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THEY SAID IT

As long as you have the wisdom to keep the sovereign authority of this country as the sanctuary of liberty, the sacred temple consecrated to our common faith, wherever the chosen race and sons of England worship freedom, they will turn their faces towards you. The more they multiply, the more friends you will have, the more ardently they love liberty, the more perfect will be their obedience. Slavery they can have anywhere. It is a weed that grows in every soil. They may have it from Spain, they may have it from Prussia. But until you become lost to all feeling of your true interest and your natural dignity, freedom they can have from none but you. This is the commodity of price, of which you have the monopoly. This is the true Act of Navigation, which binds to you the commerce of the colonies, and through them secures to you the wealth of the world. Deny them this participation of freedom, and you break that sole bond which originally made, and must still preserve, the unity of the empire. Do not entertain so weak an imagination as that your registers and your bonds, your affidavits and your sufferances, your cockets and your clearances, are what form the great securities of your commerce. Do not dream that your Letters of office, and your instructions, and your suspending clauses are the things that hold together the great contexture of this mysterious whole. These things do not make your government. Dead instruments, passive tools as they are, it is the spirit of the English communion that gives all their life and efficacy to them. It is the spirit of the English constitution which, infused through the mighty mass, pervades, feeds, unites, invigorates, vivifies every part of the empire, even down to the minutest member.

Edmund Burke, "Speech on Conciliation with America," March 22, 1775.

IS IRAQ WORTH IT?

For the post-'60s American left, American success has always been something of a bitter pill to swallow. After all, if the nation's failures are signs of its wickedness, then its triumphs might be perceived by the less sophisticated and learned as signs of the nation's goodness. And everyone knows that America cannot be "good" until it accepts and atones for the sins of its past and present, dedicates itself to "social justice," and admits that Country Joe and the Fish was a truly great rock band.

Not surprisingly, the left's response to the psychological trauma that it suffers each time the nation pursues and eventually accomplishes an ambitious objective is akin to the classic "stages of grief" process. First, the activists on the left insist that the country and its leaders cannot possibly intend to do what they appear to be doing, because no one could be so stupid and so morally obtuse as to believe that such a course of action

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could be successful or even desirable. Next, they declare that the undertaking is a failure, a quagmire, and an imminent disaster. And finally, they admit that although the failure they anticipated may not come to full fruition, the “victory” that the nation’s uber-patriots claim to have accomplished is suspect and, at the very least, not worth the price paid to achieve it.

This progression was most visible during the last couple of decades of the Cold War. It began with utter contempt for the very idea that containment in Southeast Asia was either possible or worthwhile. It quickly morphed into the claim that no victory against the mighty Soviets could ever be achieved. And finally, after Ronald Reagan undertook strategies that proved effective against Moscow, the liberal-left establishment (which, naturally, includes the media) admitted progress, but tempered its concessions by questioning the value of that progress relative to its cost. Though President Reagan’s success against the Soviets may have been impressive and unanticipated, the general narrative held that it was of dubious merit, since it came at the cost of the endless budget deficits.

We are currently witnessing a similar progression of the narrative relative to Iraq. For much of the last two or three years, the American left has insisted that victory is impossible, that American soldiers cannot beat the Islamists, cannot quell a thousand-plus years of sectarian enmity, and certainly can do nothing to stop the religiously animated Iraqi civil war. But over the last six months, it has become largely undeniable that progress is being made, that the Bush/Petraeus surge has been effective, and that something that might fairly be called victory in Iraq is a realistic possibility. Thus, the narrative is changing again. Condemnation of the war now centers more on the costs of victory. As the military blogger (“milblogger”), active-duty soldier, and self-described “American warrior” Greyhawk put it last week:

Claims that “we’ve lost” and that American soldiers have been beaten by opponents who are righteous heroes or nine-foot tall and bullet proof are being quite subtly shifted to

arguments that no potential victory (if even grudgingly acknowledged) could be worth the price.

