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The Iraq Syndrome Revisited

U.S. Intervention, From Kosovo to Libya

By [John Mueller](#)[Worst Enemy](#)

MARCH 28, 2011

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In a November/December 2005 *Foreign Affairs* article, “The Iraq Syndrome,” I concluded that Americans, because of the experience in Iraq, were likely acquiring a perspective on intervening in overseas conflicts somewhat like the one that followed the Vietnam War. Such once-fashionable terms as “unilateralism,” “preemption,” “preventive war,” and “indispensable nationhood,” I wrote, were beginning to pick up a “patina of quaintness.” I argued that there would likely be growing skepticism about the notions that “the United States should take unilateral military action to correct situations or overthrow regimes it considers reprehensible but that present no immediate threat to it, that it can and should forcibly bring democracy to other nations not now so blessed, that it has the duty to rid the world of evil, that having by far the largest defense budget in the world is necessary and broadly beneficial, that international cooperation is of only very limited value, and that Europeans and other well-meaning foreigners are naive and decadent wimps.” Most radically, I went on to suggest that the United States might “become more inclined to seek international cooperation, sometimes even showing signs of humility.”

A lot of that seems to have come true in the intervening half decade. The Obama administration has made international cooperation a cornerstone of its foreign policy, and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates observed in February (at West Point, no less) that “any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should ‘have his head examined,’ as General MacArthur so delicately put it.” That certainly sounds like the “Iraq syndrome” -- or perhaps the “Iraq-Afghanistan syndrome” -- at work.

Much of this syndrome can be seen in the hesitant approach to the chaos in Libya -- in both official and public opinion. The U.S. government has applied military pressure only reluctantly and tentatively, ruling out the idea of sending in ground troops, and has made it a priority that any intervention be internationally approved. Trying to maintain a support role in Libya, the United States has proved quite willing, even determined, to let the Europeans take the military lead.

However, progress on some of my suggestions has been halting at best. Although the country does seem to be slouching toward at least a degree of humility, it may never really be able to bring itself to embrace the condition fully. Last September, for example, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

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ESSAY

The Iraq Syndrome

[John Mueller](#)

Public support for the war in Iraq has followed the same course as it did for the wars in Korea and Vietnam: broad enthusiasm...

maintained that “when the earth shakes or rivers overflow their banks, when pandemics rage or simmering tensions burst into violence, the world looks to us.” Self-infatuation is not easily extinguished.

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Moreover, while there may be some downward pressure on defense spending, Gates and his successors will most likely continue to justify its unseemly bulk by conjuring up -- in our endlessly and always increasingly “dangerous world” -- an array of monsters and potential monsters and possibly potential monsters and crypto-monsters and monster look-alikes and monster wannabes. And Congress, with one eye always fixed on local defense contracts, will mostly continue to swallow, wallow in, or actively instigate the argument.

Actually, there is nothing really all that new about the post-Iraq unwillingness to engage militarily unless the combat environment is “permissive” or unless high-altitude bombing can be relied upon. There never has been much enthusiasm for sending Americans troops into hostile situations in recent decades absent a decided provocation like Pearl Harbor.

The Iraq war, then, might be considered something of an aberration. The neoconservative hawks in the George W. Bush administration had three peculiar things working for them in 2003. One was the memory of the splendid little walkover war of 1991 against Iraqi forces in Kuwait, the one that inspired the war’s chief architect, George H.W. Bush, to proclaim, “By God, we’ve licked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.” (That was a mere two years before the U.S. humanitarian intervention in East Africa created the “Somalia syndrome.”) The second was the seemingly effortless success in Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11 -- an experience that only later turned sour. And the third was the fairly popular notion that Iraq’s Saddam Hussein was connected to 9/11.

Indeed, the Libyan venture, and the American role in it, seem to be following the pattern not of Iraq but of Kosovo in 1999. Boxed in by their own postured huffing and puffing against a demonized regime, American leaders have now reluctantly approved “kinetic military action” from a safe distance, supported by the much-underexamined hope that it will be quickly decisive. In Kosovo, it may be noted, the bombing buoyed domestic support for the previously unpopular demon-in-charge, Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, and the campaign had to be continued for months. Something similar seems to have already happened to Qaddafi’s popularity in many places in Libya. The other consequence in Kosovo was a monumental refugee crisis for which the administration and the world were utterly unprepared -- something that may be in progress in Libya.

