Election posters on a wall in Baghdad last Jan. 23. In the elections a week later, about 58 percent of Iraq’s eligible voters turned out to elect a national assembly.

October 30, 2005

'The Right War?' and 'A Matter of Principle': Everybody Is a Realist Now

By JAMES TRAUB, New York Times

ON the whole, it has been a very satisfying postwar period for opponents of the American engagement in Iraq. I have agreed to pay off a bet with a friend who had rather gleefully predicted a steady flow of body bags from the battlefield. She's been vindicated as well on the W.M.D. front, for, like quite a few people with no apparent access to intelligence data, she "always knew" that Saddam Hussein no longer had his weapons of mass destruction, just as she always knew the whole venture would miscarry. Well, I tip my hat to her foresight; the news from Iraq has in fact been so hellish that many doubtful supporters of the war - the 55-45ers, as I like to call us - have been forced to rethink their calculus.

But the bloodshed and the chaos, and the Bush administration's hubris and sometimes unfathomable nonchalance, have obscured the powerful case for war that existed as of March 2003, when hostilities began, and that still survives, if barely, today. And though the stunning failure to find any evidence that Hussein had reconstituted his weapons programs is taken as a trump by the war's opponents, the case for war did not actually depend on the threat of imminent attack - even if the White House said otherwise. Virtually all of the essays collected in "The Right War? The Conservative Debate on Iraq," edited by Gary Rosen, the managing editor of Commentary, and in "A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq," edited by Thomas Cushman, the editor in chief of The Journal of Human Rights, were written after October 2003, when the weapons inspector David Kay put the kibosh on President Bush's prewar claims. And while several of the authors closest to the administration try to fudge the facts, and others have in fact changed their minds, most argue that Hussein's reckless expansionism, and his peerless brutality, justified the war even without vats of anthrax.

"Saddam's regime itself was the problem," as William Kristol and Robert Kagan write in a 2004 essay reprintedin "The Right War?," "above and beyond his weapons capabilities." They note that the policy of regime change began with the Clinton administration, and they quote Sandy Berger, Clinton's national security adviser, as asserting that Hussein was not only a menace to the region but "a source of inspiration for those who equate violence with power and compromise with surrender." The terrorist attacks of 9/11 increased the urgency to act, they say, not because Hussein was in any sense their author but because the bolt from the blue forced policy makers to focus on "the possible nexus between terrorism and Iraq's weapons program."

Could we afford to guess wrong, given the evidence of Hussein's intentions and capacities? Jeffrey Herf, a historian whose essay appears in "A Matter of Principle," a collection of articles making the "liberal internationalist" case for war, observes that a preememptive war against Germany in 1938 might have prevented World War II and the Holocaust, though it would have been roundly criticized since Hitler had not yet shown his hand.

Herf's argument is indistinguishable from many that appear in the conservative collection "The Right War?" In general, one thinks of the conservative rationale for war as Hobbesian - a matter of self-preservation in a chaotic world - and the liberal one as Kantian, an
acceptance of moral obligations to others. And it's true that the authors represented in "The Right War?" put more stock in "good for us," while those in "A Matter of Principle" ground their claims more in "good for them." But it's mostly a matter of emphasis. Kristol and Kagan, for example, accept the humanitarian argument for war in Iraq, while Christopher Hitchens, a polemical warrior of the left, at least until very recently, argues that the "Islamofascism" embodied in Saddam Hussein's Baath regime represents an existential threat the West must be prepared to confront and destroy.

A decade ago, the question of humanitarian intervention, above all in Bosnia, split both left and right into antiwar "realists" and prowar moralists, or "Wilsonians." What is clear from these two volumes is that 9/11 fused the two arguments into one, for enemies embodying a totalitarian and obscurantist culture had reached out to deal us a terrible blow. This Islamofascist culture was as dangerous to us as to its domestic victims. President Bush, who entered office as a realist vowing to put "interests" ahead of "values," became the chief exponent of a revived Wilsonianism. "We support . . . democracy in the Middle East," he said, "because it is a founding principle, and because it is in our interest."

