

We Are Still All Americans



Julian Borger

To cite *Le Monde* from September 2001, “We are all Americans now.” This time, however, we are so, not out of sympathy but because we all feel dragged along in the wake of American domestic and foreign policy.

We could never have foretold quite how important a turning point the Florida fiasco was in the 2000 presidential election. I believe that an American government, led by the candidate who won the popular vote nationally, would have acted differently. It would have gone to war in Afghanistan after September 11. It would not have gone to war in Iraq, it would not have opted out of so many international treaties and obligations, and it would not have lurched toward unilateralism.

Some see this turn toward unilateralism and military intervention as part of a continuous trajectory starting with the Korean War and running through Vietnam, Central America, the first Gulf War, the Balkans, and finally the invasion of Iraq. They call it the “American empire in the making.” But to bandy words around like “empire” suggests a sort of fatalism, and it clouds the varying nature of each juncture.

THE NATURE OF U.S. MILITARY INVOLVEMENT

The importance of not lumping together all military interventions is perhaps best illustrated by the Balkans. My point of view is very heavily influenced by spending time as a reporter in Croatia, Bosnia, and then Kosovo. I believe quite strongly that the American-led NATO intervention there was a rare instance of a just war, a war driven by morality, a morality that filtered through the public opinions in Britain and America to their respective political leaderships, which made the decisions.

Nonintervention before 1995 in Bosnia was the obscenity, as was nonintervention in Rwanda. To a certain extent we have to step aside from the post-war in Iraq

to make independent and sensible decisions about what ought to be done in places like Congo and Liberia, where there are very pressing cases for American leadership. The military intervention in these circumstances does not represent neocolonialism. It represents, at best, some sort of international attempt at decency.

The Bosnia and Kosovo conflict showed that the murderous dictators who people said couldn't be stopped, and the intractable civil wars people said couldn't be stopped by external intervention, could in fact be stopped with a relatively light show of force.

In the case of Bosnia, the conflict was stopped, despite what we were told about how the Serbs kept German divisions pinned down in the Balkans for years and would have done the same to NATO. I believe one of the more promising developments of the 1990s was the reevaluation of the U.N. doctrine of nonintervention in the internal affairs of other countries, to begin to make exceptions for genocide and for other atrocities of a sufficiently high brutality.

But the just nature of the Bosnian intervention makes the Iraq war all the more depressing. In the absence of finding weapons of mass destruction, the promising and the useful principle of humanitarian intervention was exploited as a sort of stopgap, as the most cynical of fig leaves for this particular foreign adventure, which has been motivated by a mixture of oil and American domestic political paranoia.

From a humanitarian point of view, the time to intervene in Iraq would have been more than a decade ago, when Saddam Hussein embarked on genocidal campaigns against the Kurds and the Shi'a. By the time the United States and Britain went to war in Iraq, the effective deterrents against genocide were basically in place. It was a brutal dictatorship, but not necessarily worse than a score of others around the world. And if saving lives was an issue, then Congo should clearly have been at the top of the list.

The war in Iraq hasn't stopped the killing but has added to it. The war undermined the case for the future use of force, in conditions under which force might genuinely prevent another genocide or might genuinely avoid a real threat of catastrophic proliferation.

We should not turn away from foreign military involvement. Instead, we should be exerting as much energy in serious debate about intervention to stem the bloodshed in Congo and Liberia as pushing for the restoration of self-rule in Iraq. But such military intervention has to be within a broader legal and institutional framework, and this is a framework that the American administration is intent on destroying.

With the administration's backing, Congress cut off aid, in theory, to every country that failed to sign a specific exemption for American soldiers from prosecution under the International Criminal Court. The administration has not just unsigned its own treaty that established the court; it has committed itself to bullying other countries into falling into line, to try to destroy the institution.

As the world's sole superpower, the American government believes that it doesn't have to be subjected to the same rules as other countries. But unless Washington makes an effort to build some kind of new moral and legal infrastructure for the post-Cold War world under which the issues of human rights transcend borders, the military interventions it undertakes, even those with humanitarian motives (as Bosnia and Kosovo) ultimately will be doomed. American actions overseas will continue to be perceived as the self-interested whims of a global bully.

COMMUNICATING THE FAILURE IN IRAQ

In Iraq, American and British troops are stuck with the consequences of an entire litany of bad decisions. There is no choice but to pursue the current counterinsurgency against the Saddamists and the many guerrilla groups that are appearing. There is no other way now than for the Americans to fight their way out and at the same time flood the country with cash in an attempt to buy their way out.

You can't destroy a country's government and then withdraw before a genuine replacement has been built. You can't leave chaos in your wake. There is no excuse for the American failure to plan for and have a constabulary standing by. America ignored the reports about the need for a force to restore public order after the main fighting had ended. Disbanding the Iraqi army was a criminal mistake, and it cost the United States a great deal of credibility. One would have thought that the United States would have learned that lesson in Panama and the Balkans, where the lack of postcombat policing produced well-documented problems.

The flow of aid in Iraq has to be turned on properly, and the failure to pay civil servants and soldiers and show progress toward rebuilding civilian infrastructure is also a lapse of mind-boggling ineptitude. The lapse is all the more inexcusable because it was made first in Afghanistan before it was repeated in Iraq. That sort of ineptitude is inevitably going to cost the lives of American and British soldiers, not to mention Iraqi and Afghan civilians.

