

Benefits of humility

by the Omaha World-Herald

Critics of President Bush's Iraq policy have emphasized a particular message in recent weeks: "See, we told you so." In exchanges in print and online media, hard-line supporters of Bush's policy have found themselves on the defensive from self-congratulatory critiques by mainstream liberals as well as leftists. Many on the political right have brought much of the disappointment on themselves. They too often have sidestepped the enormous complications and difficulties involved in Bush's overall vision for the Middle East - a crusade of democracy promotion, buttressed by a far-ranging U.S. military commitment in one of the world's most volatile regions.

Still, the turmoil in Iraq provides no validation for going so far as to make pacifism or semi-pacifism the core of U.S. foreign relations.

Foreign-policy "doves" opposed an Iraq enterprise that obviously has run into tremendous difficulties, but that hardly means that knee-jerk opposition to all military campaigns is therefore sound and in the best interests of this country. Just as U.S. military action - such as the entry of American forces into Afghanistan - was fully justified in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, so a military campaign may be needed in response to a future terrorist attack on U.S. soil. The heart of U.S. foreign policy always should be diplomacy, and military power by itself is no cure-all. But it would be folly to make semi-pacifism the core of America's foreign policy during this age of catastrophic terrorism.

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The woes in Iraq have demonstrated the enduring value of an important strain of Western thought - a type of conservative sensibility, in fact, too often neglected by Bush and his advisers in recent years. Namely, the need to make choices through cautious, prudential judgments.

That mature sense of caution consists of several components: Appreciating the limits of government's power to reshape society (not to mention the world). Being wary of ambitious crusades. Staying alert to the potential for unintended consequences. Recognizing the limitations of human nature, including the permanence of evil. Making decisions on a case-by-case basis rather than resorting to snap judgments (judgments, that is, based on an autopilot reliance on ideology). Such precepts relate directly to the current situation in Iraq. Such a restrained sensibility, wise to the need to appreciate limitations and uncertainties, needs to be an essential tool for U.S. foreign policy for the long term, regardless of which party occupies the White House.

Foreign-policy choices are so complex that a mature approach often involves a dose of humility - humility about the odds of success for any policy and humility about which combination of actions (across the wide range of "soft power" and "hard power" options) is the appropriate one for any given situation.

Prudence in foreign policy recognizes the value of an Ecclesiastes-type approach: There will be a time for muted diplomacy. But also a time for tart public statements and pressure. There will be a time for economic outreach and soft words. But also a time for economic sanctions and, as a last resort, military action. A skilled leader will know which combination of those ingredients to employ in a given situation, and in what quantity.

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Humility is needed, too, in foreign policy because the past - valuable though an understanding of it certainly is - does not automatically indicate the best course in confronting specific new challenges. America is moving inexorably into the future - meeting new situations, new opportunities, new leaders and new combinations of factors.

Americans and their leaders should learn from the past, but they also should be wary of following history's "lessons" too rigidly.

The "lesson of Munich" (Great Britain's diplomatic capitulation to Nazi territorial greed in the late 1930s) is an important one to remember. But Lyndon B. Johnson arguably took it too far in letting it shape so many of his decisions on the Vietnam War. The "lesson of Vietnam" is important to remember, too. But in 1991, their obsession with the traumas of Vietnam led many skeptical members of Congress to wildly misjudge the chances for success in the Persian Gulf War. In the future, it could be a major mistake in some situations if the post-George W. Bush generation cites the "lesson of Iraq" to automatically foreclose U.S. military action in the face of a dire situation.

These time-tested considerations need to be kept in mind as the die-hard supporters and critics of Bush's Iraq policy engage in their war of words. Beyond the transitory claims of vindication by one side or the other, the principles of prudence have enduring value. They can serve America well as it makes its way in an ever-changing world.

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