Iraq, Liberal Wars and Illiberal Containment

Lawrence Freedman

PROOF

Modern Western states invariably claim they use armed force in pursuit of liberal values and by means which reflect those values. The implications of this are not straightforward, for historically liberals have been pro-justice and anti-militarist, which has always raised questions about whether the first value can be pursued at the expense of the second, especially as war is an inherently illiberal activity. During the 1990s this tension appeared manageable, as armed interventions tended to be undertaken to protect the weak, shelter the poor and feed the hungry, and the use of force could be relatively controlled with the advent of precision technologies.[1]

Distressing events were taking place, or about to take place, in weak states which lacked an internal capacity to cope. Western sensibilities in the face of terrible violence and suffering were more likely to be engaged than Western interests, which were likely to be only tenuously involved, most notably in terms of flows of refugees. Intervention, once it occurred, created an interest in a satisfactory outcome, for otherwise it would reflect badly on the relevant governments', and any sponsoring organisations', judgement and competence. There was rarely great enthusiasm for these operations and the interventions were often quite tentative, though less so in the Balkans, where the stakes were quite high. Western casualties tended to be small, certainly by the later standards of the Iraqi and Afghan wars. The results were mixed, but in humanitarian terms they often did make a difference.

The difficulties lay in creating stable political conditions for the intervening forces to leave. It proved difficult to move from acting on behalf of the vulner-

Lawrence Freedman is Professor of War Studies and Vice Principal (Research) at King's College London. His most recent books include *Deterrence* (Polity, 2004), *The Official History of the Falklands Campaign* (Routledge, 2005), and *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, Adelphi Paper 379 (Routledge for the IISS, 2006). This article was prepared for a Council on Foreign Relations/IISS Symposium on Iraq's Impact on the Future of US Foreign and Defence Policy, with generous support from Rita E. Hauser.

able to creating the conditions that would ensure that they would be vulnerable no more. External interventions were ways of thwarting a slide into hell but not too suited to grasping for heaven. The consequences of intervention tended to be a prolonged limbo, requiring a degree of foreign governance (often through the UN or EU) to prevent a return to the bad old ways and to arrange the painstaking construction of democratic institutions and functioning economies. Furthermore, the level and type of violence involved could never wholly be in the hands of the intervening force but depended on the nature of the resistance which, if extensive enough, could result in the intervention also creating substantial numbers of innocent victims.

The interventions of the 1990s could largely be considered wars of choice. It was not absolutely necessary for the sake of the interveners that they be fought. In this sense they had an offensive quality, for they sought to extend liberal values to places where they were currently absent, or at least in short supply. The post-conflict efforts would often be based on attempts to embed those values in new political structures. Here the difficulties often revolved around attempts to encourage those who had benefited from the intervention, and could now feel that their moment had come, to share power with people associated with the losing side.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century war has taken on a harder edge. In one respect the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were even more self-evidently liberal wars, though more in a defensive sense, in that they were justified initially as part of a campaign to prevent existential attacks on the Western way of life. Because they were strategically defensive, they took on the character of wars of necessity, and so no semblance of defeat could be tolerated. This meant that not only were the methods offensive, in that the war was taken into enemy territory, they were also less restrained than the interventions of the 1990s. In both cases the objectives also took on a more offensive aspect, as they came to involve an attempt to bring the Western way of life to brutalised countries.

The George W. Bush administration has justified its military operations in terms of two linked campaigns – negatively against 'terror' and positively for 'freedom and democracy'. Critics have charged that both these campaigns have been misconceived, not necessarily in terms of their underlying liberal aspirations (few are going to speak out for terror and against democracy) but the quality of the supporting analysis, the simplistic presentation and the exaggerated role claimed for armed force in their prosecution. Those advocating alternative approaches have stressed the importance of intelligence and policing, and international cooperation in both, as the best way to deal with terrorism, while warning that an over-assertive foreign policy risks creating more terrorists than it eliminates or deters. The onward march of democracy will benefit

most from calm political conditions and strong economic development and least from external imposition and civil war.

A common critique of the Bush presidency is that it has encouraged the view that there is an inherent tension between liberal values and the requirements of security. The administration has argued that methods must be geared to those of the enemy, who in this case is duplicitous, vicious and inclined to hide within civil society. This has to be understood even in the case of a war with liberal goals. The critics argue that to insist that the demands of security, narrowly conceived, must always take precedence over core values is ultimately self defeating, as it will drain legitimacy from the whole effort. This debate has been particularly intense when it comes to the treatment of prisoners, an obvious area where the liberal should be distinguishable from the illiberal.