On its face, the question of the Iraq War’s worth is absurd. For roughly a quarter century, Saddam Hussein was the single most destabilizing force in the world’s most unstable region. His first attempt to acquire nuclear weapons was foiled twenty-six years ago by Israeli jets. His second attempt was foiled sixteen years ago by an American-led coalition, which also managed to liberate Kuwait. And though it may seem that his third attempt, which was foiled again by American troops four-and-a-half years ago, was half-hearted at best, there is little doubt that Saddam would have made a legitimate and earnest third attempt at some point, had he not been removed from power.

As for the cost of Saddam’s removal, again, there is little question that the operation was worthwhile. Though every soldier killed or injured constitutes a real and solemn personal tragedy, which should not be minimized, the fact of the matter is that by historical standards, the cost in lives of the Iraqi liberation effort has been extraordinarily – unprecedentedly – low. Indeed, it is likely that the number of combat-related deaths suffered by American forces in Iraq only marginally exceeds the number of deaths that would have been sustained by a similar-sized military force in non-combat, peace-time operations over the same time frame. And as for the financial burden, that too should be measured against the alternative, in this case, the continuation of the decade-long containment of Saddam’s regime, which, as we have written before, was a costly, multi-billion-dollar-a-year operation.

In a broader sense, though, the post Saddam, stabilization and “democracy-building” phase of the Iraq war presents a different, far more complicated picture. During the 2000 presidential campaign, then-Governor Bush promised that he would not engage in the kind of nation building that President Clinton had attempted in places like Haiti and the Balkans. However, in the four-plus years since the invasion of Iraq, he has done just that, and has been roundly

criticized for it, most especially by conservatives, who claim that building a democracy in a place where none existed before is a risky and exceptionally implausible goal. And because American blood and treasure are still being spent in pursuit of this idealistic objective, the value of the entire war effort, despite its military success, has become much more difficult to assess.

This may sound like something of a cop out, but the bottom line on the war Iraq is that no one will know its ultimate significance for a number of years. Moreover, the long-term outcome will depend heavily on the post-victory policies of the next president. Specifically, the length of time that American troops remain in Iraq is the variable that is most likely to affect the final verdict on the Iraq adventure. If one presumes that the fundamental goal in Iraq is to establish a bastion of democratic liberalism in the heart of the Muslim World, as President Bush says it is, then a strong American presence will be required for a long, long time, and premature withdrawal will all but guarantee a return to a more or less autocratic regime.

Consider the following.

In the decade-and-a-half since the fall of the Soviet Union, the question of democracy building has, for obvious reasons, been front-and-center in many foreign policy debates. Given the axiom that democracies don't go to war with other democracies, the post-Cold War era has seen an increase in the desire to encourage democratic principles and the emergence of a protracted debate over the most effective means for doing so.

Generally speaking, the major theories for democracy promotion can be broken into two rival camps. One posits, in general, that elections are fundamental to building democracy. Attempts to postpone compliance with the "will of the people" until some semblance of stability can be achieved are ultimately futile in that they rely naively on the good will of the stabilizing force, i.e. an un-elected leader who can either sanction the transition to democracy for the good of the people or arrest that progression for his own benefit. The other camp, by contrast, holds

that institutions, not elections, are the key to liberal, democratic behavior. The insistence on elections prior to the establishment of stable institutions virtually guarantees that those elections will be a one-off event and that any "democracy" will be short-lived.

Throughout most of the last decade, the latter of these two camps has generally had the better of this argument. It is hard to deny the empirical evidence, which shows quite clearly that in the absence of the kind of stable and widely respected democratic institutions that are necessary to temper the folly of the masses, elections will merely precipitate chaos. Egyptians will vote for the Islamic Brotherhood; Palestinians will cast their ballots for Hamas; and Iranians will be permitted only a handful of regime-approved candidates and will then vote to elevate the likes of the fanatical and volatile mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to their nation's presidency.

At the same time, those who favor immediate elections and instant deference to the will of the people have begun fighting back. They argue that their detractors are simply wrong and that those who say that elections must wait for the establishment of "the rule of law and the creation of stronger state institutions" have also been proven wrong, principally by the resilience of autocracy, even in the face of economic liberalization.

