

**International Affairs Forum Interview:**

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**International Affairs Forum:** Operation Iraqi Freedom may have worked as well as expected – but the aftermath clearly did not. How do you see the situation in Iraq now – a year after the invasion... and the situation in its neighbor states and the U.S. Who is better off – and who is not?

**Christopher A. Preble:** I would begin by challenging your assertion that the aftermath went as well as expected. It is true that the Bush administration went in with unrealistic expectations for the post-war environment, but many people, including some experts within the military and intelligence services, expected that the occupation would be long, difficult, and costly.

The situation in Iraq has clearly worsened since the occupation began. Even as troop levels have remained relatively high, the insurgency grows. Earlier claims that those conducting attacks on U.S. forces were being conducted by Saddam Hussein loyalists and “dead enders” do not bear scrutiny.

Among Iraq’s neighbors, Iran has benefited from the elimination of their principle strategic rival. There is evidence of Iranian involvement within some Iraqi insurgent movements, although I don’t believe all the blame for the strength and size of the opposition can be laid solely at the feet of Iran. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is fearful of the effects of the U.S. occupation of Iraq is having on their own

restive population; and Turkey looks uneasily at Kurdish moves to consolidate their relative autonomy in northern Iraq. Syria has been widely blamed for a host of ills, from harboring terrorists to hiding Iraq’s weapons, even as evidence of their complicity in these alleged crimes remains specious, at best. In short, I don’t see how any country other than Iran has benefited by what has happened in Iraq.

That leaves the Iraqi people themselves. Some are better off today, and many more can be, eventually. I have been genuinely encouraged by their demonstrations of independence and national pride, and there seems to be a general sense that things can improve. However, even as many Iraqis welcome the removal of Saddam Hussein, and most believe that their country is on the right track, most Iraqis want the American occupation to come to a swift end. The United States should accommodate these reasonable aspirations, consistent with American security needs.

**IA-Forum:** The choices that any U.S. administration is left with in Iraq seem bleak. What – if any – choices have we... and does the political will exist to make them and how are they going to play out if enacted and how if not?

**Preble:** There are no good options available to the United States. Whatever we decide to do carries

risk, some of them grave. Our credibility has already suffered as the world has witnessed our inability to eliminate the rising insurgency. Our credibility will continue to suffer so long as we continue to sustain losses in Iraq.

The United States can continue on the current path, with approximately 140,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, and another 30,000 or so in neighboring Kuwait, standing by as an on-call reserve force; expand the U.S. troop presence to a level sufficient to quell the uprising, in all likelihood double that currently in country, and remove all restrictions on the use of force within Iraq, to include the bombing of civilian areas that serve as a haven for terrorists and insurgents; or draw down and ultimately eliminate the U.S. troop presence. In this respect, my views roughly track with those of Dr. Tierney.

However, I do not see “multilateralization” as a viable near-term (let alone long-term) strategy. Very few countries have large ground forces that can be deployed to Iraq, and the few countries that do have large armies (e.g. Turkey, China, North Korea) would not be welcome there for a variety of different reasons. Among the democratic states of Europe and Asia, those who are already providing troops can not easily send more; there is precious little political will for sustaining the operations there, let alone expanding them. Meanwhile, no one should assume that the Iraqi people themselves will tolerate a foreign military presence in their country for an indefinite period of time, even if that occupation does not have an overwhelmingly American face.

**IA-Forum:** What can the goals for the U.S. and Iraqis be in the current crisis... and what solutions are there for the attainment of these goals?

**Preb:** It is in the U.S. interest to end the current occupation and to shift security responsibilities to the Iraqis in the near future. An expeditious, orderly withdrawal, one that allows for the Iraqis to assume a progressively greater share of the burden for their own defense, could commence immediately after nationwide elections are held (hopefully) in January 2005, with all forces out of Iraq by the end of the year.

Two things must be done to facilitate this process. First, the United States must communicate to the people of Iraq that our military withdrawal does not imply that we have chosen to ignore events there. If the people of Iraq do not threaten the United States, if they cooperate with the United States in hunting down and killing anti-American

terrorists, they have nothing to fear. However, if they choose—either as a unified country, or as a confederation of states defined along ethnic or religious lines—to give aid and comfort to those who wish to kill Americans, then we will be back. Our ability to defend our vital security interests, even in a place many thousands of miles away from our shores, does not depend upon the permanent stationing of tens of thousands of U.S. troops. The Taliban learned this lesson the hard way.

Second, beyond the prudent and reasonable demands that Iraq not become a threat to the United States, U.S. policy must not place demands on the Iraqi government that would impede their ability to defend themselves from security threats, both foreign and domestic. This includes arbitrary dictates concerning the structure of their government, or even the structure of the Iraqi state itself. Although we should stress the benefits of democracy, the rule of law, and respect for the rights of ethnic minorities and women, these policies do not directly affect the safety and security of the United States. We must focus on our own security, and leave internal governance issues to the Iraqis.