Debate on the war is now, in effect, organized around this view - whether it is valid, whether it can be applied to Iraq, whether the Bush administration has hopelessly botched the execution. "Democracy promotion" has cleaved opinion on both sides, as humanitarian intervention did before. On the right, the "paleos" dismiss the project as a dangerous pipe dream - a form of "democratic imperialism," in Patrick Buchanan's phrase. Buchanan has largely lost his purchase on respectable conservative opinion, but the skepticism about human prospects upon which traditional conservatism is founded makes many figures on the right doubt that the democratization project will work in the Arab world. Germany and Japan, our great nation-building successes, had been modern, if not liberal-democratic, states in the past; Iraq, of course, was not. And as Francis Fukuyama observes, neconservatives made their name by warning "about the dangers of ambitious social engineering," and about the difficulty of transforming a pathological culture. The old-line realists fear that the neocons have lost themselves in fantasies of transformation traditionally confined to the left.

Indeed, on the evidence of "The Right War?" the neocons do seem trapped in their own ironclad premises. If the war was both supremely just and supremely necessary - if the alternative really was Munich - then there can be no reckoning with bad consequences, no weighing in a balance. The horrors we commit cannot be horrible. Norman Podhoretz, the editor at large of Commentary, is - for reasons I won't bother to speculate about - granted more than a quarter of the acreage in "The Right War?" in order to broil familiar enemies in his familiar auto-da-fé. He concedes that "the aftermath of major military operations" was "rougher than the Pentagon seems to have expected." But then he immediately observes that more Americans died on D-Day.

By the same token, real achievements must be raised to world-historical proportions. The neoconservative essayist Reuel Marc Gerecht offers the following "analytical bet of high probability and enormous returns. . . . The Jan. 30 elections will do for the people of Iraq, and after them, in all likelihood, the rest of the Arab world, what the end of the European imperial period did not: show the way to sovereignty without tyranny." This way to the parimutuel window, Mr. Gerecht.

The debate being played out inside "The Right War?" is not so much the familiar one between unsentimental realists and Wilsonian idealists as between doctrinal absolutists and empiricists. "Foreign policy is not theology," writes Fareed Zakaria, the editor of Newsweek International. "A policy that might have been wise crumbles if the costs become prohibitive." Zakaria initially supported the war and still believes that democracy can flourish in the Arab world. The problem, he writes, "is that the Bush administration's inept version of nation-building failed." The problem, more deeply, is that the theologically inclined will not accept the fact that others, including intended beneficiaries, do not see us as we see ourselves, or react as we wish them to react.

The debate inside the left is of course a very different one, but also involves an absolutism that will not take account of individual cases. The absolutism, in this case, is an abhorrence of American power - an abhorrence greatly magnified by hatred for George W. Bush and all his works. The journalist Ian Buruma, though not a supporter of the war, has accused the fashionable left of practicing a form of moral racism, in which the brutalities of the West provoke outrage but the far greater crimes of third-world monsters like Saddam Hussein are passed over in silence. A magisterial nonchalance marches under the banner of moral superiority. Apropos the novelist Julian Barnes's comment that the war wasn't worth the loss of a single life, Norman Geras, a British political theorist, mordantly observes, "Not one, eh? So much for the victims of the rape rooms and the industrial shredders." But of course to admit otherwise would be to credit the Americans, and even the Bush administration, with moral insight and the capacity for good. How much more satisfying to revel in the administration's richly deserved comeuppance!
New Iraqi soldiers parade at their graduation ceremony in the northern city of Tikrit last April.

"A Matter of Principle" will be sobering reading to many American liberals, especially those who took comfort in the near-universal European opposition to the war. Among the most powerful essays in the volume are those by French or German scholars taking their own countrymen to task. With the threat of the cold war over, writes Richard Herzinger, an editor of Die Zeit, the old cry of "Never again!" had lost its meaning of never again submission in favor of never again war - as if force itself were the great peril, and thus America, the most forceful nation, the chief enemy of peace. This is what Robert Kagan means when he describes the Kantian paradise Europeans have sought to take refuge in. They, no less than the Americans, and perhaps more, fit 9/11 into the world as they already understood it, and as they wished it to be.