The journalist Robert Kagan, who is also a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, argued recently that all of the empirical evidence suggests that the focus on the rule of law and institutions does little to promote democracy. To bolster his argument, he quotes "the scholars Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and George W. Downs," who "have observed [that] it is 'an ominous and poorly appreciated fact' that 'economic growth, rather than being a force for democratic change in tyrannical states, can sometimes be used to strengthen oppressive regimes.'"

Kagan also cites his colleague at the Carnegie Endowment, Thomas Carothers, who recently published a long essay that concludes "that, on the evidence of the past two decades, it has proved almost

impossible to establish the rule of law and strong state institutions in non-democratic countries.” In support of this Carothers’ theory, Kagan points to places like China, Russia, and Venezuela, all of which saw some economic liberalization and formation of state institutions but have failed to break free from tyranny.

The problem with Kagan’s retort and with the similar arguments forwarded by those whom he cites is that they are based on a false choice between immediate elections or the slow establishment of institutions. The evidence shows that neither of these camps has successfully identified the exact recipe for democracy building and the creation of stable, post-autocratic states.

What neither Kagan nor anyone else in this debate seems willing to acknowledge is that there is a third potential course here, one that is rarely discussed but which offers the only proven method for promoting democracy. This “third way,” if you will, is seldom mentioned because it is “politically incorrect,” in that it posits not merely that the establishment of institutions is important, but that the type and the origin of those institutions matters as well. Russia, China, Venezuela, and other nations have failed to move toward democracy not because they have failed to establish institutions, but because they have failed to establish successful institutions, namely institutions that emulate those that predominate in the English-speaking world.

We noted the importance of the English language and British influence in a piece this past spring. We put it this way:

For the last several years, we, among others, have made our long-term forecasts about this century and about the nations that will dominate it based on one simple rule, namely that those who speak English are far better positioned to do well than those who don’t.

From Great Britain to Ireland to Canada and the United States; from Singapore to Hong Kong to India; from Australia to New

Zealand, the most successful nations of the world share a common thread, and that’s the English language.

It’s not that there is something magical about speaking English. It’s that those nations in which English is spoken by some significant percentage of the population are likely to have been British colonies at some point, which means that they had the great fortune of having British common law, British customs, and British institutions imposed upon them. It is fashionable in the West these days to deplore colonialism and everything that it entailed. But the fact of the matter is that those nations that were colonized by the British have, by and large, reaped immeasurable benefits from their purported subjugation.

The unique blend of influences on British culture – from the Catholic scholars Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, to the Christian reformer John Calvin and the Scottish Presbyterians, to philosophers like John Locke and Thomas Hobbes and economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo – combine to foster an ethos uniquely suited to individual liberty, individual resourcefulness, political liberalism, and economic progress.

The inimitable Mark Steyn, who is well invested in the idea that “demography is destiny,” has argued that the reason that the Brits, inhabitants of an erstwhile unimportant island in the North Atlantic, were able to conquer the world is because they were the first to conquer infant mortality, which thereby gave them a striking demographic advantage over all challengers or potential challengers. He is right, of course, but only to a point. Yes, the Brits conquered infant mortality, but that was hardly an accident and hardly the causal variable in their success.

The British were able to defeat infant mortality because of the traditions, laws, and institutions that they had developed over centuries – respect for the individual, equality under the law, the value of thrift and of hard work, the importance of trade, representative government to check executive authority, transparency in government and business, etc. – which lent themselves nicely to individual and societal initiative and which, in turn, promoted “progress” that was previously unimaginable in all of human history. Included in this progress, of course, were medical and other scientific advances that facilitated a steady increase in the percentage of live births and a decrease in infants dying from difficult deliveries. The Brits’ demographic victory was anything but coincidence.

