Five Years in Iraq
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Chainsaw Diplomacy

The Iraq war has spelled the end for muscular moralism in U.S. foreign policy. Here's what should replace it

WHEN AMERICA INVADED IRAQ FIVE years ago, most of the people who set U.S. foreign policy believed two things. First, they believed that the U.S. military could not lose. From Panama to Kosovo, the Gulf War to Afghanistan, America had been on a wartime winning streak since the late 1980s. Defeat in Vietnam seemed about as relevant as the War of 1812. Second, the policymakers believed that people in Iraq wanted the U.S. to win. Hadn't the Poles and Czechs celebrated when the Americans defeated the Soviets? Hadn't Afghans cheered the overthrow of the Taliban? Swirling in the air in 2003 was an intoxicating blend of militarism and moralism. U.S. troops would destroy Saddam, and Iraqi gratitude would take care of the rest.

Five years later, that combination has blown apart. John McCain is open to bombing Iran, but he doesn't claim the Iranians will be thankful for it. Barack Obama wants to restore America's good name, but not with the 82nd Airborne. For the most part, militarists and moralists now occupy separate camps. In the coming years, America will try to export its values and may well use military force. But it won't try to do both at the same time.

In many ways, this is what happened after Vietnam. Underlying that war were the beliefs that the communists in North Vietnam couldn't withstand U.S. military might and that the noncommunists in South Vietnam wanted to be saved. The war shattered both assumptions. On the left, Jimmy Carter responded by making human rights the centerpiece of his foreign policy: America would stand up for liberty—but not militarily. Conservatives insisted that had more military force been used in Vietnam, the U.S. would have won. But as the world's attitude toward the U.S. changed, they abandoned the conceit that when America took up arms, other nations would cheer.

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This gulf between moralism and militarism narrowed in the 1980s and '90s. Under Ronald Reagan, conservatives grew more optimistic about exporting American values as they saw democracy spread in the Third World. And under Bill Clinton, liberals became more warlike, backing humanitarian interventions in Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo.

Today, however, it's the '70s all over again. Republicans still assume that force—or at least the credible threat of it—is all that regimes like Iran's understand. But you don't hear many conservatives echoing the grand Wilsonianism of Bush's Second Inaugural, in which he claimed that "America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one." The fastest-growing species on the foreign-policy right is what *National Review* editor Rich Lowry calls "to hell with them" hawks: conservatives who don't care how non-Americans run their societies as long as they don't threaten the U.S.

Among Democrats, hawkishness is out of fashion, but humanitarianism remains strong. In a *Foreign Affairs* article last summer, Obama argued that many around the world associate Bush's freedom talk with "war, torture and forcibly imposed regime change." His answer: help freedom's march with money, not arms.

That makes sense. Moralism and military force are both necessary to U.S. foreign policy, but the former shouldn't ride the latter into battle. The U.S. military can help stop ethnic cleansing, as it did in Bosnia and Kosovo, or safeguard the world's oil supplies, as it did in the first Gulf War, but it's not designed to build democracy. You can't do open-heart surgery with a chainsaw.

Building decent, liberal societies requires strengthening parts of the U.S. government that don't carry guns. While America's military patrols the world, U.S. embassies increasingly cower behind barbed wire, disconnected from the societies they need to understand and help. America doesn't need to abandon the fervor that five years ago helped propel it into a disastrous war; it needs to redirect it. Muscular moralism has had its day. The test now is whether America can separate the two—carrying a big stick for self-defense but using less blunt instruments to improve the world. ■

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