Mention Iraq today and words like ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’ and ‘victory’ are not very likely to come into the minds of most Americans. Rather, it is a flood of long-repressed phrases from an earlier American war in a far-off and little-known land: ‘stalemate’, ‘quagmire’ and ‘syndrome’.

The American war in Vietnam lasted for more than a decade. It took the lives of 58,000 Americans and an estimated five million Vietnamese. It brought down one American president and was a major reason for the disgrace and resignation of another. And it spawned a cautionary phrase – ‘Vietnam syndrome’ – that governed American foreign policy for the following 30 years.

Simple in phrasing but vague in meaning, the expression laid down the unwritten rule that the American public would not support a war causing major American casualties unless persuaded that it was vital to the nation’s defence. With the notable exception of the Gulf War of 1991 – which was specifically designed to be a fast and limited attack for the narrow objective of restoring the status quo ante in support of a client state – the rule was never openly challenged by five post-Vietnam US presidents – until 2003.

Following the swift expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991, President George H.W. Bush excitedly declared: ‘We’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all!’ But in fact that short-lived military operation was merely a qualified exception to a standing rule. Bush prudently chose not to march on Baghdad, nor to depose Saddam Hussein, nor to occupy Iraq. For Americans it was a limited war for the limited objectives of reversing an invasion that threatened secure access to Persian Gulf oil.
Even the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union did not dispel the Vietnam syndrome. President Bill Clinton was continually pressed to send American troops into the civil wars of Yugoslavia and Rwanda. Most of that pressure came from liberals who became the new champions of ‘virtuous intervention’. Yet Clinton kept US forces out of the African genocide and confined American support for Bosnia’s secession from Yugoslavia to the use of air power. More prudent than his war-eager liberal critics, Clinton realised – from an earlier failed foray into the clan wars of Somalia – that the effects of the syndrome still held.

What changed everything was the ‘perfect storm’ that followed Clinton’s departure: the election of the evangelical George W. Bush in November 2000, the appointment to high office of nationalists and neo-conservatives seeking a dramatic demonstration of American power, and the terrorist attack on the US on 11 September 2001. The first two factors set the stage for replacing Saddam Hussein with a compliant regime, while the third provided political support from a frightened and angry American public.

Thus it was that Iraq was a war waiting to happen. It likely would not have taken place without either George W. Bush, or the ‘transformation’ agenda mapped by the newly empowered neo-conservatives and their liberal fellow travellers, or the 11 September attacks. And the resultant quagmire (to invoke another Vietnam-era term) might not have resulted had the occupation of Iraq been handled with less ideology and more prudence.

It was ignorance of the history and culture of Vietnam, combined with Cold War geopolitical fantasies, that triggered the earlier war and its consequent syndrome. And it is a similar kind of ignorance about the Middle East – combined with a dangerously distorting ideological straightjacket – that caused the political and human disaster that Iraq has become.

The war in Iraq was promoted as a major turning point in American foreign policy. And it has been – but not in the way that its planners and advocates anticipated. It was supposed to have tamed the forces of radicalism, staunched the flames of Islamic fundamentalism, provided a friendly neighbour for Israel, inspired the entrenched oligarchies of the region to broaden their ‘democratic’ base, and secured a steady supply of oil for the United States and its allies from Iraq’s reserves. It was also, of course, supposed to have removed the threat posed by Saddam Hussein’s nuclear, biological and chemical weapons – weapons which quickly turned out never to have existed.

An unannounced, but nonetheless real, objective was also to transform strategically located Iraq into a permanent base for the projection of American military power and political influence throughout the Middle East and Central
Asia. A stable, friendly, politically conservative, economically open, anti-fundamentalist Iraq was, in short, to be the lynchpin of what is known as the ‘Bush Doctrine’ for an American-directed global order.