Of the two wars, Iraq has been the most problematic, for the case upon which it was based has turned out to be false. Saddam Hussein was not linked to al-Qaeda and lacked nuclear, biological or chemical weapons. The overthrow of a tyrannical regime might have been a substantial side benefit, were it not for its cataclysmic effects on Iraqi society, which has turned in on itself in a vicious way. Defensively in terms of protecting liberal society, this war was not needed; offensively in terms of extending liberal society, it has been a failure. The human costs have been high, especially in Iraqi lives but also coalition forces, and this has led to a rapid erosion of public support. It is now widely assumed that the consequences of this fiasco will be the development of an 'Iraq syndrome' comparable to the 'Vietnam syndrome', with the American political class bound to be cautious when proposals arrive for new military adventures.[2] The inept management of both the pre-war diplomacy and the post-war counter-insurgency has put question marks against US leadership and basic competence. Other countries will be wary about joining in US campaigns. Lastly, until coalition forces are out of Iraq and Afghanistan, there is little spare capacity, even if an appropriate cause is found.

If the question is whether there will be support for using force in the way it was used in 2003, the answer will be simple. The Iraq War came at a time and place chosen by the American government. Although it probably would not have happened without the events of 11 September 2001, it was not a necessary reaction to that outrage. The other common reasons for military action were absent: a response to a direct attack against the United States or a close ally; crude aggression across international borders; a developing humanitarian catastrophe that could only be arrested by prompt and

The Iraq War came at a time and place chosen by the American government

PROOF

decisive external intervention. We can therefore assume that, in the future, there will be little appetite for self-starting wars based on poor intelligence information, in pursuit of an ambitious grand strategy but in the face of opposition from close allies, isolation in international organisations and regional distrust. But, thankfully, proposals for such wars are rare. Not to have another one for some time would not constitute a reversal of a trend.

Another question is whether there will now be a reluctance to embark on wars that can claim a compelling rationale and are worthy of general support and international sponsorship, or whether any military operations containing even the slightest risk of casualty and expense will be avoided. Will there be a renewed, nagging and sometimes paralysing belief that any large-scale US military intervention abroad is doomed to practical failure and moral iniquity? Will future presidents have to promise that proposed interventions will not be 'another Iraq'? Will, on the other hand, those who believe that a readiness to used armed force is essential to an effective diplomacy be looking for opportunities to shake off the Iraq syndrome?

On the assumption that no American government can ignore developments in the Middle East, an alternative course to a policy of active regime change and intervention is something akin to containment. The liberal case for containment is that it is preferable to an illiberal war, the likely consequence of a more robust approach, and, more positively, it ultimately depends on the strength and durability of Western countries in the face of radical challenge. The liberal case against containment is that biding time requires tolerating continuing injustice and tyranny. When this leads to ethnic cleansing or bloody oppression, it becomes not only difficult to contain the effects but ethically unacceptable to remain passive. In addition, containment also depends on allies who are not necessarily liberal in themselves but who happen to be on the target's periphery and so must be reinforced if the restraints are to hold. The risk here is of commitments to regimes which cause their own instability, from which it is harder to save them than from the threat of external aggression.

The Vietnam syndrome

The comparisons with Vietnam are constant but they need to be treated with care.[3] To start with, we do not yet know how Iraq will end for the coalition forces. Current strategy is to create the conditions for an orderly withdrawal, so that troops leave at the request of a grateful Iraqi government, having handed over to reconstituted Iraqi forces. Critics fear that it will all end with the Iraqi equivalent of the last personnel escaping by helicopter from the roof of the US Embassy as hostile forces close in on them, leaving former friends to their fate.

The presumption of an orderly transition may involve a suspension of disbelief, in terms of the assumptions made about governmental authority, national unity and embryonic democracy. Yet the result is also unlikely to involve a clear victory for an organised enemy. The problem left behind after Vietnam was a unified country under a communist regime; the problem left behind after Iraq is more likely to be fragmentation and anarchy.

