

EDITORIAL

The Disaster of Failed Policy

By Michael Kinsley

In its scale and intent, President Bush's war against Iraq was something new and radical: a premeditated decision to invade, occupy and topple the government of a country that was no imminent threat to the United States. This was not a handful of GIs sent to overthrow Panamanian thug Manuel Noriega or to oust a new Marxist government in tiny Grenada. It was the dispatch of more than 100,000 U.S. troops to implement Bush's post-Sept. 11 doctrine of preemption, one whose dangers President John Quincy Adams understood when he said the United States "goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy."

In the case of Vietnam, the U.S. began by assisting a friendly government resisting communist takeover in a civil war, though the conflict disintegrated into a failure that still haunts this country. The 1991 Persian Gulf War, under Bush's father, was a successful response to Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait—and Bush's father deliberately stopped short of toppling Saddam Hussein and occupying Iraq.

The current president outlined a far more aggressive policy in a speech to the West Point graduating class in 2002, declaring that in the war on terror "we must take the battle to the enemy" and confront threats *before* they emerge. The Iraq war was intended as a monument to his new Bush Doctrine, which also posited that the U.S. would take what help was available from allies but would not be held back by them. It now stands as a monument to folly.

The planned transfer Wednesday of limited sovereignty from the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority to an interim Iraqi government occurs with U.S. influence around the world at a low point and insurgent violence in Iraq reaching new heights of deadliness and coordination. Important Arab leaders this month rejected a U.S. invitation to attend a summit with leaders of industrialized nations. The enmity between Israelis and Palestinians is fiercer than ever, their hope for peace dimmer. Residents of the Middle East see the U.S. not as a friend but as an imperial power bent on securing a guaranteed oil supply and a base for U.S. forces. Much of the rest of the world sees a bully.

The War's False Premises

All the main justifications for the invasion offered beforehand by the Bush administration and its supporters—weapons of mass destruction, close ties between Al Qaeda and Iraq, a chance to make Baghdad a fountain of democracy that would spread through the region—turned out to be baseless.

Weeks of suicide car bombings, assassinations of political leaders and attacks on oil pipelines vital to the country's economy have preceded the handover.

On Thursday alone, car bombs and street fighting in five cities claimed more than 100 lives. Iraqis no longer fear torture or death at the hands of Hussein's brutal thugs, but many fear leaving their homes because of the violence.

The U.S. is also poorer after the war, in lives lost, billions spent and terrorists given new fuel for their rage. The initial fighting was easy; the occupation has been a disaster, with Pentagon civilians arrogantly ignoring expert advice on the difficulty of the task and necessary steps for success.

Two iconic pictures from Iraq balance the good and the dreadful—the toppling of Hussein's statue and a prisoner crawling on the floor at Abu Ghraib prison with a leash around his neck. Bush landed on the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln in May 2003 to a hero's welcome and a banner declaring "Mission Accomplished."

A year later, more than 90% of Iraqis want the U.S. to leave their country. The president boasted in July that if Iraqi resistance fighters thought they could attack U.S. forces, “bring them on.” Since then, more than 400 personnel have been killed by hostile fire.

Iraqis hope, with little evidence, that the transfer of limited sovereignty to an interim government will slow attacks on police, soldiers and civilians. Another goal, democracy, is fading. The first concern remains what it should have been after the rout of Hussein’s army: security. The new Iraqi leaders are considering martial law, an understandable response with suicide bombings recently averaging about one a day but a move they could hardly enforce with an army far from rebuilt.

The new government also faces the difficulty of keeping the country together. In the north, the Kurds, an ethnically separate minority community that had been persecuted by Hussein, want at least to maintain the autonomy they’ve had for a decade. The Sunnis and Shiites distrust each other. Within the Shiite community, to which the majority of Iraqis belong, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani and the violent Muqtada Sadr are opponents. Sadr was a relatively minor figure until occupation officials shut his party’s newspaper in March and arrested one of his aides, setting off large protests and attacks on U.S. troops.

The U.S. carries its own unwelcome legacies from the occupation:

- Troops are spending more time in Iraq than planned because about one-quarter of the Army is there at any one time. National Guard and Army Reserve forces are being kept on active duty longer than expected, creating problems at home, where the soldiers’ jobs go unfilled and families go without parents in the home.
- The Abu Ghraib prison scandal has raised questions about the administration’s willingness to ignore Geneva Convention requirements on treatment of prisoners. Investigations of prisons in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay must aim at finding out which high-ranking officers approved of the abuse or should have known of it. The U.S. also must decide what to do with prisoners of war. The Geneva Convention requires they be released when the occupation ends unless they have been formally charged with a crime. The International Committee of the Red Cross says fewer than 50 prisoners have been granted POW status. Thousands more detained as possible security threats also should be released or charged.
- The use of private contractors for military jobs once done by soldiers also demands closer examination. Civilians have long been employed to feed troops and wash uniforms, but the prevalence of ex-GIs interrogating prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison raises harsh new questions. For instance, what, if any, charges could be brought against them if they were found complicit in mistreatment?

Investigate the Contracts

The administration also put private U.S. contractors in charge of rebuilding Iraq. Congress needs to take a much closer look at what they do and how they bill the government.

Halliburton is the best-known case, having won secret no-bid contracts to rebuild the country. A Pentagon audit found “significant” overcharges by the company, formerly headed by Vice President Dick Cheney; Halliburton denies the allegations.

Iraqis say they want the Americans out, but most understand they will need the foreign forces for many more months. A U.S. troop presence in Iraq should not be indefinite, even if the Iraqis request it. By the end of 2005, Iraq should have enough trained police, soldiers, border guards and other forces to be able to defend the country and put down insurgencies but not threaten neighboring countries.

The Bush administration should push NATO nations to help with the training. Once the Iraqis have a new constitution, an elected government and sufficient security forces, the U.S. should withdraw its troops. That does not mean setting a definite date, because the U.S. cannot walk away from what it created. But it should set realistic goals for Iraq to reach on its own, at which time the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad becomes just another diplomatic outpost. It also means living up to promises to let Iraq choose its own government, even well short of democracy.

France, Germany and others that opposed the war seem to understand that letting Iraq become a failed state, an Afghanistan writ large, threatens them as well as the U.S. and the Middle East. But other nations will do little to help with reconstruction if Iraq remains a thinly disguised fiefdom where U.S. companies get billion-dollar contracts and other countries are shut out.

A Litany of Costly Errors

The missteps have been many: listening to Iraqi exiles like Ahmad Chalabi who insisted that their countrymen would welcome invaders; using too few troops, which led to a continuing crime wave and later to kidnappings and full-blown terror attacks. Disbanding the Iraqi army worsened the nation's unemployment problem and left millions of former soldiers unhappy—men with weapons. Keeping the United Nations at arm's length made it harder to regain assistance when the need was dire.

It will take years for widely felt hostility to ebb, in Iraq and other countries. The consequences of arrogance, accompanied by certitude that the world's most powerful military can cure all ills, should be burned into Americans' memory banks.

Preemption is a failed doctrine. Forcibly changing the regime of an enemy that posed no imminent threat has led to disaster. The U.S. needs better intelligence before it acts in the future. It needs to listen to friendly nations. It needs humility.