Nor is it coincidence that the very same customs, principles, and institutions that enabled that victory were the ones that the British exported to their colonies and which predisposed those colonies to success. For nearly four hundred years, the world’s centers of industry, finance, and individual liberty have been found either in Great Britain or its former colonies. Even today, the nations (or erstwhile city-states) that have transitioned from the third world to the first are those which have benefited from English traditions and institutions, either directly (Hong Kong, Singapore) or indirectly, through American occupation and reconstruction (Japan, South Korea) . . .

The Royal British Navy was the first truly successful modern military, the first military capable of global force projection, the first military capable of enforcing global norms of behavior and of likewise enforcing the wishes of the Crown. For two hundred years, the Royal British Navy not only enabled the spread of English values through conquest,

but did so as well through the creation and protection of free shipping lanes. The Brits defeated Napoleon at Trafalgar; they single handedly ended the Atlantic slave trade; and they enabled global commerce to emerge and thrive.

And just as it is no mere coincidence that former British colonies are uniquely positioned to emulate the mother country’s economic and political successes, it is no mere coincidence that they have been likewise uniquely positioned to emulate her military success. Again, take a look at the world’s most successful militaries. Nearly every efficient, powerful military capable of global force projection belongs either to Britain or to its former colonies. And it has been this way for at least a century.

This is not to say that all functional democracies throughout the world are part of the Commonwealth. Clearly there are others, most of them in Western Europe. But there can be little question that a history of British and/or American influence can be an important factor in the transition to democracy.

Of course, not every former British colony is able to make this transition. As we have seen over the last week, Pakistan is about as far from democracy as one could imagine, despite having once been a part of the British Raj. Pakistan today is a barely functional state, much less a democratic one, and either a jihadist coup or a protracted civil war are both entirely realistic outcomes of the current “state of emergency.” What Pakistan’s resistance to democracy demonstrates is that the establishment of British institutions can only lead to democratic governance if those institutions are not overshadowed by other, less democratic institutions, in Pakistan’s case, Salafi Islam.

Given the examples of places like South Africa, India, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea, it is clear that Christianity is not a necessary precondition for establishment of democracy. But

if liberal governance is to take hold, then at the very least, a nation's established religious institutions cannot be hostile to democracy, to capital formation, and to the inviolability of the individual. Predominantly Muslim Pakistan may (or may not) have been suited to democracy at some point, but it clearly is not today. Over the last three decades, with the expanse of Saudi-funded Salafism, institutions hostile to democracy have grown stronger while the residual influence of the British colonial regime has grown weaker.

What all of this means for Iraq is that based on historical precedent, the best chance that the country has to become a functional, post-autocratic state is for the United States to maintain a long-term presence there and to assist in the establishment of pre-democratic institutions, including, among other things, free and transparent markets, a fair and dispassionate legal establishment (police, courts, etc.), and a free press. If American troops and advisors are removed from the nation before such institutions can be cemented, then the likelihood of elections presaging a return to autocracy will increase substantially.

At the same time, Iraq is in a far better position to follow the path to functional democracy than, say, Pakistan. This is true, in part, because Iraq will, once the sectarian violence subsides, be a rich country, sitting as it does on the world's second

largest oil reserves. More importantly, though, Iraq is predominantly Shi'ite, and its Shi'ite leaders, namely Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, have by and large rejected the idea of an Islamic state and support the notion of a "limited Guardianship of Islamic Jurists," as opposed to the Khomeinist "absolute Guardianship of Islamic Jurists." The difference suggests that Iraqi religious leaders are more predisposed to confine themselves strictly to religious matters.

So has the Iraq war been worth it? Have the benefits outweighed the costs? In one sense, this is a no-brainer. Of course it has been. Saddam and his regime have relegated to the proverbial dust-bin of history.

In a broader sense, though, only time will tell. In 1955, most people would have told you that the Korean War was *not* worth it and that Truman had blundered terribly by sending American forces to the Korean Peninsula. But the intervening decades have proven that snap judgment to be wrong. The stability and transparency fostered by the American occupation enabled the South Koreans to perform an economic and political miracle. With any luck, Iraq too will benefit from American occupation, though any benefit will likely depend heavily on the ability of the American public to sustain support for that occupation over the long term.

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