**IA-Forum:** How does the current state in Iraq play out for the Middle East? The road to democracy sweeping from Baghdad to Tehran, Damascus and Riyadh seems clogged at the time. Can the spreading of democracy of our, western, values still be a goal and if it should be pursued, how can we? At what cost should democratic/liberal values be spread at all – and does it, can it backfire?

**Preb:** If we have learned nothing else from the debacle in Iraq, we must recognize that it is extraordinarily difficult to export democracy by force. There was a time when the shining example set by the United States attracted millions of people to embrace freedom and democracy. By our actions in the region, we have inadvertently strengthened the most ardent foes of liberty. Democratic reform movements throughout the Middle East have suffered as a result of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, as anyone espousing genuinely reformist impulses today is too easily mischaracterized as a stooge for a United States.

Thankfully, freedom-loving people need not sit idly by while so many people in the Middle East struggle under autocracy. History teaches that economic activity, trade, voluntary exchange and person-to-person cultural contact all have the

power to change even the most illiberal and autocratic countries in the world. Peaceful, voluntary exchange is far more in keeping with traditional American principles than an empire of force, dedicated to the principles of compelling “illiberal” nations to heel.

**IA-Forum:** How has U.S. policy changed or how will U.S. policy change because of the Iraq war and aftermath. Is the U.S. strengthened or weakened... and how ought it project her power in the future when her security is in danger?

**Preamble:** It is too soon to say how U.S. policy will change. The practical constraints of an overburdened military have already reined in calls for sending U.S. troops to Liberia and the Darfur region of Sudan, but the lure of so-called humanitarian intervention remains strong.

The primary threat to our security is the erosion of our military strength, both in real and perceived terms. Our military is stretched by our lingering Cold War-era commitments in Europe and Asia, a process that began during the 1990s when U.S. troops were sent on a host of missions that had nothing to do with securing the United States from threats. The process has accelerated in the post-9/11 environment.

We must begin by reassessing our global military posture, and terminate unnecessary deployments in Europe and Asia. Our wealthy, democratic allies are more than capable of defending themselves from threats. Our ability to respond to threats, even those on the other side of the globe, does not depend upon the forward deployment of tens of thousands of troops.

Ultimately, however, the military in the form of large, land-based armies becomes a less and less relevant tool of diplomacy as the threat shifts from state actors to non-state actors. Considerable harm has been done to Al Qaeda through highly targeted military operations in Afghanistan, but the terrorist organization has also been weakened by the cooperation of intelligence agencies, legal and financial restrictions, and patient, vigorous international law enforcement. We must not remain locked in a Cold War mindset when we are fighting an enemy so dramatically different from the old Soviet Union.

**IA-Forum:** How does that question apply to Iran or North Korea?

**Preamble:** Iran and North Korea are both states. They can be deterred from attacking the United States directly by our overwhelming military power, including our unmatched nuclear capability. Generally speaking, their own nascent nuclear capability, if it exists, does not pose an immediate threat to the citizens of the United States.

There is one exception to this formulation, however. If either Iran or North Korea were to deliver nuclear weapons to non-state actors, this would pose a threat. And, almost by definition, non-state actors cannot be deterred by the prodigious U.S. arsenal. Therefore, while we can and should counsel all states against developing nuclear weapons by stressing that the advantages are far outweighed by the costs, the United States must make a distinction between a nuclear weapons program intended solely for its deterrent value, and the deliberate proliferation of nuclear weapons to non-state actors. We could reluctantly tolerate the former; we should treat the latter as an imminent threat to the United States warranting the complete and total destruction of the regime guilty of giving such weapons to terrorists.

**IA-Forum:** Owen Harries, Senior Fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies in Sidney writes in a July FT op-ed that the excessive power of the U.S. led to hubris. (“When things go wrong, there is an inclination to blame the failure on lack of resolve, insufficient support or bad luck rather than on the folly and impracticability of ones goals.” Accurate or off ??

**Preamble:** Owen Harries is correct. Hubris is a concept that should be familiar to most people today. Our power to compel individuals or states to do things that run directly contrary to their own interests is extremely limited. That was always the case, but Iraq revealed the truth for all to see. We retain the ability and right to defend ourselves from threats. Saddam Hussein, if he was ever a threat (and I was always skeptical of that claim), poses a threat to no one from a prison cell. Removing him from power was the relatively easy part.

We err whenever we step beyond that, and presume that we can dictate to others how they should govern themselves. It has nothing to do with a lack of will, improper tactics, or bad luck. It has everything to do with the nettlesome problem of nationalism and self-determination, in which individuals—be they Shiite, Sunni, Kurd, Hindu,

Sikh, or Irish Catholic—resist the imposition of values by well-armed foreigners.

**IA-Forum:** Do you see a transformation of U.S. foreign policy to follow the Iraq war as was the case for almost three decades after Vietnam.