Vietnam was unpopular because it was fought by a conscript army which suffered high casualties – much higher than in Iraq. By the close of the war the army was in a poor state, with stories of drug abuse and 'fragging' of officers. The move to a volunteer force was plagued by problems of recruitment. Much of the opprobrium for the conduct of the war was focused on the generals, who were charged with employing tactics that alienated the population and exaggerated success. The military as an institution protected itself by blaming politicians for their lack of clarity and conviction, and reverted to the comfort zone of preparing for a 'big war' in Europe. The most popular military text of the time went out of its way to deny the unconventional character of the war.[4] This time it is much easier to blame the politicians, and it has suited anti-war groups to portray the military as the victims of a foolish and cavalier adventure. The army and the marines face challenges but they are hardly in crisis. Moreover, this time their leadership is making a real effort to learn the lessons of Iraq, and counter-insurgency is being taken more seriously, not less. In the future they may be less determined to steer their government away from this sort of operation.

The most relevant comparison may be the broader political settings of the two conflicts. The stimulus to American involvement in Vietnam under President John F. Kennedy was a belief that this was testing ground for a new strategy in the Cold War, in which the United States had to demonstrate that it could be a true friend to countries emerging out of colonialism and offer an alternative line of economic development to state socialism. Communist-inspired insurgencies were designed to seize power by playing on fears of the development process. It was thus about the defence of liberal values in the global conflict with totalitarianism, but also their extension into the post-colonial Third World. In this respect Kennedy was uncomfortable with the idea that the American effort in Vietnam had to be founded on an illiberal regime, although the effort to make the regime more liberal led to Ngo Dinh Diem's assassination, a few weeks before Kennedy's own, and no evident improvement in the character of the South Vietnamese government.

While the Americans failed in Vietnam, the impact on the global contest was less severe. Kennedy came to power at a stage when the Soviet Union could still

PROOF

claim to challenge the United States in scientific, economic and military capacity. By the time he was assassinated he was coming to the conclusion that the Soviet Union had passed its peak and was failing.[5] By the time the war had fully ended for the United States and Vietnam was under communist rule, the Cold War had moved on. The Soviet economic model was now discredited and was dependent on Western technology transfers and credit. Detente had broken out in Europe and full diplomatic relationships were in place with West Germany. The various dominos – other than Laos and Cambodia – once presumed vulnerable if South Vietnam fell, including Malaysia and Indonesia, now looked to be firmly in the Western camp. Walt Rostow once claimed that by holding the communists as long as they did in Vietnam, the United States had won a sort of victory, because it had been able to turn round the rest of East Asia.[6] In this respect it can be seen as a form of active containment, holding the enemy, and eventually conceding, in one location so it could not push forward elsewhere.

The broader movement which Moscow claimed to lead was now hopelessly divided. Marxists had long been split between revolutionaries and reformers who were ready to work within a bourgeois electoral system. After 1917 the bitter arguments within the Soviet Union on its future course were reflected in the international communist movement. Loyal Stalinists battled with Trotskyists, who themselves fragmented into a bewildering number of sects. The more charismatic national leaders all developed their own theoretical perspectives with which to challenge Moscow's hegemony – Titoism, Maoism, Castroism – and around the world they, along with Trotskyists, would compete with local communist parties for the leftist vote. In Europe it was apparent by 1956 that communism had lost the ideological battle. In Asia sectarianism took on the character of inter-state war. The Soviet Union and China built up massive forces along their long common border. After their victories against American-backed regimes, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and was in turn invaded by China. They all claimed to be Marxist-Leninist.

The movement which Moscow claimed to lead was now hopelessly divided

The Cold War staggered on for another 15 years, and over some of that period it became quite tense again, notably in the Third World. A Soviet belief in the reluctance of the United States to get involved in messy Third-World conflicts allowed it greater freedom of manoeuvre and led to a series of interventions in Africa. None of these worked out particularly well for Moscow, although for a while some American policymakers were convinced that they were part of a clever stratagem for interfering with sea lines of communication, in particular

oil supplies. In Afghanistan, Moscow tried to rescue a failing socialist regime and was instead itself dragged down.

