

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

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**EDITOR: John O'Sullivan**

- 1615 L Street, N.W. • Suite 1230 • Washington, D.C. 20036 •
- (202) 467-4884 • Fax (202) 467-0006 • *editor@nationalinterest.org* •

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## Strengthening the Fainthearts

John Hillen

WASHINGTON loves to panic over impending snowstorms, ongoing heat waves, the Redskins' playoff chances, and policy implications. The panic has set in on Iraq because American policy there carries enough of a whiff of incoherence about it not only to embolden critics, but cause formerly stalwart supporters to express doubts. It's one thing when Senator Ted Kennedy or Susan Sontag uses the Abu Ghraib prison scan-

dal to argue for moral equivalence between the Bush Administration and Saddam Hussein's regime. It is another when conservative allies (of all flavors) start deserting President George W. Bush in his moment of need.

They have reasonable concerns. Is the United States attempting to achieve a utopian end with a very limited set of means (with the ties between the two not patently obvious or frequently articul-

ed)? The tactics vary enough to give the impression of convenience (we use agents of the Hussein regime in Fallujah but do the dirty work ourselves in Karbala) rather than well-thought out operational flexibility. The CPA/Pentagon arrangement about who is in charge of what and answers to whom violates the age-old dictate, “if you can’t explain the chain of command in ten seconds or less it won’t work in a crisis.” The only Iraqi ally almost any American can name has just been dropped, and the rest appear incapable of accomplishing much of anything outside their tribe or ethnic group. Finally, the mounting sacrifice incurred in blood and treasure appears to many Americans as if it might be suffered in vain if we fail, run, or soldier on to no certain end.

President Bush’s Army War College speech of May 24, 2004, was an important political finger in the dike. While there was very little that was new in the way of policy, and the detailed issues that have bedeviled this occupation were not addressed, it did show him engaged and resolute. Even so, the timing of the speech—coming as it did to choke down the rising panic—seemed determined by media cycles, flustered political allies and the relentless election year polling calendar. Moreover, the Bush Administration has let its supporters flounder and discern on their own where the Administration’s ideology ends and the policy begins. Senator Dick Lugar’s recent complaint about Iraq policy was not one of reproach and alternative, but confusion.

By responding to these cycles, rather than setting its own, the Bush Administration has let three very important issues become obscured—all of which can be rescued by an appeal to that most durable American political quality: old-

fashioned horse sense. Americans would rally around the president if the Administration would tone down the utopian neoconish rhetoric and take care to point out the enduring value of what we have achieved in Iraq, the practical plan for getting out and leaving a better place behind, and the continuing utility of the Bush Doctrine in the age of terror.

Surprisingly, the administration has not been effective in reinforcing just what a gift it bestowed on Iraq, the Persian Gulf region and the world by removing Saddam Hussein. Prison scandals, continued small numbers of casualties and sporadic civil unrest in Iraq cannot diminish the abiding benefit of this feat. One can argue without end about whether this was a war of choice or war of necessity, a legitimate *casus belli* or a rogue strike, but the utilitarian fact remains: Almost every single soul on the globe is better off in a world without

*A holistic approach to the root causes of global terrorism should be an important part of American strategy.*

Saddam Hussein than with him. This is not disputed—even by those who use the frequently heard but careless argument, “I too think Saddam needed to go, but only at no cost.” The Bush Administration should have no truck with that shameful dodge and ought to beat its chest about this contribution to humanity and global security.

Indeed, the Iraq War bagged two dictators in one campaign. While Senator John Kerry chalked up Muammar Qaddafi’s dramatic surrender to the triumph of “multilateralism” and the *Washington Post* proclaimed that two decades of economic sanctions had finally broken the only man in Libya unaffected by them, practical Americans know better. Only days after Saddam was shown having his hair picked for lice by an American medic, the lion of Libya and scourge of North Africa capitulated. As Charles Krauthammer has pointed out, gangster regimes may not have much time for

American values, but they certainly understand American force. The ancillary effects of decisive American action against Saddam are worth trumpeting too.

### *Going Forward*

**P**RAGMATISM has another side: recognizing the potential mess on America's hands in Iraq. Hubris and political underselling of the costs and risks backed the Administration into a corner with fewer resources and partners than it needed; key assumptions went awry in the postwar planning; at critical points the wrong agencies and the wrong leaders were on the scene and in charge at the wrong times; and the Iraqis on whom the United States placed its hopes have been able to generate precious little legitimacy in the troubled parts of the country.

Nonetheless, a practical strategy exists for an exit that is timely, achievable and, most importantly, leaves behind an Iraq that is considerably more peaceable than the one the coalition found in March 2003. That strategy must be framed by four competing dynamics.

First, Bush must deal with the actual situation on the ground—as it is, not as one might want it to be. Second, he needs to understand not only the potential of the enormous power the United States can wield, but have a sober appreciation of its limits. Third, there must be a recognition of the inherent constraints and caprice of trying forcefully to establish a modern American-style democracy in the Middle East. Fourth, Bush must take as the starting point the obligation to Iraq and the Gulf region to leave behind a stable and sustainable regime after having removed its predecessor. What emerges is a limited role for the United States while at the same time a reduction in the expectations for Iraq from those Washington expressed a year ago, namely that the country be the insta-democracy that transforms the Arab world.