Instead of these hoped-for results, the US-led invasion soon surprised even its most ardent planners by enflaming the Islamic world, providing a recruiting tool for al-Qaeda and other jihadi groups, removing a barrier to the spread of Iranian influence, and unleashing uncontrollable violence between Sunnis and Shi’ites within Iraq, thereby sullying the image of the United States throughout much of the world. America has suffered grievously from this reckless adventure. Its motives have been widely discredited, its constitutional checks and balances impaired, its traditional alliances battered, its economy further mortgaged to Asian creditors, its arduously cultivated aura of invincibility dissipated, and its capacity both for military competence and political leadership seriously called into question. Iraq is obviously not Vietnam, but the parallels are striking. As in the earlier conflict, the war in Iraq:

- was one of choice, not of necessity;
- involved a culture alien to American experience;
- was directed as much against an ideology as a nation-state;
- sought the political transformation of another society;
- alienated old allies and threatened the cohesion of NATO;
- divided Americans and shattered the domestic consensus on the nation’s global role;
- strained the American economy and added to its crippling debt; and
- came to be repudiated by the American public that initially supported it.

The decision to attack Iraq in 2003 was inspired both by the easy success of the 1991 Gulf War and by America’s wider strategic objectives in the Middle East. These included not only secure sites for strategic air bases, but also unimpeded access to the world’s second-largest oil reserves. This consideration was prompted by the fear that Saudi Arabia might fall under fundamentalist control. The poor state of Iraq’s defences promised an easy victory, while the ‘weapons of mass destruction’ accusation provided sanction from an anxious Congress and public.

Thus did the strategic justification for the invasion dovetail with the neo-conservative goal of implanting American power in the heart of the Middle East, fortifying friendly regimes and enhancing Israel’s security. It was reinforced by
Ronald Steel

the belief of liberals – who had earlier urged US intervention in various civil
dwars, such as those in Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia and Rwanda – that American
power should be used to make the world a better place. Persuaded by political
science theories that democracy is the key to world peace, they convinced them-
selves that America’s unchallengeable power would be
purified by its good intentions.

These agendas came neatly together in Iraq. And
making the invasion argument compelling was the belief
that toppling Saddam Hussein would be easy. And so it
was.

But the devil was in the aftermath. The invasion
divided America’s Cold War allies in western Europe from
NATO’s new members in post-communist eastern Europe.

It weakened the cohesion of the European Union and made a common European
defence policy even more difficult. In the Middle East a war designed to increase
American influence and strengthen friendly governments had the opposite effect.
It emboldened radical Muslim movements in client states like Egypt, Morocco
and Saudi Arabia, stimulated recruits for Islamic terrorist groups, paved the way
for turning Iraq into a Shia client state for Iran, and set the stage for a civil war in
Iraq that has imperilled Western interests throughout the region.

Even in Asia the consequences were significant. The war fortified the dan-
gerous American alliance with a nuclear-armed and Taliban-sympathising
Pakistan, undermined American influence in such important Islamic states as
Indonesia, and increased the US financial obligation to China and its role in
world oil markets. Indeed China today is in the position of the United States a
century ago: a rising industrial, financial and military power. And the United
States is in Great Britain’s place: its legions scattered, its economy in relative
decline, its interests damaged by an unnecessary war, and its authority dimin-
ished by feckless leadership.

On the domestic front the war gravely polarised the public over an issue – ter-
rorism and national security – that should have united it. It provided the means
for a dangerous enhancement of presidential power and threatened the balance
of the American system of government. It allowed the creation of mercenary
legions of ‘contractors’ beholden only to their private employers. By relying on
these freelance fighters and the voluntary reserve forces of the National Guard,
it undercut the American tradition that military service in times of danger is an
obligation of all citizens. And the use of emergency powers by the executive
branch has threatened American civil liberties and constitutional protections.
All this has been done, in Orwellian fashion, in the name of security.
In a grotesque inversion of intentions, the war has weakened the international position of the United States. It has shattered the illusion of hegemonic claims of government officials that ‘we make our own reality’. By weakening American economic power it has undermined the ability to sustain an activist foreign policy. Despite an enormous military budget (even before the Iraq War greater than that of most of the rest of the world combined), US military might – with its concentration on high-tech weapons and air and naval armadas – is totally unsuited to the kind of wars America is likely to fight. Dependent on unstable or unreliable sources for its oil supplies, distrusted or even despised in much of the world, and weakened by a pervasive sense of incompetence and defeat by its own abused citizens, the United States has been weakened rather than strengthened by its war in Iraq.

