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*Was the invasion worth it?***by Robert D. Kaplan**

# Iraq: The Counterfactual Game

As an early supporter of the war in Iraq, I like others have taken refuge in counterfactuals: all the bad things that might have happened had we left Saddam Hussein in power. Counterfactuals, if you haven't noticed, have become a staple of conservative opinion pages.

Indeed, the list of *what ifs* is long and compelling. Just some examples: Had we not invaded, the sanctions regime against the Iraqi dictator would soon have crumbled, without the oil-for-food scandal being exposed. The French, Russians, and Chinese would have swept in with lucrative deals for Saddam, even as he restarted his weapons program. The arms race between Iraq and Iran would have grown fierce, with many, especially the Iranians, believing Saddam already possessed weapons of mass destruction. Israel would have been the big loser in this arms race, feeling less secure and consequently more trigger-happy than ever. Saddam's grip on power would have surged with the price of oil. Drowning in oil wealth, Saddam would have, among many other nefarious deeds, increased his payments to the families of Palestinian suicide bombers. In a larger strategic sense, the success of Saddam Hussein, an implacable hater of the West, in forcing President George W. Bush to stand down his troops and beat the sanctions, too, would have had a radicalizing effect on the entire Moslem world. He would have emerged as the new [Nasser](#) of the Sunni faithful, from Morocco to Pakistan, even as he continued to murder in desultory fashion thousands of people per month in his police state. As a footnote, sooner or later an American Navy or Air Force aviator would have been shot-down patrolling the no-fly zones, paraded through the streets of Baghdad, thus providing immense propaganda value. Truly, a world with Saddam still in power is awful to contemplate, as I can personally attest, having visited Iraq several times in the 1980s, the worst years of Saddam's tyranny.

Yet, there is a problem with this line of reasoning: how do all these might-have-beens, as frightfully convincing as they seem, stack up against the very real, violent deaths of more than 4,000 Americans and tens—perhaps hundreds-of-thousands of Iraqis, as a result of our invasion—not to mention the hundreds of billions of dollars spent on the war that could have been used to meet other threats to our national interests? To coldly state, without qualifiers, that these costs have been a price worth paying is to reduce foreign policy to the realm of inhuman abstraction. In any case, I don't believe anyone making such a claim could pass a polygraph test. And I include President Bush in this category. His attempts to compare himself with President Harry Truman – a president whose decisions were also hated at the time he made them—have the air of desperation rather than of historical thinking.

I am aware that the American death toll in Iraq is many times lower than that in Vietnam, and that aversion to casualties has become a feature of low birth-rate, post-industrial democratic societies. But I am also aware that when I and others supported a war to liberate Iraq, we never fully or accurately contemplated the price that would have to be paid. Of course, it can be argued that the high human cost of the war was not a result of the invasion at all, but of the negligence that

characterized the subsequent military occupation. But you could well make the case that such negligence was at least partially inherent in the hubris of the conception of regime change in the first place.

Moreover, when you sign on to a war, you implicitly place your confidence in those who would carry it out. Thus, a character judgment is required. And events have shown how wrong supporters of the war were in this regard.

At a far deeper level, as with many of life's disappointments, you are stuck with the reality that you have, not the one that might have been. You can play the counterfactual game for all of history's great junctures, and as enlightening as the exercise can be, it is still a game that doesn't get you anywhere. It is where we are now that matters: overextended in Iraq and Afghanistan, while the Russians move methodically to recreate their former Soviet near-abroad in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and the Chinese continue to use the years of our Middle East distraction to become, in military parlance, a future peer-competitor.

We are undeniably in a far better situation in Iraq today than we were in 2006. Credit for that must go to President Bush. He bravely, and wisely as it turned out, ignored the advice of almost the entire Washington establishment, surged troops into the country, changed his strategy, his generals, and his defense secretary. In this very limited sense, he might yet be compared with Truman. Iraq could well stumble along to greater democratic stability, leading not to a model state, but to a viable and non-threatening one, which can, in the fullness of time, encourage liberal movements throughout the Arab world.

Might one then argue that the invasion was worth it? From a purely historical perspective, perhaps. But policy is about the here and now. It's about taking or not taking action based on a near- and middle-term cost-benefit analysis. To subsume policy-making completely to long-range historical thinking is to risk constantly getting involved in grand schemes.

Most fundamentally, does Iraq meet the parents' test? Can you look parents in the eye and tell them it was worth losing their son or daughter over? As awful as it sounds, quantity matters here, for it says much about the scope of violence that is unleashed for the sake of a higher good. If there were, say, 500 sets of parents you had to look in the eye, the answer might well be yes, it was worth it, given where Iraq is today and what might have been had we not toppled Saddam. But at more than 4,000 and counting, the answer for years to come will still be no. Counterfactuals can only take you so far.

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