Since my article was written, new public opinion data have suggested that Americans have become even more skeptical of foreign military interventions like the one in Libya. Beginning in 1945, the same [poll question](#) about engagement in foreign affairs has been posed periodically: Do you think it would be best for the future of this country if we take an active part in world affairs, or if we stayed out of world affairs? After the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s campaign in Kosovo in the spring of 1999, Americans became less keen on intervention -- an interesting reaction, since the campaign was something of a success. The proportion of respondents choosing the “stay out” option rose to a near all-time high of 34 percent. Right after 9/11, the figure dropped to a low of 14 percent, and after a brief rise declined again to 14 percent at the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003. Since that time, however, the “stay out” option has become considerably more popular, so that by 2006, the

last time the question was asked, fully 38 percent embraced the sentiment -- the highest ever registered.

This does not necessarily mean that old-fashioned isolationism is emerging; the United States is unlikely to withdraw from participation in the global economy, disengage from international political organizations, or cease to be a citizen of the global community. But it could well be fertile ground for an even more intense Iraq syndrome, or Iraq-Afghanistan syndrome, to flourish.

New opinion data also relate to another consideration in my article. In 2005, the war in Iraq was not going well, and I was not very hopeful for eventual success there. Things got even worse over the ensuing two years. However, I argued that even if there were to be continuous good news about the war, especially a decline in the American casualty rate, this would probably not trigger a surge in support for the war. Instead, it would merely slow or stop the erosion of support.

Other analysts have contended in contrast that Americans are defeat-phobic rather than casualty-phobic, and therefore that whether the public supports a military operation depends on whether it is persuaded that the operation will be successful. I engaged in a [debate](#) over this question in the January/February 2006 issue of *Foreign Affairs*.

As it happened, developments in the war provided a test of these contrasting perspectives. After 2007, things actually did improve in Iraq to the point where, by 2009 or 2010, some could claim that victory had been achieved. The public clearly got the message: by late 2008, the percentage of people who thought U.S. efforts were making things better rose from 30 to 46, the percentage holding that the U.S. was making significant progress rose from 36 to 46, and the percentage concluding that the war was being won rose from 21 to 37.

Despite this change, however, support for the war did not increase according to [the main question](#) I used in the article: "In view of the developments since we first sent our troops to Iraq, do you think the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq, or not?" Nor did support rise on other, similar measures, such as the number who favored the war, who felt it had been the right decision or worth the effort, who favored staying as long as it takes, or who felt George W. Bush was going a good job in handling the war. The successful prosecution of a war, it appears, is unlikely to convert people who have already decided it is not worth the costs. Something similar may be happening now for opinion on Afghanistan. If the war there begins to go well, or at least better, the erosion in support is unlikely to reverse.

In my 2005 article, I probably should have focused more on the antiwar movement during Iraq. Refusing to commit the mistakes of their predecessors during the Vietnam War, when strident antiwar activists may have actually slowed a decline in support for the war, opponents of the Iraq War never became associated with anti-American values, and rather than expressing themselves in noisy and often unruly public demonstrations, they worked within the Democratic Party.

They were instrumental in engineering the party's 2004 nomination for the presidency of the most credible antiwar candidate, John Kerry, and then, in the 2006 and 2008 elections they fielded successful antiwar candidates for the House and Senate, many of them Iraq war veterans. And they were the cornerstone of the success in 2008 of the only credible presidential candidate in the field to have opposed the Iraq war, Barack Obama.

For all the work, however, their adored standard-bearer has not appointed anyone to prominent foreign policy office who publicly and clearly opposed the

Iraq war before it began -- that is, who embraced the Iraq syndrome before the war there supplied its label. The presence of a few of these might have led to an even more cautious approach to what the administration is calling "the situation in Libya."

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Emma Sky

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POSTSCRIPT, JUNE 18, 2014

Iraq Syndrome Redux

John Mueller

The Iraq Syndrome has played a role in U.S. politics for nearly a decade. As I wrote in 2005, public support for the war in Iraq followed the same course as for the wars in Korea and Vietnam: broad acceptance at the outset with erosion of support as casualties mount. The experience of those past ...

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Christopher Gelpi and John Mueller

How Many Casualties Will Americans Tolerate? Misdiagnosis CHRISTOPHER GELPI In "The Iraq Syndrome" (November/December 2005), John Mueller argues that public support for the American wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq can be explained with "a simple association: as casualties mount, support ...

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via f. (Aug. 21, 2009) · 3 years ago

I clicked on his name and saw a pattern of writing well measured position papers, yet could not figure his affiliation. In other words, the question becomes: Why are such views not heeded by those making decisions?

As I recently asked, are we in such a mess that no distraction is to be lost?

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