The point is not to compare current struggles with those of the Cold War or to presume that they will end in the same way, with erstwhile revolutionaries fighting amongst themselves – though they might. What is relevant is first the success of containment as a strategy and, secondly, relevant to the comparison with the current situation, the stage of development. Whatever is going on at the moment has a long way to go and currently lacks a clear trajectory. It involves an interconnected set of conflicts that will endure for some time and will require a continuing Western response. The connections between these conflicts and whether they should be conceived of in terms of an over-arching war, let alone how the enemy should be defined, are all matters of controversy. There is general agreement that there is a problem with militant groups, which have many followers, can claim to draw on the traditions and texts of Islam, and adopt extreme measures in pursuit of their goals. Beyond that there is a degree of narrative confusion.

The goals of these groups provide the main difficulty: are they little more than over-excited protests against the more provocative policies of the West; do they represent an attempt to provide a unifying theme in a series of disparate national power plays; or, as they say, a determined attempt to establish a new caliphate? Bush, struggling to find an appropriate term that does not send the wrong message (that the US is at war with Iraq, when it is supposedly supporting its elected government, or with Islam) has spoken of how 'some call this evil Islamic Radicalism, others militant jihadism, still others, Islamofascism'. Although the latter term now has some currency, to the extent that fascism now has come to be associated with any hate-filled ideology with totalitarian tendencies, it is not wholly apt.[7] If any comparison is appropriate it would be with communism. The militants clearly reject communism's atheism along with secular liberalism, but their broader politics and economic populism betray socialist influences while their vanguard-led, cell-based revolutionary organisations have Leninist qualities. Such movements, with their many strands and inner tensions, need to be understood on their own terms. For the moment, no general label seems to work better than 'jihadism'.

Nor has anyone come up with a good name for the 'meta-conflict'. The US government has spoken prosaically of a 'long war'[8] and, more stridently, of a 'global war on terror'. This designation seems to have stuck. It suffers not only because of its association with Bush and the Iraq War, where its initial relevance was low but its current relevance is high, but also by its designation of a tactic as the enemy and its militarisation of a complex political phenomenon – a problem

with any war-like terminology. Those fighting on the other side have not hesitated to use belligerent language, proclaiming a variety of jihads.

The narrative confusion is not a trivial matter; it reflects some deep tensions on the Western side and renders it harder to agree on a consistent story-line and forge a consensus on future actions. Despite these uncertainties and disagreements, however, there is a consensus that something serious is going on and, while specific policies are hard to devise, especially when they involve armed force, passivity is not an option. Iraq has made a difference to the conduct of this meta-conflict – generally not a helpful one – but it has certainly not brought it to a conclusion. It is reasonable to assume there will be occasional, even regular, requirements for military operations and these will involve a number of countries, not solely the United States.

The region's past

The current situation may be more fruitfully compared to the last major radical movement in the Middle East, which began with the officers' coup which overthrew the dissolute Egyptian Monarch King Farouk in 1952, followed by similar events in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya. The most vicious struggle it initiated was the Algerian Civil War, which lasted from 1954 to 1962. The movement's most charismatic figure was Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egyptian president from 1954 until his death in 1970. This movement was anti-colonial, anti-Zionist, socialist and secular. It was also prone to internal division, as evident from the different and antagonistic wings of the Ba'ath Party in Iraq and Syria. In its time it caused great anxiety and dismay among Western countries. France fought it bitterly in Algeria and, blaming Nasser, looked to have him toppled through colluding with Britain and Israel during the Suez Crisis of 1956. The United States opposed the British–French action over Suez on the grounds that it was illegal in international law, bound to create regional and international hostility, and foolish in giving Nasser the notoriety he craved.

Yet US President Dwight Eisenhower became increasingly anxious about Nasser's influence and intentions, particularly his links with the Soviet Union and potential threat to the oil states. In addition to asserting in January 1957 that there would be a firm response to 'overt aggression by a nation controlled by international communism', he looked for ways to undermine leftist regimes in the region and, with greater confidence, to assert support for the conservative regimes in the Middle East.[9] The most notable episode in this regard was the quick move to support the Lebanese government by a major troop movement in 1958, just after the Iraqi king had been deposed. At the same time the British moved to support King Hussein of Jordan, and then in 1961 sent troops

to Kuwait, claiming that it was vulnerable to an Iraqi invasion. In all these episodes no shots were fired and it would seem that the beneficiaries, and targets, of these actions were often quite surprised. To say that the 1958 and 1961 crises were manufactured may be going too far but, it undoubtedly suited both Britain and the United States to find an opportunity to show they were still forces to be reckoned with in the Middle East and they would respond where appropriate with force. Nigel Ashton has discussed both crises in terms of manufactured pretexts, as pre-emptive actions designed to reassert the credibility of British power after Suez.[10] These episodes, furthermore, demonstrated the importance of backing key allies.

