

# It will end in disaster

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The US and British governments have dragged us into a mess that will last for years

**S**o far, the liberators have succeeded only in freeing the souls of the Iraqis from their bodies. Saddam Hussein's troops have proved less inclined to surrender than they had anticipated, and the civilians less prepared to revolt. But while no one can now ignore the immediate problems this illegal war has met, we are beginning, too, to understand what should have been obvious all along: that, however this conflict is resolved, the outcome will be a disaster.

It seems to me that there are three possible results of the war with Iraq. The first, which is now beginning to look unlikely, is that Saddam Hussein is swiftly dispatched, his generals and ministers abandon their posts and the people who had been cowed by his militias and his secret police rise up and greet the invaders with their long-awaited blessing of flowers and rice. The troops are welcomed into Baghdad, and start preparing for what the US administration claims will be a transfer of power to a democratic government.

For a few weeks, this will look like victory. Then several things are likely to happen. The first is that, elated by its reception in Baghdad, the American government decides, as Donald Rumsfeld hinted again last week, to visit its perpetual war upon another nation: Syria, Iran, Yemen, Somalia, North Korea or anywhere else whose conquest may be calculated to enhance the stature of the president and the scope of his empire. It is almost as if Bush and his advisers are determined to meet the nemesis which their hubris invites.

## MONBIOT | IT WILL END IN DISASTER

Our next discovery is likely to be, as John Gray pointed out some months ago, that the choice of regimes in the Middle East is not a choice between secular dictatorship and secular democracy, but between secular dictatorship and Islamic democracy. What the people of the Middle East want and what the US government says they want appear to be rather different things, and the tension between the two objectives will be a source of instability and conflict until western governments permit those people to make their own choices unmolested. That is unlikely to happen until the oil runs out. The Iraqis may celebrate their independence by embracing a long-suppressed fundamentalism, and the United States may respond by seeking to crush it.

The coalition might also soon discover why Saddam Hussein became such an abhorrent dictator. Iraq is a colonial artefact, forced together by the British from three Ottoman provinces, whose people have wildly different religious and ethnic loyalties. It is arguable that this absurd construction can be sustained only by brute force.

A US-backed administration seeking to keep this nation of warring factions intact may rapidly encounter Saddam's problem, and, in so doing, rediscover his solution. Perhaps we should not be surprised to see that George Bush's government was, until recently, planning merely to replace the two most senior officials in each of Saddam's ministries, leaving the rest of his government undisturbed.

The alternative would be to permit Iraq to fall apart. While fragmentation may, in the long run, be the only feasible future for its people, it is impossible, in the short term, to see how this could happen without bloodshed, as every faction seeks to carve out its domain. Whether the US tries to oversee this partition or flees from it as the British did from India, its victory in these circumstances is likely to sour very quickly.

The second possible outcome of this war is that the US kills Saddam and destroys the bulk of his army, but has to govern Iraq as a hostile occupying force. Saddam Hussein, whose psychological warfare appears to be rather more advanced than that of the Americans, may have ensured that this is now the most likely result.

The coalition forces cannot win without taking Baghdad, and Saddam is seeking to ensure that they cannot take Baghdad without killing thousands of civilians. His soldiers will shelter in homes, schools and hospitals. In trying to destroy them, the American and British troops may blow away the last possibility of winning the hearts and minds of the residents. Saddam's deployment of suicide bombers has already obliged the coalition forces to deal brutally with innocent civilians.

The comparisons with Palestine will not be lost on the Iraqis, or on anyone in the Middle East. The United States, like Israel, will discover that occupation is bloody and, ultimately, unsustainable. Its troops will be harassed by snipers and suicide bombers, and its response to them will alienate even the people who were grateful for the

## MONBIOT | IT WILL END IN DISASTER

overthrow of Saddam. We can expect the US, in these circumstances, hurriedly to proclaim victory, install a feeble and doomed Iraqi government, and pull out before the whole place crashes down around it. What happens after that, to Iraq and the rest of the Middle East, is anyone's guess, but I think we can anticipate that it won't be pleasant.

The third possibility is that the coalition forces fail swiftly to kill or capture Saddam Hussein or to win a decisive victory in Iraq. While still unlikely, this is now an outcome which cannot be entirely dismissed. Saddam may be too smart to wait in his bunker for a bomb big enough to reach him, but might, like King Alfred, slip into the civilian population, occasionally throwing off his disguise and appearing among his troops, to keep the flame of liberation burning.

If this happens, then the US will have transformed him from the hated oppressor into the romantic, almost mythological hero of Arab and Muslim resistance, the Salah al-Din of his dreams. He will be seen as the man who could do to the United States what the mujahideen of Afghanistan did to the Soviet Union: drawing it so far into an unwinnable war that its economy and its popular support collapse. The longer he survives, the more the population - not just of Iraq, but of all Muslim countries - will turn towards him, and the less likely a western victory becomes.

The US will almost certainly then have engineered the improbable chimera it claims to be chasing: the marriage of Saddam's well-armed secular brutality and al-Qaida's global insurrection. Even if, having held out for many weeks or months, Saddam Hussein is found and killed, his spirit may continue to inspire a revolt throughout the Muslim world, against the Americans, the British and, of course, Israel. Pakistan's unpopular leader, Pervez Musharraf, would then find himself in serious trouble. If, as seems likely in these circumstances, he is overthrown in an Islamic revolt, then a fundamentalist regime, deeply hostile to the west, would possess real nuclear weapons, primed and ready to fire.

I hope I've missed something here, and will be proved spectacularly wrong, but it seems to me that the American and British governments have dragged us into a mess from which we might not emerge for many years. They have unlocked the spirit of war, and it could be unwilling to return to its casket until it has traversed the world. #