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MEASURING THE IRAQ WAR "ACCOMPLISHMENTS" THROUGH THE LENS OF ITS AUTHORS: A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

Chairman Meyssan, Prime Minister Al-Hoss, Ambassador Hernandez, Honorable Representatives of the European Union, colleagues - I am honored that you asked me to join you. My purpose is to offer an American perspective on the issues before us. I will confine my focus to Iraq.

But first, a caveat is in order. My remarks are at variance with what passes for conventional wisdom in Washington. They do not accord with what counts for considered opinion in most of the mainstream U.S. media. They bear scant resemblance to what is produced in many of America's think tanks. They are also at odds with established thought as reflected in the commentary of many officials in my country. I am encouraged, however, by the extent to which the validity of this last observation is less and less so with each passing day.

My perspective is one of caution. It is to stress the importance of providing a preliminary assessment of what has happened in Iraq. Failure to do so at this juncture is not an option. Neither is it cost-free. To proceed in the absence of such an assessment would place at further risk much that has already been jeopardized and placed in harm's way more than was necessary. It would prolong what is already an excessive public ignorance of the many facets of this war's objectives regarding which most, even now, are not fully aware. It would overlook what some of the war's more ardent proponents intend to replicate elsewhere.

In stating this at the outset, I am mindful that the Bush Administration's popularity and credibility has plummeted. Few if any deny that his political setbacks are heavily related to the Iraqi insurgency that shows no signs of early abatement. However, one needs to be careful not to over-estimate the president's current difficulties. The damage he has suffered on the public trust and confidence fronts has hardly been disabling in terms of the commander-in-chief's stated will and intention to "stay the course." Certainly, there is no evidence that an abrupt reversal of American policies or intentions regarding Iraq is in sight. To argue the opposite may prove wishful thinking.

Yet at the same time, the situation in the United States is not exactly idling at the intersection. Something quite pregnant with meaning is afoot. With regard to the rationale for invading and occupying Iraq, increasing millions of Americans feel they were betrayed by their national leaders. Many argue that the president and his closest associates not only intentionally hyped their Iraq-centric threat perceptions, but also stated quite a few things as facts that were not whilst manipulating Americans' fears. Large numbers believe the president and his ideological and special interest advisers knowingly exaggerated what were represented as clear and imminent challenges to regional peace and stability.

Friends and foes alike allege that the Bush Administration overstated what credible near-term danger, if any, Iraq represented to United States national security interests. In the same vein, within Arabia and the Gulf, a broad swath of opinion among elites as well as the rank and file among the citizenry as a whole resents that Washington ran roughshod over the elemental needs and concerns of its most important, allies, friends, and strategic partners.

COMING ATTRACTIONS?

Of intrinsic importance in highlighting these opinions, perceptions, and facts is the following. It is the need to examine the implications of what has already occurred. It is the need to do so now, not later, if only the better to be prepared for what may lie in wait beyond Iraq.

This effort to contribute to a somewhat different context and perspective for understanding the Iraq war's consequences does not come lightly. It concedes at the outset that its analyses and conclusions will rattle the sensibilities of many. This is understandable, for what is said here is seriously at odds with what passes for daily analysis and comment in much of the American media. If the effort has no other value, the hope is that it may call attention to what may yet be in store, however partially or differently, for Damascus and Tehran, if not also for Cairo and Riyadh.

Of imminent interest is not just that much of the rest of the world remains largely in the dark as to what, if anything similar to what has happened to Iraq, may come next. Of added and ongoing concern to many is that, even at this advanced stage in the aftermath of its military attack against Iraq, Washington has continuously failed to heed the advice of the vast majority of the world's Muslim moderates whom it rhetorically embraced after 9/11.

Welcomed breakthroughs on the Arab-U.S. trade and investment fronts notwithstanding, on the major issues of war and peace under consideration at this conference there remains little indication that the Bush Administration has been willing to accommodate the considered opinions and advice of its Arab and Islamic allies. Neither, in the matter of whether to resort to armed force and "preventive" military strikes against its adversaries, is there compelling evidence to hand that our national decision-makers are inclined to weigh seriously the informed views and recommendations of our allies' closest friends and partners either.

