

Was War Worth the Costs, by Paul Heinbecker*

As the stated *casus belli* on Iraq evaporates into the dry desert air, human security arguments are increasingly marshalled to justify the war. ¹ That the intelligence about weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and terrorism was either catastrophically wrong or deliberately manipulated or both is said not to have mattered. Getting rid of Saddam Hussein and ending the killings and brutality mattered. However appealing this argument is, and though the purposes of some of the people who make it are entirely honourable, it is, nonetheless, not the end of the story.

In the first place, motives make a difference, above all when it comes to war and its irrevocable acts. The human security objectives of the invasion were clearly an afterthought. The 2003 State of the Union speech dwelt at length on WMD and terrorism, alluded to the nuclear danger and implied a gathering threat. It was virtually silent on saving Iraqi citizens. The same week, in the U.N. Security Council, the world was invited to accept a very extensive American bill of particulars against Iraq, little or none of which has been, and in all probability ever will be, corroborated. Almost nothing was said about saving Iraqis.

Nevertheless, was the war worth it to liberate the Iraqis? There is every reason to believe reports coming out of Iraq of schools being rebuilt, councils being elected, newspapers opening and life improving, albeit in the face of a still dangerous political and personal security situation. The Iraqis themselves seem to think they are better off, to the extent that polls conducted in the midst of an occupation are reliable. But the opinions of the Iraqis whose views on such a question matter most could not be polled. They are among the estimated 10,000 people who were killed in the course of the invasion and since.

Even humanitarian motives for war have to meet reasonable precautionary tests. As Kenneth Roth, the head of Human Rights Watch and a former federal prosecutor for the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York and the Iran-Contra investigation in Washington, has written "to justify the extraordinary remedy of military force for preventive humanitarian purposes, there must be evidence that large-scale slaughter is in preparation and about to begin unless militarily stopped. No one seriously claimed before the war, however, that the Saddam Hussein government was planning imminent mass killing, and no evidence has emerged that it was." *** Responding militarily to still horrific but lower levels of violence requires grisly judgements about whether doing so would make things better or worse for the citizenry.

Attacking Saddam to prevent large scale slaughter would have been justified on humanitarian grounds on at least two earlier occasions, when he gassed the Kurds in 1988 and when he suppressed the Shiites at the end of the 1991 Gulf war. Waiting a decade to react to these atrocities, however, calls into question any humanitarian motive for the action. Furthermore, there is no statute of limitations on these crimes against humanity. Had Saddam, like Milosevic and some of the Khmer Rouge, eventually fallen into willing hands he would have been prosecuted. In the meantime, he was progressively disarmed and effectively contained.

The implications of the Iraq war for U.S. credibility are serious, as they are for coalition partners. 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 a couple of weeks ago by the Pew Research Center, 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 single digits. This is more than just transitory unpopularity, the necessary price to be paid for success in an unpopular but important cause. The United States cannot win its war against al Qaeda and the metastasizing terrorist network without the cooperation of many others. When motives are doubted, cooperation becomes scarce.

Nor is all the questioning all being done by foreigners. A recent report of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace found that war was not the best or only option. A report published recently by the US Army War College argued among other things that the invasion of Iraq was a strategic error and a distraction in the war on terrorism. The latter is, also, the view of the former counter-terrorism head of successive U.S. governments, a member of the Bush White House and the man who actually directed the U.S. response on 9/11, Richard Clark.

The negative consequences of the war are not particular or exclusive to the U.S. and its partners. Two key objectives of successive Canadian, and until now, American, governments have been damaged, international law and the U.N. Further, the ex post facto humanitarian justification for the war, and the chaotic aftermath, may tragically have made military force more difficult to use in the future to protect the innocent. And certainly not the least worrying consequence is the prospect that the Iraq war may have created a thousand Bin Ladens, as President Mubarak of Egypt warned it would. All of these consequences and more will have to be part of the eventual judgement whether this entirely elective war was worth it.

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