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Canada Got it Right on Iraq

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Rarely in life, is a decision so quickly and thoroughly vindicated as Canada's decision to opt out of the war in Iraq. A year later, the stated *casus belli* has evaporated. No weapons of mass destruction have been found despite the best efforts of 1600 American weapons inspectors with free rein. No connection to Al Qaeda has been established. No persuasive argument endures about the urgency of the U.S. need to act. It is no clearer today what Washington's purposes were in invading Iraq than it was a year ago.

A year ago in New York, I led a Canadian effort to find a compromise between the U.S., in its determined march to war, and others, in fact the great majority of others, equally determined to give the U.N. weapons inspectors more time to do their jobs. The substance of the compromise consisted of setting a series of steps to test Iraqi cooperation, on a pass or fail basis, and a limited time-frame within which to assess Iraqi compliance. We knew the odds were long against selling the compromise but we believed the consequences of a war made the effort mandatory. Many, including members of the so-called coalition of the willing, encouraged us to persevere. There is little doubt that it would have been in everyone's interests, especially Washington's interests, to have accepted the compromise. In the end, the horses would not drink. The war proceeded, with consequences that the world is still trying to calculate.

The most obvious consequence is that the U.S. and its posse are caught in a morass. They cannot end the occupation precipitously without triggering a civil war and undoing the good they have done in removing Saddam Hussein. But they cannot stay in Iraq without losing more soldiers and more money. Echoes of Vietnam. Meanwhile, the Iraqi toll also rises. As one Arab Ambassador at the United Nations put it, the Americans have swallowed a razor and nothing they do now will be painless or cost-free.

The cost to American interests extends well beyond Iraq. In December, the U.S. Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, headed by

former U.S. Ambassador to Israel and to Syria Edward Djerejian, reported that “the bottom has indeed fallen out of support for the United States”. According to a poll released this week by the Pew Research Centre, international discontent with the United States and its foreign policy has intensified rather than diminished since last year. In some Muslim countries, support for the U.S. is in the single digits. Pew found little change in the overwhelmingly negative attitudes of countries towards the Iraq war. In Britain, support has plummeted from 61 percent a year ago to 43 percent now. Two-thirds of Canadians believe that President Bush “knowingly lied to the world” about Iraq.

Nor are all the critics foreign. The war, according to a report of the U.S. Army War College, was a strategic error, a distraction from the war on terrorism. Beyond the neo-cons, few see terrorism as monolithic. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace found that Weapons of Mass Destruction were not an immediate threat, inspections were working, the terrorism connection was missing and war was not the best or only option.

Most of the extraordinary foreign disaffection with the United States can be traced to U.S. foreign policy, rather than to the U.S. per se. The world respects the United States for its economic, technological and cultural successes. The world respects the U.S. for its decisive roles in the Second World War, in defeating Soviet Communism and in preserving stability among China, Japan, Russia and the Koreans in the strategically precarious north-west Pacific.

But an equally long list of errors can also be readily drawn from U.S. foreign policy, from overthrowing the democratically-elected government of Mossadegh in Iran in the 50’s (for which we all are still paying), to Cuba in the 60’s, Chile and Vietnam in the 70’s, Iraq in the 80’s and Afghanistan (including supporting the Taliban and Al Qaeda) in the 90’s. The United States has not, Secretary of State Colin Powell’s assertions on the eve of the war notwithstanding, earned the world’s trust.

What lessons should Canada learn from the Iraq experience? First and foremost that values matter in foreign policy. Reduced to its basics, participation in the Iraq war would have meant sending young Canadians to kill, and be killed by, young Iraqis for the sake of maintaining friendly relations with Washington.

Second, going along to get along has never made good public policy, or good politics, either. The Canadian government looked at the evidence Washington presented and voted its conscience. Another government, the Spanish, looked at the

same evidence, and voted its interests, specifically its interests with Washington. One is in office and the other is not.

Third, the Iraq war demonstrates the limits of intelligence. The U.S. administration and others made intelligence pivotal to their decision-making. The Canadian government used it as one input among many. One government is embarrassed and the other is not. Time, and enquiries, will tell whether the intelligence in the U.S., and U.K., was just catastrophically bad, politically manipulated, or both.

Fourth, Canada does not have to choose between the United Nations and the U.S. To be respected in Washington, we need to be effective in the world, including at the U.N. The converse is also true; effectiveness in New York depends on visible influence in Washington.

Finally, we should not shrink from disagreeing with American administrations when they are wrong any more than we should shrink from agreeing with them when they are right. We should call them as we see them. We did so on Iraq, and we have been vindicated.

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