INCLUSION VERSUS EXCLUSION

To underscore the level of danger that continues to unfold within the region, one need only note the following case in point. Specialists from several different countries remarked to me this past September how initially impressed they were to learn of a U.S. Defense Department plan to sponsor a conference in Jordan relating to regional defense issues.

Informed that the conference would focus on "Iraq's Security and Its Neighbors," the specialists admitted to being pleasantly surprised. They thought this could mean that the Bush administration's approach to regional stability might henceforth be less exclusive than before. Accordingly, they asked about whom would be representing Iran and Syria.

To everyone's shock and amazement, the Administration's representatives replied, "no one." The specialists pressed for clarification and the rationale for excluding representatives of two countries that, by any standard, are Iraq's most important neighbors on matters pertaining to security. The reported response was, "We don't want to send them or anyone else the wrong signal."

In short, no one can say for how long Washington officialdom's decision not to engage all the regionally relevant players is likely to continue. Based on the publicly available evidence, there is reason to believe it may be for the indefinite future.

More likely is that this will remain the case for as long as Washington refuses to admit and address seriously the implications of the negative repercussions of its Iraq policies to date. Certainly there seems to be no interest within the Bush Administration to examine or debate at any length publicly what it has done to make Iraq, the immediate neighborhood, the broader region, the United States, and other places where Americans dwell in any number more dangerous places to live and work than before.

"STAYING THE COURSE"; OR, "OF COURSE, WE'RE STAYING"

From this perspective alone, there is ample cause for concern. There are valid grounds to question the more roseate assumptions of the war's prosecutors who endlessly proclaim the need to "stay the course." Not least is that many who championed the war against Baghdad believe that, even at this stage, they have largely been vindicated.

But one might ask: How could this be? The answer is that for these super-hawks, their overriding strategic goal mattered most. This was to topple the Iraqi regime. It was to reconfigure the country's structure along with specific aspects of its governance and international orientation. A related goal was to leverage these two achievements in order to pursue other objectives of equal if not far greater importance.

Only thus, in their minds, could the quest for macro American strategic gain and economic advantage succeed; only thus could they achieve additional longer-term resource and other material as well as geopolitical benefits.

PERCEIVED "ACCOMPLISHMENTS" TO DATE

Among the further goals that these thinkers and planners believe they have already accomplished are the following:

- (1) With regard to mega-dollar objective number one, the insertion of American or pro-American Iraqi representatives into key Iraqi agencies where decisions about the country's future oil and gas concessions, as well as pricing and production levels, are likely to be determined;
- (2) With regard to mega-dollar objective number two, the positioning of a different set of American advisers and Iraqis known to be sympathetic to U.S. interests within other key Iraqi

economic infrastructure agencies -- in such a way as to enable them to direct contracts to U.S. companies specializing in the building and operating of refineries, electric power generating plants, sewage systems, desalination facilities, mega-commercial complexes and hotels, international airports and shipping terminals, oil storage facilities, and the design, engineering, procurement and construction of oil, gas, and water pipelines both within Iraq and beyond it, e.g., to Turkey in the case of additional oil and gas pipelines; to Jordan in the case of oil and gas as well as water pipelines; and, in the event of an earlier rather than later resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, even oil, gas, and water pipelines to Israel and potentially to a differently governed, if not also differently configured, i.e., Balkanized, Syria as well;

(3) With regard to mega-dollar economic objective number three, acquiescence in the imminent installation of mini-polities in place of the previous unified Iraqi state and strong central government -- in such a way that the elected and appointed leaders of those new and smaller entities, and even the president and prime minister of any weakened polity in Baghdad, are likely to accept into their defense and security establishments carefully selected Americans and pro-American Iraqis who could be counted on to ensure that serious and favorable consideration is extended to U.S. firms for future contracts to build, operate, and maintain military bases, armed forces command and general staff colleges, centers for military education and training, and the periodic conducting of military maneuvers and joint exercises, as well as the procurement and security of defense systems, weaponry, ammunition, and the pre-positioning of equipment, among other things;

