After Iraq, What Will the US Learn?

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MARC SIMON, APR 24 2008

Although a downturn in the economy has taken some attention away from the Iraq war in the US, very soon a period of reflection will begin. The war continues, but after 5 years and over 4000 deaths it is apparent to everyone except Vice-President Dick Cheney that the US will begin to pull its troops out in the next administration, especially if one of the democrats wins the presidential race. Even now, political struggles to shape the "the lessons of Iraq" have begun.

What will they learn? Some insight is provided by the last American war disaster in Vietnam. One would think the lessons from Vietnam would have prevented the tragedy in Iraq. But different people learn different lessons from every war. Not surprisingly, the lessons people learn usually depend on how they viewed the war at the time.

After Vietnam, those who had favored the war blamed the US defeat on politicians who would not allow the military to win. The Johnson administration had micromanaged the details of war, even choosing targets to bomb. (Never mind that this was to prevent a Soviet or Chinese intervention, a lesson they had learned from Korea). The escalation had been too gradual. And by the time the military was in a position to win, the US public had turned against the war. Those who supported this view, like Colin Powell, developed an "overwhelming force" doctrine in response, which they applied in the first Gulf War in 1991. They believe that the US must use massive force early in a war, to win decisively and get out before resistance can develop in the public.

Many people who favored the Iraq war in the US will blame Bush and Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense, for not managing the war correctly. They started with "shock and awe," but did not put enough troops on the ground to prevent the Iraqi resistance from forming. Rumsfeld believed that US technology was so powerful that extra troops would not be needed. His goal was to show that a smaller force could make US military power more "usable" in the future, and less vulnerable to protests from the peace movement.

If John McCain wins the coming election, it signals that this view has become dominant. If so, the US will return to policies of the elder Bush administration; it will be reluctant to use its military forces, but if used, both force and troop levels will be overwhelming. McCain will remove US troops from Iraq more slowly, but he will still remove them.

Another set of people, mainly on the political left, opposed the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. Unfortunately, the lessons they thought they learned from Vietnam—don't trust the president or intelligence services when they claim that the US is threatened—were somehow forgotten after 9/11. Some believed that protests did end the war in Vietnam, and so they have faith in the democratic system. They believe that if only the US public had known the "truth" about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, the system would have prevented the US invasion of Iraq. For them the problem is the Bush administration, and to a lesser extent, the American media.

Once Bush is gone, these war opponents are still likely to support a return to the kind of aggressive but multilateral policies of the Clinton years, with an emphasis on antiterrorism and humanitarian interventions. If Hillary Clinton wins the 2008 election, it is sign that the lessons learned by these moderate war opponents have become dominant.

It is most likely that one of these two mainstream views—which broadly represent the opinions of the republican (right) and democratic (left) parties, will become widely accepted in American society after Iraq. But there is still a

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third group, mainly on the left, which has drawn some more profound insights from Iraq.

These people were strong opponents of the Iraq war, although a few were supporters who had an epiphany. Many also opposed the Vietnam war, but some were too young or too apathetic to remember. A lot participated in the US and global peace movement, which was vastly better organized than 40 years ago. Some had real hope that the protests of 15 February 2003 would stop the war. They assumed that after Abu Ghraib and Falluja, Bush would certainly lose the 2004 election to John Kerry.

The Bush victory in 2004 had a powerfully cynical effect on the views of the American public, but the victory of the democratic party in the 2006 legislative elections did not restore their faith in US democracy. The 2006 victory did nothing to stop the "surge," an escalation of US troop strength in Iraq, record defense budgets, or continuing violence in Afghanistan. Indeed the public seems fooled again into believing that the Iraq is not going so badly, or at least that the coming economic recession is worse.

This third group, by far the minority in the US, has learned a deeper lesson about war itself.They see Iraq war as evidence that military violence is not only unethical but also ineffective. It has made the US less safe, by making it easier for Al-Qaeda to recruit. It has made the US less strong, by alienating its allies and generating anti-American sentiment across the globe. It has led the US to pursue policies of torture and suppression of civil liberties that undermine its own democracy.

Of course, some people learned these same lessons after the Vietnam war. While some reforms were enacted, the generation that fought in that war and protested that war produced the leaders who invaded Iraq. The voices for peace are still a minority in America, so a change in presidents will not deeply change US foreign policy. Societal attitudes have to change as well, and that won't happen from one election.

Americans have a surprisingly high level of faith in their leaders and government institutions. The system is quite legitimate, and in times of crisis, it is very easy for any leader to turn the public fear into support for war. Too many Americans have an unspoken faith in violence, especially in the international arena. They share the view of Osama bin Laden and the Bush administration that violence is a catalyst for change—an almost a magical way to solve big international problems. It is an old idea, espoused by Marx and many others before him.

By the end of the 20th century most of the developed world had begun to reject this idea. In organizations like the UN and the EU, they have been taking positive steps toward the creation of a real community of nations that can solve problems collectively. The United States has taken part in this effort but has remained aloof, not really committed to the program. This "exceptionalist" attitude has strong roots in American society. The US is slowly changing—the peace movement is getting stronger—but it is not clear whether change will occur fast enough to prevent another Iraq.

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