

## debacle piece

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To: Paul Volpe <volpep@washpost.com>

Paul: A piece for consideration. Under 800 words. John

Debate?

by John Mueller

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It is much too early to be certain, but not too early to suggest, that America's venture in Iraq could prove to be a debacle. There is a possibility of a long, costly, enervating, lonely, and deeply-divisive occupation.

Elements within a devastated and humiliated population may support years of terrorist and irregular attacks on the occupiers--rather like the 18-year experience of Israel in southern Lebanon. Adventurers from the outside who are dedicated to killing Americans--and their collaborators--would continue to be drawn to Iraq because of the convenience of the targets there. And over time they are likely to become better organized and more skilled.

The United States would suffer accumulating casualties and increasing financial outlays, costs likely to be viewed by the American public with growing dismay. The only way to keep casualties from accruing among the already somewhat demoralized troops would be to secure them in well-protected bases. But the whole point of the occupation, of course, is to bring peace, order, and democracy to Iraq and to build an effective new government there, something that can hardly be accomplished if the builders remain in preventive seclusion.

Neighboring countries like Iran and Syria, which are on the administration's explicit or implicit hit list, have every incentive to make the US experience in Iraq as miserable as possible in order to dissuade it from repeating the process elsewhere, though they would not want to risk American wrath by doing so openly. NOTE: this paragraph can be cut.

And Osama bin Laden's theory that the Americans can be defeated, or at least productively inconvenienced, by inflicting small, but continuously draining, casualties on them would have achieved encouraging confirmation. A venture that was designed and sold in part as a blow against international terrorists would thus end up emboldening and energizing them. NOTE: this last sentence can be cut.

Meanwhile, the international community--pointedly spurned by the administration--is unlikely to provide much serious military or financial help to the American occupation, though it would continue to have an incentive to counter international terrorism.

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There would also be an increasingly bitter debate in the United States. The Democrats are already beginning to sense an opportunity. Those who voted for the war can profess they were lied to--as happened in the Vietnam debate. And they can claim prescience by pointing to their pre-war concern that the administration had not done enough to consider post-war difficulties. There could also be a related decline of support for Israel as the undercurrent holding that the administration was snookered into the war by pro-Israel intellectuals comes more to the surface. NOTE: this last sentence can be cut.

On the brighter side, all that self-infatuated talk about a brave new superpowered American "empire" would fade away.

Debate is by no means certain. Although there is a long way to go, there is a reasonable prospect that, before unacceptable American casualties are incurred, a coherent domestic government can be fabricated leaving the Americans free to recede into the background or even withdraw. The capture or elimination of Saddam Hussein and his sons might help boost support. And the discovery of so-called weapons of mass destruction in Iraq would go a long way toward justifying the invasion, increasing acceptance both domestically and internationally, and restoring the administration's tarnished credibility. Americans are far more willing to expend combat lives for countering perceived threats to the country than they are for humanitarian ventures--which is effectively how the Iraq invasion stands without those weapons.

If the invasion does prove to be a debacle, however, the administration may have difficulty extricating itself after so confidently rolling over so much criticism to carry out the venture. Possibly the international community will be willing to assist with an extraction, particularly if the Americans display a certain amount of uncharacteristic humility and agree to foot the bill.

The U.S. has retreated from lower scale debacles: policing forces which had suffered unacceptable losses were withdrawn from Lebanon in 1983 under Reagan and from Somalia in 1993 under Clinton, and in both cases the issue scarcely came up in ensuing elections. More to the point may be the resolution of the greatest debacle of all: Vietnam. The U.S. plugged on in that war in part because it feared the political reaction to defeat, but failure was substantially accepted at least in electoral politics when a face-saving agreement was crafted and a bit of time passed.

Debacles are painful, but they need not be permanently damaging. Acknowledging them is often preferable to slogging ever deeper into quagmire.

John Mueller is a professor of political science at Ohio State University. Among his books is "Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War."

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