



## The Great Stampede

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Colaboraciones n° 869

March 30, 2006

In recent weeks prominent conservatives — William F. Buckley, Niall Ferguson, Francis Fukuyama, George Will, to a name only a very few — have, in various ways, suggested that the war in Iraq was either a mistake or unwinnable, or both. The blowing up of the shrine at Samarra, together with subsequent sectarian killings in Baghdad and the failure so far to form an executive branch, were the most recent catalysts that apparently pushed a great number of wearied observers over the edge.

Sometimes such remorse is coupled with louder lamentations about the failed foreign policy of the Bush administration — especially the malevolent influence of neoconservatives and their mania for democracy.

There are many reasons why such pessimism, and indeed depression, is unwarranted — although I concede that very few Americans and still fewer pundits would agree with my own explanations.

### **Democracy**

America is hardly pushing it down anyone's throat. Only in Afghanistan and Iraq have we used force to dethrone authoritarians and birth constitutional government. That's pretty much what Ronald Reagan tried in Grenada. George Bush Sr. did the same in Panama, and so did Bill Clinton in the Balkans.

What then is the real difference with this administration's effort? Taking out the Taliban and Saddam in the Middle East proved to be far more difficult and costly operations than

bombing Milosevic from on high, or decapitating the Noriega regime.

So I fear that it is not the principle of occasionally spreading democracy by arms as much as the messiness of the Iraqi war that bothers most. Take away 2,300 American fatalities and envision a stable government in two or three months in Baghdad, and we would hear very few *meas magnas culpas*.

There is also the larger question of advocacy of democracy in the Middle East itself. We have no plans to invade Syria or Iran, dethrone their autocrats, and birth constitutional governments. The pressures on others to reform are steady and insidious, but still relatively weak – given the fact that Musharraf has the bomb, the Gulf States have the oil, and the Mubarak dynasty has an aggregate \$50 billion in American aid.

Moreover, the pathology of the Middle East – whether defined by the increased stature of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, the involvement of authoritarian regimes with terrorists, or vehement anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism – predated American pressure for democratic reform. One could just as easily make the argument that it was the absence of such principled American advocacy – and instead the prevailing realpolitik of the last 50 years – that helped bring us to the crisis of 9/11.

Certainly the scab of the Middle East that was ripped away on September 11 revealed an old and pu-

trid wound of authoritarians paying blackmail to Islamists in an anti-American unholy alliance. Abruptly leaving Lebanon in 1983, not going to Baghdad in 1991, lobbing cruise missiles at Saddam and the Taliban, trading arms for hostages with Iran, Oil-for-Food, no-fly-zones, giving a pass to Saudi Wahhabism, subsidizing Mubarak and Arafat – none of this made for a more stable Middle East or a safe America.

## War

There has been a naiveté about the nature of war in the last three years, perhaps explicable by our past abnormal experiences in Grenada, Libya, Panama, Gulf War I, the Balkans, and Afghanistan. Apparently GPS-guided munitions, helicopter gunships, and fast-moving armor had convinced some that the carnage of past conflicts was now thankfully past.

But that optimism was only true if certain premises were to be enshrined as the new American way of war:

One, that war is always to be waged against small countries without many assets such as Panama or Grenada;

Or two, that war is to be conducted largely by air, whether defined by bomber attacks against Khadafy and Milosevic, or cruise missiles sent into Afghanistan and Iraq in the 1990s.

Or three, that war is to be solely punitive. We are to go in, defeat the

enemy, and leave the ensuing mess to others, on the premise that we either cannot or should not worry about whether the populace deserved the odious regime we were obliged to end.

In other words, we should renounce the type of more holistic and ideological wars of the past, such as those waged against Italians, Germans, Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese, where we not only sought to defeat entire belief systems, but to stay on and craft a stable government in the hopes of stamping out fascism, Nazism, militarism, or Communism.

There is an easy logic to the first three methods of warcraft, but we cannot rule out the occasional need for the tougher fourth option – one that will always involve greater costs and casualties.

For all the tragedy of our fallen in Iraq, if a constitutional government stabilizes in Baghdad, and liberalization follows in the surrounding region, then our losses will not be measured against the far lighter casualties suffered in Panama, Gulf War I, or Grenada, but against the far worse losses of Korea and World War II.

## **Iraq**

There are never good and bad choices in war, but only bad and worse – and Saddam Hussein's Iraq certainly is a prime example of that dilemma, whether we look at the regime's internal barbarism or its attacks on four neighbors in a mere decade. We had already fought two

fought two prior wars with him – in 1991, and in the 12 years of no-fly zones between 1991 and 2003. Despite conventional wisdom, the verdict is still out on the extent of his connection with terrorists in general and al Qaeda in particular. The painfully slow translation and release of captured tapes and documents, together with a growing anecdotal body of testimony from ex-Baathists, may well suggest things in Iraq were far worse than we thought.