Do we truly know what is required in order to defend democratic principles in the face of attack from those who consider themselves divinely inspired? (I am referring, of course, to Islamic fundamentalists, not the Bush administration.) "A Matter of Principle" includes a backbone-stiffening contribution from Adam Michnik, a political philosopher, a founder of Solidarity in Poland and an authentic hero of the democratic left. Asked whether it isn't "paradoxical" to advocate violence as a means to advance human rights, Michnik snaps, "I can't remember any text of mine where I said one should fight Hitler without violence; I'm not an idiot. . . . In the state of Saddam, the opposition could find a place only in cemeteries."

James Traub is writing a book on the United Nations in the era of Kofi Annan.
October 30, 2005

'The Assassins' Gate': Occupational Hazards

By FAREED ZAKARIA

IN "The Assassins' Gate," his chronicle of the Iraq war, George Packer tells the tale of Drew Erdmann, a young American official in Baghdad. Erdmann, a recent Harvard Ph.D. in history, finds himself rereading Marc Bloch's classic firsthand account of the fall of France in 1940, "Strange Defeat." He was particularly drawn to a few lines. "The ABC of our profession," Bloch wrote, "is to avoid . . . large abstract terms in order to try to discover behind them the only concrete realities, which are human beings." The story of America in Iraq is one of abstract ideas and concrete realities. "Between them," Packer says, "lies a distance even greater than the 8,000 miles from Washington to Baghdad."

Packer begins his absorbing account with the ideas that led the United States to war. A few neoconservatives, most prominently Paul Wolfowitz, had long believed that ousting Saddam Hussein would pave the way for a grand reordering of the Middle East, pushing it away from tyranny and anti-Americanism and toward modernity and democracy. Others, including Douglas Feith, explained that eliminating Hussein would be particularly good for Israel's security. But the broadest reason to intervene in Iraq was that it was a bold use of American power that mixed force with idealism. Many neoconservatives were Reaganites who believed in an assertive, even aggressive, American posture in the world. For them the 1990's - under Bush père and Clinton alike - had been years of retreat. "They were supremely confident," Packer writes, "all they needed was a mission." But they wouldn't have had one without 9/11. As one of the neoconservatives Packer interviewed correctly points out, "September 11 is the turning point. Not anything else." After 9/11, Bush - and many Americans, including many liberals - were searching for a use of the nation's power that mixed force with idealism and promised to reorder the Middle East. In Iraq they found it.

Packer collects his articles from The New Yorker but goes well beyond them. His book lacks a tight thesis or structure and as a result meanders at times, petering out in its final sections. But this is more than made up for by the sheer integrity and intelligence of its reporting, from Washington, New York, London and, of course, Iraq. Packer provides page after page of vivid description of the haphazard, poorly planned and almost criminally executed occupation of Iraq. In reading him we see the staggering gap between abstract ideas and concrete reality.

Hard as it is to believe, the Bush administration took on the largest foreign policy project in a generation with little planning or forethought. It occupied a foreign country of 25 million people in the heart of the Middle East pretty much on the fly. Packer, who was in favor of the war, reserves judgment and commentary in most of the book but finally cannot contain himself: "Swaddled in abstract
ideas . . . indifferent to accountability," those in positions of highest responsibility for Iraq "turned a difficult undertaking into a needlessly deadly one," he writes. "When things went wrong, they found other people to blame."

Packer recounts the prewar discussions in the State Department's "Future of Iraq Project," which produced an enormous document outlining the political challenges in governing Iraq. He describes Drew Erdmann's memo, written for Colin Powell, analyzing previous postwar reconstructions in the 20th century. Erdmann's conclusion was that success depended on two factors, establishing security and having international support. These internal documents were mirrored by several important think-tank studies that all made similar points, specifically on the need for large-scale forces to maintain security. One would think that this Hobbesian message - that order is the first requisite of civilization - would appeal to conservatives. In fact all of this careful planning and thinking was ignored or dismissed.