(4) The related goal of not so much weakening the idea of a nationally sovereign, politically independent, and territorially intact country - the three most important criteria for UN membership - as subduing and transforming if not practically doing away with these core manifestations of the Iraqi people's freedom and their nationhood whilst endorsing the formation of a weak and loosely organized confederation in their place;

(5) The objective of diminishing OPEC by profoundly changing the nature and orientation of one of its co-founders and the second-most energy resource-rich country among its members -- simultaneous to delivering a body blow to an idea the Iraqi leadership tried briefly to implement prior to the invasion, i.e., changing the currency in which oil is denominated and traded internationally from the American dollar to the Euro;

(6) The goal of removing the militarily strongest anti-Israeli occupation player from any near term seriously meaningful Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian diplomatic process, as opposed to a genuine peace process with valid regional prospects for reaching a just, durable, and comprehensive settlement between the parties;

(7) The objective of depriving the Palestinian resistance of the previous financial, political, and moral support that it received from Baghdad;

(8) The goal of enhancing Israel's geo-strategic and military position in the region through its de facto allies and the domestic security forces it is training in Iraqi Kurdistan; through shifting, however partially, the international spotlight from the eastern Mediterranean to the Gulf, thereby lessening the degree of public interest in, and any effective international legal, judicial, and

human rights opposition to the Israeli land-grab of additional Palestinian territory in the name of security by constructing the so-called "Separation Barrier," the "Security Fence," or "The Wall," and by using these distractions in such a way as to continue expanding the West Bank settlements, thereby limiting still further the nature and extent of territory upon which a sovereign, independent, and economically viable as well as territorially contiguous Palestinian state can be established;

(9) The setting in motion of the means to eventually privatize, globalize, and free market-ize as much of the Iraqi economy as possible in a way that, were genuinely transparent democratic processes and outcomes allowed to prevail, it is questionable whether the Iraqi people would agree; and in such a way as to favor American investment interests and commercial liberalization schemes popular with the Bush Administration's largest corporate supporters and financial backers;

(10) The related goal of substantially lowering the commercial tax rates that would apply to future American and other allied countries' businesses in Iraq -- in a way that, again, if the Iraqi people were granted a genuine choice in the matter, it is uncertain whether they would accept such an outcome; and in such a way as to pressure Arab oil-producing countries elsewhere to do the same, especially in those economies where Americans and other Westerners are also investors and have their eyes set on eventually being able to purchase equity stakes, even if only as minority shareholders, in one or more profitable state assets;

(11) The objective of making it more problematic than ever before for Riyadh and the capitals of the other GCC countries as well as Egypt and Syria to provide meaningful material, let alone operational, support for the Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation -- lest they find themselves, like Damascus and Tehran, in the gun-sights of the American neo-cons and their well-placed supporters in the White House, the Defense Department, the CIA, the Congress, the media, and prominent think tanks, not to mention the U.S. forward-deployed military forces and advisers in the GCC countries, which, in varying degrees, as a result of existing Defense Cooperation Agreements, unpublicized military undertakings, arms transfers, training, pre-positioned equipment, and various other defense-related relationships with the United States, are already deeply entrenched within these countries' territories and armed forces environments;

(12) The condoning of a sub-regional atmosphere of unease within Saudi Arabia and the other GCC countries relating respectively to their legitimate anxieties about the situation unfolding in Iraq and to their apprehensions about possible future actions by an Iran that, as a direct result of the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, has become regionally stronger and more politically and sectarian ally emboldened than at any time in recent memory -- in a way that, as a consequence of such uncertainties, one cannot rule out the possibility that one or more GCC countries' leaders might be willing to enter into still additional defense arrangements with the United States; and in such a way, perhaps, as not to preclude a reversion, however limited, to the not so distant era in the past when mega-dollar purchases of advanced defense systems and armaments from American manufacturers in this region were the norm, not the exception;

(13) The added momentum to inspiring an increase in the number of GCC countries seeking to enter into bilateral free trade and investment agreements with the United States, thereby adding

further political, psychological, and material dimensions - greater glue, so to speak -- to the perceived if not yet fully realized mutuality of benefits between their capitals and Washington, and thereby providing still greater strength and adhesion to the already strong cement bonding the external American hegemonic presence to what, in a throwback to an earlier era's lexicon, would be recognized as the strengthening, expansion, and maintenance of a pan-Gulf de facto U.S.-Arab protected-state structure and system of foreign relations for the indefinite future;

And, finally,

(14) The granting to Iraq's soon-to-be formed regional governments constitutional authority to negotiate and conclude new oil and gas concessions with leading American (and other foreign) companies, now made possible by the removal of the regime of Saddam Hussein.

