

The Left and the Iraq War

By Clive Hamilton | July 13, 2005

The left has been snookered by the U.S. invasion of Iraq, for it is deeply opposed to the war yet supports the spread of democracy and civil freedoms. It is in the interests of the world that democracy should succeed in Iraq but that the U.S. has its nose bloodied in the process.

President Bush and his allies, including Australian Prime Minister John Howard, had little interest in promoting democracy in Iraq until it became expedient to do so, when the weapons of mass destruction proved chimerical. Neo-conservative support for democracy is contingent on whether its promotion is in the financial and strategic interest of the United States.

For anyone with an appreciation of the history of U.S. foreign policy, the Bush administration's dewy-eyed homilies in praise of democracy in the Middle East are nauseating. If he were serious he would act against regimes in those countries that could most easily be converted to democracy - those where autocrats rule only by dint of U.S. support. He could begin with the U.S. client regime in Saudi Arabia.

The decision to go to war in Iraq was wrong, not because Saddam was not a monstrous tyrant, but because it violated the first principle of international relations: respect for sovereignty. Without respect for sovereignty, international relations are reduced to the will of the powerful.

The only exception arises when a regime's activities directly threaten one's own security. Thus Vietnam was within its rights to invade Cambodia to overthrow the Pol Pot regime, which had launched a series of military incursions across their common border. Although most of the world breathed a sigh of relief to see such an odious regime fall, even then some countries, such as Singapore, were alarmed that a nation's sovereignty had been violated by a powerful neighbour.

The principle of non-intervention is one that has been much harder for the left to accept than the right, because historically the democratic left in the West has been a much stauncher defender of democracy and human rights. And it has been at the forefront of legitimate means to put pressure on dictatorial regimes by supporting domestic dissidents and pro-democracy movements.

Trade sanctions and sporting boycotts against the apartheid regime in South Africa were supported by the left long before the conservatives felt the need to respond to public pressure. Some on the right, such as Margaret Thatcher and

Australia's Joh Bjelke-Peterson, resolutely refused to support the international opposition to the white regime.

Western powers could have intervened militarily to overthrow the minority government. But none of the anti-apartheid activists, within South Africa and outside, ever advocated such a move. Imagine if majority rule in South Africa had not been won by the struggle of black and coloured South Africans but had been delivered by a foreign victor.

Similarly, the revolutions in Eastern Europe were so inspiring and successful because they were people's revolutions. Governments created by U.S. or NATO occupying forces could never enjoy the same degree of legitimacy and stability.

It is regrettable, therefore, that Michael Costello, former adviser to Labor leaders and one who identifies with the left (to cite but one example), should give unalloyed support to the Iraq invasion and criticize skeptics on the left by repeating the arguments of people with abysmal records of support for democracy and human rights throughout the world (Opinion, April 15, 2005).

It is more regrettable that someone on the left should support an invasion by a belligerent administration that trampled over the United Nations and then used appeals to democracy as a post hoc rationalization to cover up its own lies.

Unscrambling the egg

While the intervention in Iraq was based on lies and hypocrisy, the fact is that withdrawal now would, in all likelihood, lead to catastrophic civil war. This is why the left is snookered: it wants peace and democratic government in Iraq, but it understands that an outcome that allowed the neocons to claim a victory would have grave consequences for the world.

While appalled at the human cost, the fact that the U.S. and its allies quickly became bogged down in a costly and uncontrollable insurgency in Iraq is not without its long-term benefits. For if the adventurism of President Bush and his hawks had been vindicated, it would have entrenched the U.S. under President George W. Bush as an aggressive and arrogant power prepared to impose its will anywhere.

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Only those ignorant of history, or blinded by a belief in American exceptionalism, believe that the United States' global intentions are everywhere benign. Just as the hawks have been willing to promote democracy when it has suited U.S. interests, they have shamelessly destroyed democracy when it has stood in the way. There is no better illustration than the U.S.-led destruction of the Allende Government in 1973, events that ushered in a vicious U.S.-backed tyranny that traumatised Chile for decades.

So a rapid victory in Iraq would have been good for the Iraqis but not for the future of peace, stability and self-determination elsewhere. The bloody nose that the U.S. has received in Iraq has severely dented the confidence of the neocons and that can only be good for the world.

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p. 2

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