Part of the problem was the brutal and debilitating struggle between the State Department and the Defense Department, producing an utterly dysfunctional policy process. The secretary of the Army, Thomas White, who was fired after the invasion, explained to Packer that with the Defense Department "the first issue was, we've got to control this thing - so everyone else was suspect." The State Department was regarded as the enemy, so what chance was there of working with other countries? The larger problem was that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (and probably Dick Cheney) doggedly believed nation-building was a bad idea, the Clinton administration has done too much of it, and the American military should stop doing it. Rumsfeld explained this view in a couple of speeches and op-ed articles that were short on facts and long on polemics. But how to square this outlook with invading Iraq? Assume away the need for nation-building. Again, White explains: "We had the mind-set that this would be a relatively straightforward, manageable task, because this would be a war of liberation, and therefore reconstruction would be short-lived." Rumsfeld's spokesman, Larry Di Rita, went to Kuwait in April 2003 and told the American officials waiting there that the State Department had messed up Bosnia and Kosovo and that the Bush administration intended to hand over power to Iraqis and leave within three months.

SO the Army's original battle plan for 500,000 troops got whittled down to 160,000. If Gen. Tommy Franks "hadn't offered some resistance, the number would have dropped well below 100,000," Packer says. At one point, Franks's predecessor, Anthony Zinni, inquired into the status of "Desert Crossing," his elaborate postwar plan that covered the sealing of borders, securing of weapons sites, provision of order and so on. He was told that it had been discarded because its assumptions were "too negative."

As the looting began and went unchecked, the occupation lost its aura of authority and began spiraling downward. Iraq's first czar, Jay Garner, was quickly replaced, as were dozens of American officials, in what was the first of a stream of shifts, countershifts and bureaucratic battles. Garner was followed by L. Paul Bremer. Bremer was an intelligent man but his previous administrative experience was confined to running the American Embassy in The Netherlands. In any event, his two catastrophic decisions were probably made in Washington - disbanding the Iraqi Army and de-Baathification, which banned from government service the entire top four levels of the Baath Party, regardless of whether any of the individuals affected had been implicated in any crime. (In Iraq, to be banned from the public sector was effectively to be forced into unemployment.) Packer writes that "at least 35,000 mostly Sunni employees of the bureaucracy, including thousands of schoolteachers and midlevel functionaries, lost their jobs overnight." Thousands more were purged subsequently.

Bremer has often argued that the deBaathification decree was his most popular act. This is probably true, among the Shiites. But that would be like saying that had he proclaimed independence for the Kurds, it would have gone down well in Iraq's northern regions. As a balancing act that kept Iraq's three communities at peace, it was a disaster. Bremer's decisions signaled to Iraq's Sunnis that they would be stripped of their jobs and status in the new Iraq. Imagine if, after apartheid, South Africa's blacks had announced that all whites would be purged from the army, civil service, universities and big businesses. In one day, Bremer had upended the social structure of the country. And he did this without having in place a new ruling cadre that could take over from the old Sunni bureaucrats.

These decisions did not cause the insurgency, though it is worth noting that for the first few months of the occupation, Sunni Falluja was much less of a problem for the United States than was Shiite Najaf. But Bremer fueled the dissatisfaction of the Sunnis, who now had no jobs but plenty of guns. And most especially, his decisions added to the chaos and dysfunction that were rapidly rising in Iraq. "We expected the Americans would make the country an example, a second Europe," an unemployed electrician told Packer in the first year of the occupation. "That's why we didn't fight back. And we are shocked, as if we've gone back 100 years."
Packer describes an occupation that was focused more on rewarding confederates than gaining success on the ground. Garner received instructions from Feith and Wolfowitz to be nice to the Iraqi exile leader Ahmad Chalabi, who was a favorite of the Pentagon. State Department officials were barred from high posts in Baghdad, even when they were uniquely qualified. Senior jobs went to Feith's former law partner and to the brother of Ari Fleischer, Bush's press secretary. Friendly American firms like Halliburton were favored over local Iraqis.