In many ways prospects for a new ‘American century’ are considerably dimmer than they were five years ago. Arab allies are shakier than they were before the Iraq War and Islamic fundamentalism – fuelled by humiliation, faith and resentment – has been fortified. Japan is turning from pacifism and becoming increasingly nationalistic, NATO is riven by dissension, Latin America has slipped from US control, and the stability of the small nuclear club threatens to give way to a condition of nuclear anarchy as rising powers demand access. What has been for the most part a voluntary Pax Americana threatens to become a global struggle for power fuelled by nationalism, religious passion, ethnic hatreds and resource scarcities – in short a Hobbesian world with no legitimate sovereign and no accepted rules.

The war in Iraq did not cause these problems, but it has highlighted and in some cases intensified them. Rather than persuading Americans of the wisdom of using military force in a treacherously volatile region, the war has deeply divided them. Two-thirds of Americans polled in the autumn of 2006 declared that the threat of military action has diminished rather than enhanced US security. A poll taken a year earlier found solid majorities in nine major countries, including the United States, rejecting a world system dominated by a single power.3

While Americans remain a long way from favouring isolationism (itself a non-existent issue since 1941), the appeal of withdrawal from what is viewed as a dangerous overextension is becoming more pronounced. In a poll taken in summer 2006 nearly twice as many (59%) Americans said that the United States should not take the lead in resolving international conflicts in general, as those who thought that it should (31%).4 Similar majorities said that the Iraq War had not been worth the cost (63% vs 30%).

What these figures indicate is that whoever follows George W. Bush, whether a Democrat or a Republican, may have a more limited range of foreign-policy
options, and more difficulty in gaining support both at home and abroad for the use of military power in support of unrealistically expansive foreign-policy goals. Already the war has taken its political toll in American politics, with the Republicans losing control of both houses of Congress and many state governorships and legislatures in November 2006.

Does this mean, then, that the United States is now in the grips of an ‘Iraq syndrome’ – one that will sharply inhibit its willingness to use military force to achieve political objectives? Judging from the deadening drone of disastrous headlines from Iraq, it might seem that a retreat from the ambitious objectives of the Bush Doctrine – what is generally viewed as a programme for global hegemony – is likely. But it is unwise to jump to such a hasty conclusion. And it is particularly unwise to assume that a change of political parties will mean a sharp change in foreign policy.

There is only a hair’s breadth of real difference – and a great deal of empty rhetoric – between the foreign-policy goals of the second G.W. Bush administration and those of its Democratic critics. This narrow space between the two parties is not new. It has been true for more than 60 years. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor the Republican Party jettisoned its isolationist faction and fully embraced internationalism in the raiments of an American-directed world order.

Indeed, the selection of the internationalist Wendell Willkie as the Republican candidate in the presidential race of 1940 marked the party’s acceptance of America’s new global role. ‘America First’ originally meant isolationism, but after 1941 took on a far more expansive meaning. Since that time the only significant differences between the two parties have been on domestic issues and the role of the federal government in the economy.

There is a well-known saying that ‘the business of America is business’. This has been no less true under Democrats than under Republicans. President William McKinley’s seizure of Cuba and the Philippines from Spain in 1898, Theodore Roosevelt’s ‘doctrine’ that the United States had the right to political and economic dominance in the Caribbean, Woodrow Wilson’s decision to take America into the First World War to protect America’s economic as well as political interests in Europe, and the trade accords forged by Franklin Roosevelt and his successors in both parties were based in large part on the goal of preserving and extending American economic interests. This indeed was the primary purpose of the Marshall Plan for the economic recovery of Europe after the war.

Throughout the Cold War the United States consistently pursued open markets and free trade, whether this involved cooperation with democratic
governments or tolerance (and in some cases, support) of authoritarian ones. During that period, when the United States and the Soviet Union avoided confronting one another directly, they conducted proxy wars in Central America, Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. This was particularly evident under Ronald Reagan, who not only publicly and secretly (the Iran–Contra scandal) provided arms and money to the Contras in Nicaragua and the rebels in Angola, but also the mujahideen in Afghanistan and even Saddam Hussein in his war against the ayatollahs’ Iran. Similarly, Clinton’s intervention in Bosnia was more motivated by a determination not to lose American control of NATO than by the humanitarian appeals of liberals.