**Preble:** The transformation should have occurred after the Cold War, but the overwhelming size and strength of our military masked our real limitations. Those practical limitations are far clearer today. If the debacle in Iraq ultimately prompts a fundamental reassessment of our foreign policy, then it will be a slim silver lining in an otherwise very dark cloud. But, frankly, I am pessimistic, because I already see the debate over what happened in Iraq turning on questions of tactics, not fundamental strategy. Too few people question the wisdom of taking military action against cruel dictators who are believed to possess weapons of mass destruction. Many Americans remain convinced that the Bush administration's goals were sound (and in many ways consistent with the Clinton administration's policies in the late 1990s) but his critics charge that he erred by "rushing to war" or by failing to bring along France and Germany.

This is short-sighted. The next time around, we can be *sure* that the dictator in question is horrible, brutal, and irredeemable. We can be *sure* that he possesses weapons of mass destruction. We can send in enough troops, seal the borders, and make the water and electricity flow. But we cannot by force of arms compel people to "elect good men" as Woodrow Wilson famously declared he was going to do, beginning with the invasion of Veracruz, Mexico in 1914. In short, we should ask ourselves whether our security truly depends upon the overthrow over every undemocratic dictator in the world. And, if the American people believe that it does, they must be prepared to pay the enormous costs to make this happen.

I am confident that they will opt for the more sensible route of using direct attacks on Al Qaeda and other anti-American terrorists; deterrence to prevent direct attacks by state-actors against the United States; and peaceful voluntary intercourse within an increasingly efficient global marketplace to advance the ideas of liberty.

**IA-Forum:** If the U.S. had not invaded Iraq, how would we control dictators and their aim to harm the U.S.?

**Preble:** We don't control dictators now, having invaded Iraq, so I don't agree with the formulation of the question.

We remain the most successful and prosperous country in the world, and we were founded on principles that directly threaten the power of despots. It is probably not too much of an exaggeration to say that most dictators have more to fear from our commercial culture—from Mickey Mouse and Britney Spears to Coca-Cola and McDonalds—than from our military might.

For all of these reasons, many dictators harbor resentment—and perhaps even hatred—for the United States. Among those who hate us, precious few have the capability to do direct harm to us, here, in the United States. And even if they did have such a capability, the knowledge that any attack upon the United States would result in their complete and total annihilation would deter all but the most deranged lunatics.

However, we must be careful not to replace rational tyrants who love life, and who can be deterred, with irrational zealots, who are impervious to deterrence because they celebrate death over life. There is a difference, and we must focus our efforts on eradicating the latter, because they cannot be reformed, before they do harm to us here.

**IA-Forum:** How will European and other powers – Russia, India, Japan, China come to mind – have to adapt their politics and even their thinking in order to ensure a cordial cooperative relation with the U.S., regardless who is her President?

**Preble:** Other European and Asian powers will have to take a greater and greater responsibility for their own defense. There is simply no alternative. The pressures are two-fold: first, the United States cannot afford to indefinitely underwrite these costs, especially as the risks increase; and, second, precisely because the political will is lacking in the United States for maintaining obsolete security alliances, the credibility of our deterrent is seriously eroded.

The other major impetus behind a resurgence of other powers is the inherent multi-polarity of the international system. For all the talk of unipolarity, benign hegemony or empire (whichever term you prefer), other countries are simply not willing to trust the United States to do right by them all the time. Self-interest is a very powerful force, and we should not expect other states to risk their own security on the promise that American power will

always be deployed in ways that advance their interests.

This is difficult for many Americans to understand. Many see us as providing a universal global good, promising to maintain a preponderant military and to deploy this force in a selfless way. But the proponents of a continuation of the unipolar system dramatically understate the costs and risks that unipolarity imposes upon the American public, and they are equally disdainful of the suggestion that other countries would object to U.S. power. They argue that the international order has been fundamentally, irreparably altered by a new kind of benign hegemony. Other states, they argue, should be grateful for our largesse, and deferential to our dictates. The Athenians believed the same thing in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and the conflict that engulfed all of Greece ultimately destroyed Athenian democracy.

**IA-Forum:** George Bush jr. is going to be reelected while running – in part – on the issue of the War

on Terror. If your view is inconsistent with that of the majority of the American people who find strong leadership and courage important in times like these, can you elaborate on how you reconcile that for yourself?

**Preble:** I obviously am troubled and disappointed that many Americans seem convinced that American power can be applied in particular ways, even when the facts suggest otherwise. Americans value strong leadership and courage, and are discouraged by suggestions that there are real limitations to what we can and cannot do as a nation.

But there are limits, and we must carefully and wisely deploy our resources in ways that can best ensure safety and security for all Americans. Here let me echo John Tierney: there is a fine line between conviction and stubbornness; between introspection and self-doubt. I don't think it a sign of weakness to consider facts in a dispassionate objective manner, and to adjust strategy and tactics in response.

