terrorism (over which we have neither control nor responsibility) they are the roadblock on the “road map” to a two-state solution.

On the settlements US and Likud interests diverge. President Bush betrayed the national interest in abandoning thirty-five years of US policy toward the settlements to appease Ariel Sharon—and win Jewish votes in Florida. It is hard to imagine a second Bush Administration reversing course and even harder to imagine John Kerry facing down a vital part of the Democratic coalition to force Israelis to choose between the settlements that have brought them so much suffering and continued US aid. But desperation brings clarity. National crisis can override special-interest politics. Israel could still build its wall—only *within* its pre-1967 borders. Perhaps a Palestinian state on contiguous territory on the West Bank, its people barred from work in Israel, its economy petrified, would confront its Islamist terrorists. But even if it did not, “Fortress Israel” would be as secure behind its wall as its history with the Palestinians will permit. And the US would have taken the one step, perhaps the only step it can take now, to tamp down the fury of the Arab street, to deny a propaganda instrument to the denizens of the Arab “basement” itching to perpetrate a new September 11, and to strengthen the forces of reform in the Arab world. If there is a path to democracy in the Middle East, it begins in Jerusalem, not Baghdad.