GRAND PRIZES AND STILL GRANDER ONES

The attainment of this last-named goal would possibly be the greatest strategic and economic prize of all. Certainly, its constitutional accomplishment, which is already a fact, albeit one subject to change like many other facts, was, and remains, the quintessential prerequisite to enabling American energy-related companies to enter the country's oil, gas, and petrochemical sectors legally. Lest one forget, that prospect was previously foreclosed by the Clinton Administration's policy of Dual Containment of Iran and Iraq as well as the sanctions against Iraq enacted and monitored by the UN Security Council.

Energy specialists have not forgotten that, with Saddam Hussein remaining in power following the liberation of Kuwait from Iraq in 1991, the atmosphere never seemed acceptable, and the right political moment never seemed propitious, either within Iraq or in the United States, for American domestic investment in the development of Iraq's energy resources in any major way.

Nor was this likely to occur so long as Moscow, Paris, and Beijing stood at the head of the legitimate access-to-Iraqi-oil queue, in which they each had incontestable contractual rights, and towards which Baghdad had equally valid legal obligations, but Washington had none.

It is true that this particular American objective in the form of new Iraqi oil and gas concessions being granted to U.S. companies has not yet come to pass. However, given how the new Iraqi constitution, with substantial American input and comment, has been engineered with precisely such a scenario in mind, it takes little imagination to see this happening soon.

IMPLICATIONS

If so, the implication would be obvious and ominous. It would be hard to imagine a greater strategic gain -- money-wise and might-wise -- for those who clamored earliest and most energetically for the war and who, thus far, believe they have succeeded in achieving these and other goals among their original objectives.

It would be equally difficult to cite a more dramatic illustration of the disintegration of American governmental respect for and adherence to international law, international organization, and the

norms of inter-state behavior and legitimacy. This is to say nothing of the impact of additional blows to truth-in-labeling-and-packaging with regard to the sanctity of contracts, transparency, and official accountability for any harm ensuing from one's actions.

Carried to its logical conclusion, it could hardly be more evident what this will have done -- in the name of advancing freedom and the cause of democracy -- to a country and a people whose ability to chart their destiny in their own way, in accordance with their own timing, and in relationship to their own legitimate needs, concerns, interests, and objectives, was rent asunder by the invasion and occupation.

If this major multifaceted resource, together with its attendant economic and military advantages, is either secured for American gain or denied to other countries with legal rights to it -- or if some measure of both scenarios occur simultaneously or sequentially -- the consequences will not be hard to fathom.

What the United States will have done to one of the most important and culturally rich countries in the Arab and Islamic worlds as a result will mark an even greater watershed in the ongoing downward spiral of America's relations with, and moral standing in the eyes of, more than a fifth of humanity.

Here the reference is to the larger strategic calculus of geopolitics, geo-economics, the United Nations, traditional balance of power considerations, and the prospects for regional order and predictability. The reference is also to the four criteria that all governments must meet if they are to have any hope of being deemed by their people as credible, legitimate, and worthy of remaining in, or being returned to, public office.

These, respectively, are the needs to ensure the citizenry's: (1) domestic safety and personal security; (2) external defense against neighbors who, in support of their own perceived interests, would be tempted to intrude if they foresaw a possible chance of succeeding; (3) ability to maintain, if not enhance, its material standard of living, versus seeing little prospect for meaningful employment, a life of economic opportunity, and/or the chance for dignity that is often associated with both; and (4) guaranteed access to a peaceful, legal, and effective system of justice, lest armed violence and other forms of vengeance and vigilantes become the de facto law of the land.

CONSEQUENCES

In terms of these and related considerations, what one can say unequivocally at this juncture is that each of these four criteria or frames of reference for effective governance that apply to all countries and all governments was, in the case of Iraq, dashed to smithereens by the American-led invasion and ensuing occupation. In addition, all three of the benchmarks for UN membership noted earlier - national sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity - were shattered as well.