The next decade began with the Kennedy administration putting out feelers to Nasser to see if he could be weaned away from the Soviet Union, and encouraged to take a more positive attitude to the United States and a more conciliatory approach to Israel.[11] This effort made some progress, helped by US aid, but faltered as a result of Nasser's inability to agree to recognise Israel in any form and, more importantly, his intervention in Yemen. While Nasserism continued to prosper politically during the 1960s, and Nasser himself remained a hugely popular figure, it failed to serve as a basis for Arab unity, the defeat of Israel, or economic renewal. When Nasser died in 1970 his successor, Anwar Sadat, had given little reason to suppose that he was anything other than a loyal follower. Yet soon after taking power he turned away from Moscow and toward Washington, and, after demonstrating his leadership credentials with a war against Israel, made peace with the 'Zionist state'. While this led to his rejection by other leaders in the same political mould – Assad, Arafat, Gadhafi and Saddam – and to his assassination, the high-water mark of secular Arab nationalism had passed. Gadhafi's journey is in some ways the most surprising, for during the 1980s (while Saddam was still being courted) he was the main political hate figure in the West for his attachment to terrorism. We now know he was also developing nuclear weapons. In the end it was the diplomatic isolation and his limited capacity for economic advance that got to him.

So the mismanagement of the Suez crisis by both the United States (in rebuffing Nasser over the Aswan Dam[12] and Britain (in its crude and duplicitous resort to force) created immense short-term difficulties for both countries and helped sustain the Nasserite advance. The eventual success of Western policy in resisting this political movement lay in providing clear support for countries opposing it, often with little regard for their internal political complexions, backed up more by arms transfers rather than combat troops, and the internal failings of the movement. It was let down by its adoption of socialist economic models, its inability to manage popular expectations and its external

PROOF

dependence on the weaker of the two superpowers. With Syria the last holdout, although hardly threatening regional hegemony, a story already lasting half a century is not yet over. The ideological potency of Nasserism dribbled on for a few years after Nasser's death, but his heirs increasingly had to play on nationalist and even religious themes to keep themselves in power and in most cases the governing influence has been regime, even personal, survival.

Conservative clerics and theocratic states were an important source of enmity to secular Nasserism, with which the West cooperated. In this respect the Iranian revolution of 1978–79 was a turning point. The shah of Iran was unusual in being both pro-West and continually at odds with both nationalist and clerical sentiment in Iran. In 1978 these came together in a movement led by the Ayatollah Khomeini, offering a skilful fusion of leftist, nationalist and Islamic themes. Despite President Jimmy Carter having described the shah at the end of 1977 as an

The Iranian revolution was a turning point

island of stability in a troubled region, he was swept away.[12] It took some time for the political character of the revolution to be established and, until late 1979 and the hostage crisis, its anti-Americanism was qualified. From that point on the United States struggled to cope with the Iranian challenge. The failure to see through a military operation in April 1980 to rescue the hostages created a sense of weakness around American policy. This undermined Carter. Ronald Reagan hardly fared much better. The intervention in Beirut, which was in part advertised as a means of demonstrating that the United States was really prepared to use force to support its foreign-policy objectives, was marred by the October 1983 bombing of the marine barracks, undertaken by the Iranian-backed Hizbullah. Then the attempt to use Iran as an intermediary to secure the release of US hostages held in Lebanon led to the farce of the 'Iran–Contra scandal' which shook the Reagan presidency.

The Reagan administration was conscious of the impact of the US failure to protect the shah. At the same time the Arab world (as well as Israel) became fearful of the destabilising impact of Persian-backed Shia militancy. This led to the support of Iraq in its war with Iran, especially after the initial Iraqi offensive had faltered and Iran was on the offensive. From 1986, stung by the revelations over Iran–Contra, the administration became more directly involved with the war. By reflagging Kuwaiti tankers it set itself up for a direct conflict with Iran, which included two attacks on Iranian oil platforms, in October 1987 and April 1988, the latter exercise involving the destruction of a considerable proportion of the Iranian Navy and contributing to the Iranian decision to accept a cease-fire. Again, if there is a message it is that influence was restored, and to a degree

PROOF

enhanced, in the Arab world by working with the grain of its political concerns at the time and not being too fussy about friends, so long as it was 'my enemy's enemy'.