This point certainly has been made in Britain, but less so in America. The British stereotype is that Americans have a short, MTV attention span. But the lapses in American policy can and should be spelled out to the American citizenry and debated publicly. Americans must be made to grasp the consequences of the ineptitude in Iraq.

The daily choices made by American editors have a lot to do with the citizenry grasping the truth. In the British journalistic tradition, the newspapers do decide that we are going to have a crusade about this now, and we are going to keep on hammering about it, and it will become the news. If the *Daily Telegraph* or the *Guardian* decides to have a sustained rant about a certain subject, then it is picked up in the electronic media as well. The politicians follow. There is a different power structure

between journalism and the politicians in Britain than there is in America, which is probably just a function of Britain being a much smaller country. But the potential still exists for American nongovernmental organizations to pressure mainstream media and use alternative media to point out the way American lapses have repeated themselves.

The worst outcome from the point of view of the media would be for the general public to believe that somehow Iraq had become a problem solved. This is what the American general public obviously believes about Afghanistan.

Amid the confusion and turmoil in Iraq, the important lessons of September 11 are beginning to fade, and one of those lessons was that the United States can't be insulated from the very deep ingrained anger and hopelessness that exist in the Middle East and the Arab world.

America and Western Europe can't be made safe without the investment of serious amounts of political and financial capital in the Arab world. Iraq must be stabilized and rebuilt, and demonstrably not at the expense of the Iraqi natural resources doled out to corporations that have all contributed to conservative interests and conservative election campaigns.

Iraq does have a sizeable industrial infrastructure. It has civil engineering expertise and construction companies. To continue to ignore that capacity would obviously be another in a long list of very devastating mistakes in the war and post-war.

THE ULTIMATE ISSUE: DISMANTLING THE WEST BANK SETTLEMENTS

Many American conservatives believe that the road to Jerusalem runs through Baghdad. If democracy can be established in Iraq, they reason, other Arab regimes will feel pressure to reform. Reform will promote moderate groups in Arab countries. Those groups will help force Arab countries to withdraw their support for Islamic extremism. According to this logic, Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation then will diminish—and clear the way for a new Israeli-Palestinian equilibrium that is favorable to Israel.

This doctrine is frightening to a host of observers in the Middle East and Europe. It could pave the way for more American intervention, say in Syria. It would remove from the American government the need to seriously reengage in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Without resolution, runs the counterlogic, any move toward true democracy in the Arab world will bring Islamic extremists to power.

What really is needed is investment of White House time and political capital—to acknowledge that this Baghdad-to-Jerusalem scenario is unrealistic and to give momentum back to the Middle East peace initiative. When you talk to the staff of

Prime Minister Blair, they say the American government promised breakthroughs in the Middle East. The prime minister helped the Americans, so now the Americans must return the favor. But putting overt pressure on the Israelis now is taboo in America.

The Palestinians have reformed their administration and the military pullbacks have begun, but the ultimate ground-level issue in the Middle East is dismantling the settlements. Palestinians have to be seen on Al-Jazeera going back to their olive groves. They must be seen as going back to their family land for there to be any sense of momentum.

The importance of this single issue is hard to overstate. Given political realities, it is impossible to imagine dismantling of the settlements. On the one hand, we would be seeing Palestinians going back to the olive groves, but on the other we would be seeing Israeli settlers being ripped out of the West Bank, and that's going to be difficult. That is the bitter pill that any Israeli leader would have to swallow, and any American president standing behind that Israeli leader would have to take a whole lot of flak from his base in order to push Israel into it. As difficult as this would be, it obviously has been done before, in the Sinai, and reasonable new solutions have been proposed (see Chris Toensing's plan in chapter 16).

Without movement on the issue of settlements, Arab hatred of America will deepen and metastasize. In a way, all of this is extraordinary, because the Arab world is the most instinctively pro-American place I have ever lived. They all play basketball in Ramallah. They dream of the National Basketball Association, and they dream about American scholarships. The amount of goodwill that has been lost there is quite striking. It has to become an issue at some point because it is so directly tied to what America is facing now in the war against terrorism.

I am not saying al Qaeda is at its heart a ward of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. But it is able to live in the Middle East and the Islamic world because of the U.S. failure to do anything about Israel-Palestine over the decades. Only by going to the source of that problem are you going to begin to take al Qaeda apart.

In the long run, the only place where the tide of the American war on terror can be turned is on the hilltops of the West Bank.

These connections emerged very clearly in the public debate in Britain and in Europe. Yet they really don't figure in the public debate in America, nor are they prominent in the American media. Arguably it is not the media's job to make these connections, but the American media were happy enough to allege a connection between Saddam and al Qaeda, as well as to allege a connection between Saddam and weapons of mass destruction.

The West Bank settlements are part of the solution, and for them not to be part of the American public debate, for reasons of long-held taboos, verges on the absurd. Many politicians admit the connection but feel unable to raise the issue. At some point, the line has to be crossed. For how long can this kind of dissonance go on?

The right-of-return issue is the Palestinian equivalent of the settlement issue. But if the settlements are seriously addressed, then the mood may change and the difficult may become easier.

THE FUTURE OF TERRORISM

As David Corn observes in chapter 11, a key question is whether the Democrats will put these issues on the map. They are the underlying issues that make it more likely that at some point down the road in the next few years there will be a terrorist attack using a weapon of mass destruction.

The absence of American debate on the core Israeli-Palestinian issue represents a very serious dysfunction in American political life which could literally have catastrophic consequences for Americans and Brits and Europeans and Iraqis and Afghans.

At the end of the day, *Le Monde* was right. We are still all Americans.

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