As such, the implications for future international relations of what has already happened thus far can be expected to be immense and ongoing. At a minimum, it would be difficult to foresee the

likelihood of an early or easy reversal of such multifaceted and largely self-inflicted damage to what remains of the U.S. international image of yesteryear as a just, compassionate, law-abiding, and morally credible power among nations.

What is more, the implications for a set of additional American interests and objectives are also clear. For one, it will be much more difficult than before for the Chinese, French, and Russian competitors for the planet's finite hydrocarbon energy supplies -- engines as they are of humanity's material wellbeing and world economic growth -- to access significant new amounts of Iraqi oil.

For another, it will be in spite of the fact that the leaders and citizenries of each of these three economies and fuel-hungry nations, whose combined populations exceed America's by eight to one, believe that the Bush Administration has dealt them a grave injustice. Why? Because in the context of the rule of law, they possess legal access to Iraqi oil; the United States, before its invasion, did not, and to this moment, does not.

Yet another implication has to do with Iraq's fellow Arabs, Kurds, and Muslims -- among others, those specifically who, in alpha order, live in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, and to which Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey should be added to the list -- whose combined populations exceed America's additionally by two to one.

“CRIME DOES NOT PAY?”

The leaders of these polities, no less than their counterparts in China, France, and Russia, will have less reason than before to find certain Washington pronouncements credible. The pronouncements in question are the ones in support of governmental transparency, political democratization, official accountability, and the oft-stated adage that crime does not pay.

In a world of lowered standards and willful blindness as to what is right, what is wrong, what is legal and what is illegal, however, it may well be that increasing numbers regard such frames of references as old-fashioned. If so, who can blame them? Certainly many would be on solid ground if, citing a mounting body of evidence worldwide, they were to argue that of late crime seems increasingly to pay quite well.

Millions the world over already regard the Bush Administration's oratorical flourishes extolling the merits of freedom, democracy, and respect for the rule of law as little more than cosmetic. Their real purpose, suspect growing numbers of cynics as well as idealists, is something else.

Fig leaves notwithstanding, many see Washington's moralistic posturing and pontification as disguising a more naked gambit to enhance America's preeminent position in what is arguably the world's most vital energy resource-rich region.

In the eyes of a growing chorus of critics at home and abroad, what is nearer the truth as to what is in play, albeit officially denied ad infinitum, is something quite different than many have been led to believe. It is a quest to extend the previous and ongoing "American century" of global dominance and thereby forestall, delay, or, in effect, preclude indefinitely a Chinese and/or other

Asian or Asian-Euro (Russia/EU) “century” for as far into the foreseeable future as possible.

TALLYING ADDITIONAL COSTS

With the foregoing as background and context, it is clear why the war's most ardent proponents feel they have reason to believe that, all in all, they have not fared badly thus far. If nothing else, it is as though they would have one acknowledge the Machiavellian and other conscience-soothing credos which posit that the ends justify the means and that might equals right.

Certainly, it is easy to see why the original crowd of gotta'-and-gonna' invade Iraq enthusiasts contend privately, even now, that the categories of newfound benefits and advantages only partially listed here could only have been accomplished in one way -- by defeating Iraq militarily, by toppling its regime, and by reconfiguring the country's governance and political dynamics.

Further, such a preliminary assessment provides otherwise hard-to-come-by insight into what, were the circumstances and available evidence quite different, might continue to be unfathomable. It reveals why there have been next to zero expressions of regret or remorse, let alone an admission of mistakes, by those whom specialists the world over regard as the principal playwrights of a manifold tragedy.

The reference is to the principals who scripted what may prove to have a longer shelf life than many would have imagined or, even now, perhaps envision. To wit, it would likely be illusionary to believe that the marketers of Operation Iraqi Freedom do not have other countries and regimes in mind.

AN EXTENDED “ROAD-SHOW?”

If so, their objective would likely be to “succeed” in producing and performing Iraq-similar encores elsewhere. Further, were they to prevail, theirs could well prove to be an even longer-run road show than the one that has already been launched and is still running, with the prospect of being brought sooner rather than later to a series of theaters nearer to the Gulf, Arabia, and the Levant than ever before.