We have not yet experienced a sizable antiwar movement coalescing around Cindy Sheehan and Michael Moore. Donald Rumsfeld has not done a Robert McNamara sweaty-brow resignation. And why haven't at least a few senior generals confessed that this is a hopeless task? Cannot the Congress update something like the old Cooper-Church Amendment – or won't we at least see a Eugene McCarthy-like candidacy in the next Republican primary, or a bloodbath in 2006 that wipes out a war-stained Republican Congress?

There are various answers, but the chief one, besides our leaders' belief in the righteousness of the cause and our proximity to success, is that Americans themselves are still unsure about the Iraqi outcome for a variety of reasons.

They are confused about the war's coverage. They cannot ascertain whether the daily drumbeat of explosions is just the media's story, and should be set against the silent counter-narrative of three successful

elections and a growing Iraqi security force. For all the unease, even the most dubious citizen still thinks the United States may, in fact, win. And had we reported Okinawa minute-by-minute as we do Iraq, we might we have lost that close-run encounter.

The enemy is not idealistic or egalitarian, but clearly pre-modern and fascist. The more we are told that Iraq has nothing to do with the war on terror, the more al Qaeda's methods surface in Iraq and its leadership boasts that it is the new front, after Manhattan and Afghanistan. At least some in this country still believe that victory in Iraq, and the emergence of a viable government there, would have implications far beyond Iraq, inflicting a terrible defeat and humiliation on the Islamists in their own backyard.

Americans are sensitive to charges of imperialism and ruthlessness, but less so to those of misplaced idealism or naiveté. Whatever one believes about Iraq, the facts counter realpolitik and oil diplomacy. Petroleum skyrocketed after the invasion. Oil-for-Food was exposed, along with French and Russian petroleum shenanigans. The loss of life over the last three years must be weighed against the yearly butchery of Saddam Hussein – deaths that were not part of the struggle for a democratic future, but the annual carnage that consolidated a fascist regime and had no end in sight.

### **The World Beyond**

Things abroad simply are not worse after March 2003. Europe is again

growing closer to the United States, in part due to its fright after the French rioting, the Danish cartoons, and murders in the Netherlands. Its multilateral alternative to the United States is in retreat, as we see from the humiliating negotiations with Iran, Hamas, and the Russians.

India and Pakistan are closer to us now than before Iraq. China is China; Japan is a military ally as never before. England and Australia are strategic partners; Canada and New Zealand are similarly beginning to follow a wiser course. The world is catching on to Iran, and the theocracy must subvert the new Iraqi democracy or itself be undermined by the nearby democratic experiment.

There is, of course, heightened anti-Americanism in places, but it is largely confined to specific areas. The Middle East Street resents deeply the humiliation of seeing Muslim leaders so easily dethroned. The European cafés abhor the spread of American popular culture and muscle, and are starting to recoil in shock that the world did not turn out to follow the rules of the Hague or the E.U. charter. And then there is the trans-Atlantic elite, who, after calling for three decades for a more principled American policy, finally got it in spades – but splattered with all the gore and mess that such radical changes always entail.

### **The Military**

Yet another misconception concerns the U.S. military. Almost all the latest grievances against it have

proven to be mostly hype. It is meeting its recruiting goals. In the heart of the ancient caliphate, with great sensitivity and tact, it has trained ten Iraqi divisions, after removing a 30-year-old fascistic dictatorship with dispatch. If America's was already the best equipped and disciplined military in the world, it is now also the most savvy and experienced in precisely the sort of asymmetrical war our pundits worry threaten our future. In all the post facto, self-serving, tell-all books by our ex-intelligence agents and diplomats, it is high-ranking military officers who usually escape censure.

### Critics

From the very outset, rightist critics such as those in *The American Conservative* have told us that it was a hopeless waste of America resources to offer pre-modern people of the Middle East democratic government. Those of *The Nation* assured us that Iraq was yet another amoral attempt at postmodern imperialism. Fine, you get what you hear and read with both sides – and both, through good and bad news, have remained consistent and principled in their vehement opposition to all that we have done.

But the latest criticism is more troubling, since it often comes from the

“my perfect war, your lousy peace” school that, for some reason, never critiques the three-week removal of Saddam Hussein. Instead, it defends its evolving opposition to the war by advancing particular pet theories of reconstruction that were never followed. Rarely do we hear that most postbellum efforts are long, messy, and necessary, much less that the essence of war is lapse and tragedy, with victory going only to those who in the end err the least and endure. Anyone back in the United States can post facto write up a list of what ought to have been done in Iraq amid the heat and fire; but they at least need to factor in the conditions at the time that led the supposedly less bright on the ground not to anticipate their own inspired wisdom from afar.

Especially troubling are those who even before 9/11 demanded that President Clinton or Bush remove Saddam Hussein, but now consider such a move an abject blunder of the first order. Their advocacy helped us get in when there were dubious reasons to go, and their vehement criticism may well get us out when there are now better reasons to stay until Iraq is secure.

So here we are – close to victory abroad, closer to concession at home.

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