Packer describes in microcosm something that has infected conservatism in recent years. Conservatives live in fear of being betrayed ideologically. They particularly distrust nonpartisan technocrats - experts - who they suspect will be seduced by the "liberal establishment." The result, in government, journalism and think tanks alike, is a profusion of second-raters whose chief virtue is that they are undeniably "sound." The simplest proof of the myriad American errors is that, starting around May 2004, Washington began reversing course wholesale. Troop withdrawals were postponed. The decision to hold caucuses and delay elections was shelved. The American-appointed Governing Council was abolished. The hated United Nations was asked to come in and create and bless a new body. In recent months, the reversal is wholesale. The United States has been bribing tribal sheiks, urging the Iraqi government to end de-Baathification and make a concerted effort to bring the Sunnis back into the political process.

Where is Iraq today? The continuing violence in the Sunni areas has kept most Americans from recognizing what is actually happening in the country. America's blunders forced Washington, hastily and with little planning, to hand over power to those Iraqis who were organized for it - the Kurds and the Shiite religious parties. Iraq is currently three different lands - though not three different countries. In the north, the Kurds run a relatively benign form of one-party democracy. In the south, while things are stable, in several places, Shiite religious groups, often with their own militias, have imposed their rule. Packer describes the disjunction: "Inside the Green Zone, long hours of negotiation about the role of Islam and women's rights . . . outside a harsh social code enforced by vigilante rule." And in the center, of course, is a war zone.

Let's be clear: Iraq today is a much better, even more liberal, place than Saddam Hussein's Iraq. It has elements that are more progressive than many Arab countries. Divided rule and a federal structure may produce real checks and balances on absolute power. And its negotiations, debates and elections have had a positive effect. But Iraq is also plainly not what so many had hoped it would be - a model and inspiration for the Arab world. For every day of elections, there are months of chaos, crime and corruption. Things will improve but it will take years, not months. And the costs have been unconscionably high - for Americans and Iraqis.

Was all this inevitable? Did the United States take on something impossible? That seems to be the conventional wisdom today. If so, what to make of Afghanistan? That country is deeply divided. It has not had a functioning government in three decades, some would argue three centuries, and yet it is coming together under a progressive leader. Two million Afghan refugees have voted with their feet and returned to their country (unlike Iraq, where people are leaving every day). And the reasons? The United States allied itself with forces on the ground that could keep order. It handed over the political process to the international community, preventing any stigma of a neocolonial occupation (it was the United Nations that created the loya jirga, the national assembly, and produced Hamid Karzai). It partnered with NATO for much of the routine military work. In fact the Afghan National Army is being trained by the United States - and France. And it has accepted certain facts of Afghan life, like the power of its warlords, working slowly to change them.

"The Iraq war was always winnable," Packer writes, "it still is. For this very reason, the recklessness of its authors is hard to forgive." But it is not just recklessness. The book that Drew Erdmann should have been reading in Iraq was not "Strange Defeat" but his dissertation adviser Ernest May's recent emendation to it, "Strange Victory." In it, May explains that the fall of France was not inevitable at all. It happened because the French made some key misjudgments. Presciently, May argues that "Western democracies today exhibit many of the same characteristics that France and Britain did in 1938-40 - arrogance, a strong disinclination to risk life in battle, heavy reliance on technology as a substitute and governmental procedures poorly designed for anticipating or coping with ingenious challenges from the comparatively weak." Above all, he emphasizes the fatal cost of arrogance, closing his book with the injunction of Oliver Cromwell in 1650 to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland: "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken." No one in the Bush administration ever did, and so we are where we are in Iraq.

Fareed Zakaria is the editor of Newsweek International, the author of "The Future of Freedom" and the host of the PBS show "Foreign Exchange."