If the foregoing analysis provides cause for concern, one would be remiss not to highlight something else that is scarcely less troubling. It is the consequences of what the Bush Administration did in the course of arguing its case in the United States for going to war against Iraq. The results are not unrelated to the manner in which the presentation was made to a largely accepting and trusting American citizenry grown increasingly anti-Arab and anti-Muslim in its orientation.

In so doing, the war's prosecutors did more than mislead the American people. They committed a monumental disservice to the truth, to the country's troops, and to the U.S. taxpayer's treasure, not to mention to tens of thousands of innocent Iraqis as well.

IN THE REAR VIEW MIRROR

Further, what was not fully understood on the day the war began can now, with the advantage of hindsight, hardly be clearer. It is that the Administration's ideological and special interest-driven agenda hardly lost; to the contrary, it "won." It won out over the advice and suggestions of America's more experienced and realistic foreign affairs practitioners. And it did so in a manner and to a degree that has few parallels in the annals of recent U.S. history.

What is more, the forces promoting these interests prevailed even over the House of Representatives. It would be unconscionable to try and make light of this. Those who were defeated were elected leaders whose constitutionally mandated trust and responsibility is to reflect as accurately and faithfully as possible the national security and related concerns of the American people as a whole.

Prior to the invasion, this branch of the American government, which nationally is closer to the citizenry and literally tasked to be more representative of their legitimate aspirations and interests than any other, spoke its collective mind. It recommended that the career Iraq and area studies specialists in the Department of State, and not the Pentagon, be entrusted with the all-important post-invasion formulation and administration of American policies and actions in Iraq.

But this was not done. Only if one were inclined to be charitable in the extreme could the reason be attributed to incompetence. Otherwise, in its act of overriding the one branch of government constitutionally authorized to have the upper hand in matters of governmental war-making powers, what happened can be interpreted at minimum as the reverse of duty faithfully performed. Indeed, what occurred was the exact opposite of what the Congress had recommended.

FIRING AND RE-LOADING

For all but the deliberately blind, deaf, and otherwise insensitive, the results could hardly be clearer. Shorn of any doublespeak, the overall episode can be likened to tragic theater. As such, it was akin not only to a classic example of how to shoot oneself in the foot. It displayed a cast of characters who were exceptionally trigger-happy. No less impressive have been its encores: an ability to re-load faster than anyone else.

The sum effect has been a twofold, self-inflicted, body blow. In the first instance, the war's champions turned their backs on an ideal enshrined in the lore of good governance practice since the earliest days of the fledgling American republic. This is that the success of any democracy turns heavily on the extent to which its citizenry is well-informed.

Equally, such success is dependent upon the degree to which, armed with such information, the electorate is meaningfully engaged in the forging of public policies. And at the end of the day, the prospects for success are no less reliant upon the representatives of the people's advising, consenting, and sanctioning of actions that policies inevitably entail.

In the second instance, those officials who were determined to invade a country that had not

attacked the United States, and which represented no clear and present danger to either the United States or its neighbors, violated another age-old maxim.

In effect, the war's prosecutors thumbed their nose at the need, underscored by the country's founders, for the government's leaders to avoid temptations to rush to judgment. To the contrary, those who held and would wield power over others in matters of life and death were advised always to manifest a modicum of respect for the considered opinions of America's closest friends, allies, and strategic partners, even if – indeed, *especially* if -- the opinions are different, as was clearly the situation in this case.

QUESTIONS

Against the dearth of national knowledge and understanding of Iraq prior to the current war depicted, is it any wonder that the violence unleashed following the country's invasion and occupation in 2003 would become so deep-rooted, massive, and pervasive?

Which people like foreigners invading their country?

Where, in the United States or elsewhere, would any other proud and resilient citizens have been expected to chafe any less or differently than Iraqis at the indignities visited upon them in force by another power?

What people would likely have been taken less aback at the notion that they should be occupied by the citizens of other countries who in such vast numbers had never set foot there before and who were unable to speak their language?