During the 1990s containment was the explicit US policy for dealing with both Iraq and Iran.[13] It reflected the perceived success of the containment of communism, after its European implosion and its embrace of capitalism in Asia. It followed on from the explicit decision not to overthrow Saddam or to support the Shia/Kurd insurrection at the end of the 1991 war. This in turn reflected the belief, stronger in the case of Iraq than Iran, that the regime would collapse from within. There was also a prudent understanding of the risks involved in taking responsibility for the governance of potentially turbulent and fractious countries. In the case of Iraq, and despite pre-war claims, we now know that it had been effectively defanged and was unlikely to be in a position to threaten its neighbours for some time.

The attacks of 11 September 2001 played a critical role in undermining confidence in containment. Al-Qaeda and other like-minded groups could not be confined within bordered territories and lacked internal grounds for restraint. They seek to act violently wherever they can using militants ready to accept their own deaths. If future terrorist attacks could reach such deadly proportions, then the United States dared not concede the initiative to its enemies. It could not rely on deterrence and must therefore be ready to pre-empt, to frustrate with an attack before it could be launched, or better still, to deny the enemy the wherewithal to mount the attack. If this was the objective then Iraq seemed a good place to start. Saddam held onto power, showed no contrition and acted as ruthlessly as before. Containment always involves a degree of coexistence with a repugnant regime, but in this case it no longer seemed an unavoidable accommodation to another's power and so it had become an act of US self-restraint.

A similar logic could be applied with Iran. Containment is under strain, not just because of the nuclear programme but also the readiness to supply weaponry to sympathetic groups elsewhere, including Hizbullah, and the inflammatory rhetoric within which this is couched. In this case, however, the experience of Iraq is more telling, including the risks of going to war on an intelligence hunch and the consequences of a resilient opponent. More directly, Iran has influence in Iraq that is already being used to complicate the coalition's task and could provide opportunities for retaliation. This is in addition to matters such as the effect on oil prices and sympathetic responses against Western interests elsewhere in the Islamic world.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who presents himself as Khomeini's direct political heir, teases and taunts the Bush administration by

refusing to back down over Iran's nuclear programme, calling for the end of Israel and continuing to back Hizbullah, which has transformed itself into one of the most effective non-state groups in the region. This appears to have given radical Khomeinism a new lease of life. It is interesting to consider why it may prove to be more durable than Nasserism. Four obvious differences suggest themselves. First, in societies where it matters, religious authority is politically more potent than the secular, because it can draw on a narrative that is difficult for secular politicians to challenge directly. Secondly, because of oil Iran has a degree of self-sufficiency even though its economic performance has been generally poor. Thirdly, when a moderate leadership, in the form of Khatami, did appear its power was qualified by the clerical establishment and it was impossible to make major initiatives either in domestic reform or foreign policy. While European countries attempted a dialogue with Iran the results were frustrating. Lastly, at least since the end of the Iran–Iraq War and up to now, Iran has avoided a direct challenge to Western power and has taken advantage of its split identity when elements from within the regime were up to no good. The regime has had a clear sense of its own interests and has not been averse to cooperating with the West when it suits its purposes (for example in Afghanistan).

At the same time there are reasons why Tehran's regional power will be limited. It can exercise influence through clients and co-religionists in neighbouring states, but the Arab world is not going to be led from Persia and Sunni-led countries are wary of Shia advances. Hizbullah's efforts against Israel gained the applause of the 'street' but the reckoning is painful and Lebanon is not the only country that could do without more victories of this sort. The ideological aspects of the regime are harder for outsiders to decode than, for example, Nasserism, which was couched in a familiar if over-heated, anti-colonial and populist language. Greater expertise is needed to make sense of what is going on in Iran, for otherwise the extent to which local power plays start to turn on arguments about sacred texts are missed or the onset of cynicism misjudged. Furthermore, the country is too large for oil alone to solve its economic problems. Indeed, it has made itself dependent upon confrontation, for this (until recently) kept the oil price up and allowed Ahmadinejad to make a patriotic appeal. Against the background of strident rhetoric the nuclear issue should not be played down and it has its own timetable, because at some point a weapons programme will have to be deemed to have reached the North Korean position where it will generate its own deterrence. Yet there is an argument for patience, in that such regimes are more likely to flounder when the pressing policy issues revolve around the mundane concerns of everyday life rather than ultimate salvation and national destiny.

