

Iraq: The Mistake Was Staying

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, MAR 8 2013

It is easy to have regrets when reflecting back on the 2003 US led invasion of Iraq. Nearly 4500 Americans died there in the occupation that followed and tens of thousands more were wounded. Hundreds of billions of American tax dollars were wasted in the largely futile effort to reform Iraq. The country was wrecked and many, many Iraqis suffered greatly in the process. After all this pain and our departure, it is still uncertain whether or not democracy will take root in Iraq, burdened as it is by continuing sectarian violence and corruption. Nevertheless, I believe the decision to invade was right and necessary. The policy mistake was staying there beyond the destruction of Saddam Hussein's regime.

The invasion was necessary not because Saddam was behind the 9/11 attacks on the United States. He wasn't. Not because many (understandably) believed in 2003 that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction. And certainly not because I wanted the US to help convert the Middle East to democracy with Iraq becoming the leading example. For me the necessary reason was the need for the US to leave Saudi Arabia, the home of the two Holy Mosques of Islam. In 2003 the US had over 10,000 troops in Saudi Arabia, mostly airmen, protecting that country, the world's prime oil supplier, from Saddam who had threatened it since his invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Al Qaeda's attack on the US was in large part justified to the Muslim world by our presence in Saudi Arabia. Although we would seek al Qaeda's utter destruction, we had to leave Saudi Arabia. The road out of Saudi Arabia led through Baghdad. Why? Because Saudi Arabia would not be safe with Saddam in power. With Saddam deposed, we left Saudi in August 2003.

Accepting Colin Powell's ridiculous and gratuitous Pottery Barn rule—you break it, you own it—was the mistake. Staying in Iraq turned America from a liberator into an occupier. Our promises to develop and democratize the nation apparently meant little to the Iraqis. Many there thought we had designs on their oil wealth. Others saw us as the protector of Israel's interests. Thanks to Saddam's divide and rule cultivation of ethnic and tribal hatred, Iraq was a land with many internal scores to settle. Some of Iraq's neighbors, most especially Iran, feared our success and worked intensely to prevent it. We came to Iraq foolishly misled by analogies to our experience after World War II in Germany and Japan. Our interest in Iraq was quite narrow, but we made it impossibly broad. We needed to leave Saudi Arabia while assuring its safety. We ended up trying to remake Iraq into a Middle East showcase for our good intentions and the government we imagined the Iraqis wanted. A dethroned Saddam was good enough for us and totally justified from our own security perspective. Nation building is something best done at home. It is the Iraqis who should determine how Iraq should be governed.

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Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.