Which country's citizens would have been less offended at having to endure any soldiery not their own that, for reasons owing to their varying degrees of ill-preparedness, arrived to administer them with so little firsthand familiarity with their history, heritage, and culture?

What people anywhere would not have taken umbrage at the persistent inability of those who invaded them to accommodate the infinitely complex social interrelationships stemming from the dynamic interaction among Arabic- and Kurdish-speaking families, clans, and tribes?

Which nation's inhabitants could have been expected to take kindly to the imposition on their soil of another country's armed forces? What people would likely have suffered peaceably an occupying force unable to adjust effectively to the dynamic interplay among regions, sub-regions, towns and villages of a country and a society as old and complex as Iraq, hammered out as it was on the anvil of antiquity?

COSTING THE EARLIER ERA'S EXTENDED NON-ENGAGEMENT

In the absence of having prepared far in advance of the war, let alone having on the ground at its outset, a significant number of seasoned specialists amongst one's citizens who were steeped in that peoples' ways, how could one realistically have hoped, let alone expected, to succeed?

In the midst of important exceptions here and there, for those who were the most ill-prepared for their mission, what else but one costly mistake after another could one have foreseen?

What grounds would there have been for predicting anything different in the absence of the invading force having the surest footing possible in terms of relating effectively to the sensitivities, institutions, beliefs, and practices among this or that ethnic, religious, or cultural group in Iraq?

Lacking the requisite cadres of personnel deeply familiar with Iraq's centuries-old traditions of prayer and pilgrimage, and of equally long observances of faith and spiritual devotion, how could one have anticipated being able even to begin to manifest the requisite respect and interpersonal skills towards the citizenry's intangible values or towards the adherents to this or that secular, political, or ideological school of thought?

Or those who practiced one of the country's religions or subscribed to different articles of faith, and/or were, or were not, apolitical? Or those who subscribed to one of several different denominations within a given sect? Or the followers of this or that offshoot of a widely or little practiced principle or dogma? Or those committed to still other doctrines as well as belief systems?

Or those who, steeped in the lore of how Baghdad had long served as the zenith of Arab and Islamic culture and civilization, who were bound to be deeply offended that new denizens would come from afar and, like others more than half a millennium earlier and another less than a century before, would proceed to impose by force their writ upon the land?

LESSONS

In asking such questions, the purpose is not to be provocative or disrespectful to honorable and well-intentioned men and women who willfully led America and its allies into an unnecessary war. It is merely to underscore how in many unnecessarily mindless and incomprehensible ways numerous American officials who urged the launching of this war could hardly have been more out of their intellectual, analytical, operational, logistical, legal, and moral depth.

It is to highlight the degree to which many who planned the attack were oblivious to a vast array of phenomena pertaining to what makes, or made, Iraq and Iraqis "tick." It is to point out what can happen when intruding outsiders ignore the implications of age-old local dynamics that lie behind a people who, longer than any other segment of humanity since recorded time – and who indeed have long since been judged as synonymous with the dawn of human history -- eventually emerged as one among the world's more unique actors in regional and international affairs.

Under ordinary circumstances, and certainly in retrospect, the fact that so few of the war's architects had ever set foot in Iraq ought to have been its own early warning, the modern era's equivalent of Adam and Eve's original sin. Certainly, going to the moon cost less in terms of lives and in terms of making the world a more dangerous place than before. This is to say

nothing of the costs of the United States and Americans losing the moral high ground in terms of international acceptance and respectability.

What is hardly less painful to acknowledge, and for which the hurtful lesson for America's leaders of tomorrow will likely be some time in coming before it is fully learned and assimilated, is the following. The added injury and insult to an already wounded image of America at home and abroad that resulted cannot, and must not, be blamed on others.

Finally, it is a sorrowful matter of an altogether different magnitude to note that these wounds -- and the bereavement they have visited upon the Iraqi and American people, the stature of the United States among its regional friends and allies, and the erosion of trust and confidence among those who would lead and be inspired by the United States in the future -- did not occur in a vacuum.

To the contrary, the damage is not the result of coincidence or happenstance. Quite the opposite, it is the inevitable consequence of policies that manifestly were strategically unsound, economically wasteful, and morally bankrupt to begin with.