George W. Bush – his triumphalist rhetoric aside – has been solidly within this American foreign-policy tradition. He has put economic relations with Russia and China above geopolitical differences, kept NATO under American direction by diluting its political cohesion through its expansion into Eastern Europe, and sought accommodation with the moderate reformist governments of Latin America.

Although he disastrously overplayed his hand by invading Iraq, his objectives were nonetheless in line with those of his predecessors: to ensure access to a vital resource, gain bases for the projection of American air power, protect US client states in the region, and maintain a firewall against radical movements both political and theological.

Thus American foreign policy after Bush – regardless of who is elected in 2008 – is unlikely to be greatly different than it was before Bush. The style will be smoother, but the substance will be similar. Sweet talk and summit meetings rather than diktats and ultimatums will be the style. Although the rise of new power centres in China, Japan, India and a restored Russia may inhibit American unilateralism, the belief in the virtue of – and the indeed the necessity for – American global hegemony (‘leadership’) remains.

On this conservative ideologues and liberal interventionists are in full accord, despite nuances of rhetoric and claims to the contrary. There is little difference between them on fundamental issues. Many of today’s neo-conservatives, like today’s intervention-prone neo-liberals, after all, are yesterday’s liberals. For them the transition has not been a difficult one. Both groups believe in the global American mission, the salutary use of American military power, the spread of American political and economic institutions, and the promotion of what is loosely termed ‘democracy’ as the instrument of that global mission.

After the debacle suffered in Iraq we probably will not soon see any more militarised ‘crusades’ fought directly by Americans in the Middle East or else-

We can expect a return to proxy wars.
where. Rather, we can expect a return to the proxy wars of the sort that took place in Angola, Nicaragua and El Salvador under Reagan. Indeed, the recent successful overthrow of the Islamic fundamentalist regime in Somalia – by American-supplied forces from Christian Ethiopia – is a harbinger of what is likely to be a key element of America’s post-Iraq foreign policy.

An Iraq syndrome in our future? Yes, if that means no more large-scale invasions by American soldiers to overthrow unfriendly regimes in Iraq or places very much like it. But if it means that Washington will cease to intervene actively – politically, economically and even militarily – where American leaders feel that important interests are at stake and that they have the power to protect them, the answer is ‘no’.

Goodbye to Pax Americana? Yes, eventually, but not quite so soon. The United States has been weakened by the Iraq War, but hardly so grievously as to retreat into its shell. Such a retreat reflects neither America’s global interests nor the American character. True, US authority and its prestige have been compromised by incompetent and ideology-driven leadership and by an easily corrupted political system. But the United States will, for some time, remain the world’s dominant military, economic and cultural power.

Critics of the war, looking to nineteenth-century Europe as an example, have proposed such formulations as ‘balance of power’ or a ‘Concert of Powers’ as an alternative to American hegemony. They argue that the rise of new centres of power – China, Japan, India, a united Europe, a restored Russia – combined with the relative decline of the United States, will render American hegemony unworkable. This is no doubt true in the longer run. But a balance-of-power system looks good only from a distance. It is inherently unstable, and it did nothing to keep Europeans from mutual destruction in 1914.

A Concert of Powers – a kind of latter-day Congress of Vienna by satiated powers to suppress radical movements – suffers from many of the same problems. The United States may, in time, as its relative strength further declines, be forced to accept such a formulation. But it will not do so voluntarily. A nation that will not even join the World Court or accept an international accord on mitigating global warming is not going to share its sovereignty gracefully or prematurely. The American experience, after all, has been either to try to run the world or petulantly to withdraw from it.

The Iraq War has indeed been a disaster by every measure. Yet, as Adam Smith wrote, ‘there is a great deal of ruin in a nation’. Great empires rarely collapse, or even lose their ambitions, following a colonial skirmish. They generally reorder their priorities. That is why there may well by an Iraq syndrome, but it will be considerably less severe than its advocates hope, or its critics fear.
Notes