It would be wonderful, of course, if Iraq flowered into a contagious, pluralistic, free-market democracy during the U.S. military occupation. But that should not be the goal in this round of engagement. There is neither the time nor the tools (nor the climate) to do so now. Rather, the United States should seek to leave behind a fairly trim political system and an economic order that allows for most citizens to make a living. More important, the standards for order, security and a structure for economic advancement should be Iraqi standards, not American. The trains don't run on time in Iraq or the Middle East, and never have. Call it lowered standards if you will, but any system of political order that must have some guarantees of individual freedoms, representation, minority rights and economic wherewithal in Iraq must make sense to Iraqis even if they don't to Americans. While the United States has a solemn obligation to leave behind a better Iraq than the one it found, it need only do it to the standards of that country.

This sort of strategy applied to the many political, economic and social issues affecting Iraq today is neither an excuse nor a low window out of which to crawl because the going has gotten tough. Rather, it reflects a meaningful, achievable and sustainable role the United States can play in Iraq. Bush himself has realized this and struck a powerfully pragmatic note in his Army War College speech when he declared his goal to be a "representative government that protects basic rights", and stipulated that "Iraqis will raise up a government that reflects their own culture and values."

Ultimately, the United States has an "over-the-horizon" interest in Iraq—and any other country in the region, for that matter. Over time, America's military posture in the region should also take that physical form. The U.S. military is not there to police Fallujah's street corners and cares little for who runs that city or

any other in Iraq. America *does* have a powerful interest, however, in making sure whatever Iraqi government emerges is stable, unthreatening to the region, able to defend itself, mindful of the role that its oil supply plays in the global economy, respectful of the general tenets of basic human freedoms and minority rights, and unwilling to harbor or collude with terrorists. The United States must reserve the right to mobilize the international community or just itself to help assure these general conditions persist.

### *The Bush Doctrine's Utility*

THE BUSH Doctrine of preemptive action against terrorists or rogue states has come in for a beating due to the struggles of the Iraq occupation. The media have portrayed the choices in Republican foreign policy as either “Wilsonianism in combat boots” or a caricature of reflexive anti-interventionism. But the Bush Doctrine is sound if practically applied—and represents an important middle ground between neocons and Buchananites. In a world of dramatically changed threats, it is important to have a president who is entrepreneurial by nature and unafraid to confront the status-quo-worshiping tradition of caricatured Kissingerian policies. But Bush’s bold initiatives have to some degree been hijacked by the Bush Doctrine’s most enthusiastic and ideological proponents—and discredited in much of America as a result.

For these proponents, to compromise in applying the doctrine is anathema. Universal values cannot be compromised, after all; to do so would refute their universality, so it could be said. Some neoconservatives have even suggested that if our values are not fully implemented everywhere, than they are illegitimate even in our own tradition! It is hard to understand however, how the U.S. Constitution loses legitimacy after 215

years of struggle and interpretation in our own country if not implemented tomorrow, or the day after that, in Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, neoconservatives believe that the enemies America faces will grow even stronger if America does not forcefully escort them into the modern age—with all the trappings of political freedom and free-market prosperity.

Perhaps. But it is possible for Bush to apply the basic tenets of this doctrine while recognizing seriously two pragmatic considerations. First, power has limits, even American power. To recognize this, work through it, and even accommodate it in policy on occasion is not to be unpatriotic or defeatist. Second, American values do have universal appeal to some extent; nonetheless, one is not surrendering to cultural determinism or relativism to recognize that these values are not easily applied in their “pure” form on ancient or failing societies struggling with the challenges of modernity. Nor should they be. Democracy is, by its very nature, a home-grown enterprise—with all the quirks and baggage that complex societies can hang on it. There is nothing inherently wrong with societies getting to modernism in their own way and on their own pace provided that they do not threaten America or its allies’ peace along the way.

If pragmatic conservatives do not help the Bush Administration define an ideologically uninspiring but eminently practical “middle way” for the Bush Doctrine, it could end up being junked for its failure to transform the Middle East via democracy in Iraq. But the Bush Doctrine must remain.<sup>1</sup> Bush is right in recognizing that the United States cannot wait to be attacked and must have a proactive and muscular engagement with all parts of the world in the furtherance of American and global security

<sup>1</sup>See Philip Zelikow, “The Transformation of National Security”, *The National Interest* (Spring 2003), pp. 17–28.

interests. The Bush Doctrine is also correct in recognizing that a holistic approach to the root causes of global terrorism should be an important part of American strategy—and not simply be bent on the final act of capturing or killing a core group of irredeemable and apocalyptic terrorists.

But the Bush Doctrine—applied to terrorists, rogue states or even malevolent rising powers—does not require the United States to democratize the world or even small parts of the world in a generation. Iraq is an important opportunity to define the Bush Doctrine for what it is: a

cold-eyed and sober strategy to protect American interests, guard allies and the global systems on which U.S. prosperity depends, and to promote principally through example and support the values that allowed the country and world to flourish. □

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John Hillen is a contributing editor at *National Review* and trustee of the Foreign Policy Research Institute. A reconnaissance officer in the Gulf War, he is a co-author of *Iraq Strategy Review: Options for U.S. Policy* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998).