An Iraq syndrome?

It should not be assumed that the experience of Iraq will by itself result in a reluctance to use force. US policymakers, fearful that Vietnam would encourage adversaries to exploit weakness, were often keen to pick what they thought were winnable fights in order to reassert US power. The *Mayaguez* incident (involving a Khmer Rouge seizure of a US container ship just after the fall of Saigon) was one example. The Multinational Force in Beirut in 1982–84 was another, although in this case the mishandling of the operation led to the apparent lessons of Vietnam being reinforced rather than undermined. In 1991 President George H.W. Bush stressed how much the 'Vietnam syndrome' had at last been overcome as a result of the Gulf War.[14] Using military force just to demonstrate that you are prepared to do so is not to be recommended. It is not like falling off a bicycle where the best advice is to remount immediately and try again. Nonetheless there will be occasions for the appropriate use of armed force.

There may well be more reluctance (enthusiasm was never high) to engage in 'offensive liberal wars'. In their ideal sense these are altruistic in nature, at least bringing relief to distressed populations and potentially the light of liberty to societies shuddering in the dark. They have always been wars of choice and when resources are scarce there will be fewer of them, although that does not mean the issue will not arise. This is evident in the clamour to deal with Darfur. It is an interesting question as to whether, without Iraq, more would have been done in Sudan. If there is a degree of intervention fatigue in this area it is not only because of Iraq but also the frustrations of the post-conflict conditions and the consequent length of the commitments being taken on.

Disappointment is natural when populations freed from tyranny and fear do not spontaneously embrace liberal values and practices. Even without resorting to cultural stereotypes about which nations are really suited to democracy, it should not be surprising. People need to be convinced that the evil that has blighted their lives for so long will not return and to have their own desires for vengeance restrained. When fighting is underway any intervention, even undertaken for purely humanitarian motives, will affect the local power structure and success depends on an understanding of this process. Intervention usually depends in part on local actors. Some cope better than others. Governments from whom support is already draining may buckle under the weight of an intervention notionally intended to reinforce their legitimacy against internal opposition. Alternatively, those able to make an intervention work, as with the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, expect a return when the fighting stops. One of the problems with Iraq was the inability to find local politicians with a genuine base, as opposed to returning exiles who had offered themselves as the main

representatives of the Iraqi opposition prior to the war. At this stage the weak may expect to become strong and dispossessed put in possession, yet attempts to produce lasting reform of local power structures can soon be qualified by the need to use these structures to meet the immediate needs of government. In this respect humanitarian interventions of choice raise very similar issues to those shaped by defensive liberal wars intended to protect a liberal society. The former may be inspired by high principle but they must be realised through the application of armed force in unfamiliar political settings. The latter has the more pressing strategic imperatives, and may find a degree of ruthlessness unavoidable, yet it dare not ignore principle.

This is the challenge if we are entering a harsher geopolitical period. Iraq was a false move in a real conflict. Its effect has, as a result, been negative. This has been the most frequent criticism. It is not that Iraq demonstrates the inherent foolishness and immorality of any resort to armed force, but that it has impeded the conduct of the real conflict. These false steps have undermined American leadership in the context of a continuing debate over the character and proper conduct of the 'meta-conflict'. The most striking feature of 2006 is how bold governments other than the United States are prepared to be. In Afghanistan the Canadians are taking severe casualties in war for the first time since Korea, along with the British who are having a rougher time than in Iraq. After the 2006 Lebanon conflict, Italy, France and Germany have all taken on roles whose full implications are not yet understood.

PROOF

The dilemmas of liberalism have been aggravated

The same is true of the criticisms of the disregard of the Geneva Conventions or human rights when dealing with terrorists. The well-known dilemmas of liberalism as a governing philosophy have been aggravated: what rights do you accord to those who would strip you of yours; how far do the intolerant have to go before you can tolerate them no longer? There are those who worry that the threat has been built up out of all proportion to justify repressive legislation, but the main critique is that a lowering of standards, to the point where euphemisms are found to condone torture and abduction, not only provides a propaganda gift to our enemies but also blurs rather than sharpens the ideological differences.

*   *   *

At the best of times foreign policy can be a constant trial for a liberal purist. It is bound to involve compromises with illiberality, so unpleasant that they are

contrived in secret, which makes them even worse. Vital intelligence turns out to have been obtained by dubious means. Showy support is given to ruthless regimes that happen to share our enemies. They are even allowed to buy arms because the alternative would be to commit to their direct defence. And these are not the best of times, so these debates are not going to get any easier. Instead of offensive liberal wars which respond to victims, often seeking to aid the weak and vulnerable regardless of context, defensive liberal wars have to focus on context. This may not be that different from the old form of containment in that it will require patience, when others are suffering, because of the need to exercise restraint, and partnership with states who are undeserving in terms of their internal practices and also politically brittle. It may even involve conversations with adversaries, as is now being proposed with Iran and Syria to help stabilise Iraq. There will be requests for support from governments having trouble with home-grown jihadists. This will create moral dilemmas because their methods may not be pretty and the long-term consequences of supporting such regimes may be harmful, even if in the short term there appears to be little choice. As things stand in the Middle East, if there are no means to overthrow or undermine disagreeable regimes, and in most cases it seems imprudent to try, then it will be necessary to work with disagreeable regimes.

PROOF

Notes

1   Some of these themes are explored in Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, Adelphi Paper 379 (London: Routledge for the IISS, 2006).

2   The Iraq syndrome is discussed in Robert Brigham, *Is Iraq Another Vietnam?* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006); and John Mueller, 'The Iraq Syndrome', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 84, no. 6, November–December 2005, pp. 44–54.

3   See Brigham, *Is Iraq Another Vietnam?* and Stephen Biddle, 'Seeing Baghdad: Thinking Saigon', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 2, March–April 2006

4   Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Presidio Press, 1982).

5   See Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 249.

6   'The pain, loss, and controversy resulting from Vietnam were accepted for ten years by the American people. That acceptance held the line so that a free Asia could survive and grow; for, in the end, the war and the treaty which led to it were about who would control the balance of power in Asia, an issue which was evidently at stake in the Asian crisis of 1965 and thereafter. Those who died or were wounded in Vietnam or are veterans of that conflict were not involved in a pointless war.' W.W. Rostow, 'The Case for the Vietnam War', *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 June 1995.

7   See William Safire, 'Islamofascism anyone?', *International Herald Tribune*, 2 October 2006.

PROOF

8   US Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington DC: Department of Defense, February 2006).

9   Eisenhower proposed if requested by Middle Eastern states 'assistance and cooperation to include the employment of the armed forces of the United States to secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence ... against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by International Communism'. He also observed, weeks after Suez, that 'we have shown, so that none can doubt, our dedication to the principle that force shall not be used internationally for any aggressive purpose and that the integrity and independence of the nations of the Middle East should be inviolate. Seldom in history has a nation's dedication to principle been tested as severely as ours during recent weeks.' The Eisenhower Doctrine on the Middle East, A Message to Congress, 5 January 1957, *The Department of State Bulletin*, vol. 35, no. 917, 21 January 1957), pp. 83–7.

10   Nigel John Ashton, 'A Microcosm of Decline: British loss of Nerve and Military Intervention in Jordan and Kuwait, 1958 and 1961', *The Historical Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, December 1997, pp. 1069–83. There is something familiar in Ashton's description of the British government exaggerating or even manufacturing the evidence of a plot against Jordan's King Hussein in July 1958, or how in June 1961 the evidence of an Iraqi plan to invade Kuwait was based entirely on hearsay.

11   Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the US–Israel Alliance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

12   In 1955 the United States had agreed to finance the Aswan Dam project, intended to generate electric power for Egypt, but the offer was withdrawn in response to Nasser's arms deal with Czechoslovakia and perceived tilt towards the Soviet bloc. It was in response that Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal.

13   Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran* (London: Hurst & Co., 2006), p. 76.

14   See Martin Indyk, special assistant to the president for Near East and South Asian affairs at the National Security Council, speech, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 18 May 1993. The argument was that the strength of current allies would allow Washington to 'counter both the Iraqi and Iranian regimes. We will not need to depend on one to counter the other.'

15   George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Knopf, 1998).