



Between Iraq and a Hard Place

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Do I dare to say good evening? Have we not had enough of tragedy? We know too much: Cambodia, Rwanda, Israel and Palestine, to name a few where the international community has failed. And now the maelstrom around Iraq. How can we live with so much tragedy? The fact is we cannot. We have to laugh. On my kitchen door in Manhattan I have a New Yorker cartoon, two men wading through sludge in a great dark cavern. One turns to the other and says: "Look, it could be worse. At least we're dead." And once more I invoke my Irish Canadian father. One of his stories was about the political orator crying out: "And my friends, the cup of Ireland's sorrows is flowing over, and it isn't filled yet."

That mythical Ireland could be a microcosm of our world. We need a big cup, the world's cup. There is plenty to fill it. To come to the point, some have maintained that the present US government had decided to attack Iraq long before going to the UN Security Council. This decision was not negotiable. Negotiation means compromise, finding common ground. Threats and bribes brought the US a few states' support, but in the main the world stood opposed to any military action before all other solutions had been tried. The so-called debates at the Security Council were a futile charade. The only concession to world opinion was a delay in the attack and some attention to what next in Iraq.

Washington, of course, claims that the Security Council already had approved military action, and no doubt lawyers can be found to support this. This is sophistry. Why did the US decide to go again to the Security Council, and then back down? Only to save Tony Blair? And while the Council's debate did nothing to change Washington's decision, it made it plain that the Council did not support military action right now. Beyond the 15-member Council, the open debate where over 40 governments spoke showed practically no support to Washington. World-wide citizen protests on an unprecedented scale could hardly be ignored. And yet...

What are we to make of this? Washington says it is not only emasculating a wicked man with mass weapons, but also giving Iraq back to its people. There is enough truth in this to be confusing. The regime of Saddam Hussein is not the only repressive tyranny in the world, although it may be the worst. But who has the authority to attack any state in order to bring about a “regime change”, to install a new government. Is the mighty US Army exporting democracy worldwide? What justice will be meted out in US military courts? Why Iraq? The common answer is oil. Is that all? And in any case, is war necessary to control oil?

Washington's obsession with Iraq is consistent with the dominant trend in US foreign policy. You all know the story: opposition to the Kyoto protocol aimed at holding back global warming, the attack on the International Criminal Court, the weakening of the UN small arms conference, the refusal to commit to banning tests of nuclear weapons, the scuppering of the Anti-ballistic Missiles Treaty, the reactivation of Missile Defense (so-called “Star Wars”). Just as troubling is the way Washington has been handling international trade -- for example, steel, wheat and lumber -- shaking up even the conservative World Trade Organization. But then, in the midst of all this, along came the terrorists on 9/11 2001, bringing international violence to New York and Washington.

You will recall that Washington immediately took the terrorist issue to the Security Council, and that the US got world-wide sympathy and support. It was obvious that the US alone could not cope with terrorism. The Security Council has been vigorous in leading international action to prevent and control terrorists. Even so, Washington has talked as though this was the US versus the world, an American war on terrorism. Taken together with US intransigence on other issues, this public stance has not been helpful. Fortunately the Security Council still presses on. Terrorism is not an exclusive US concern.

It is no great comfort to see that for the US to go-it-alone is no different from earlier imperial powers. But there has been a difference, for example, in the US lead in creating the UN, in the introduction of judicial process at Nuremberg, and internationalizing human rights. But our hopes for a new peace after the Cold War have faded, with mass violence in all regions and the gigantic growth of arms worldwide, the US towering over all. US reliance on military in foreign affairs has accelerated since 9/11. The Pentagon has not brought a sense of security. The sad fact is that the US now is afraid of the world; and at home, Americans are told to watch each other. I don't want to exaggerate, but since 9/11 the US has been close to a war-time atmosphere. Even in the international UNICEF House where I work, a note has been circulated to all staff advising us on preparing for an emergency -- water, food, medicine, exit plans, etc.

The White House has managed to intimidate the Congress, which is only now beginning to wake up. The reality is that, besides its well-known ties to big business, the White House -- and in particular the President -- have a fundamentalist conviction of their truth and destiny. The President, I am told, believes that God has told him what to do, that he has a sacred mission to save his world. Anything goes: the pre-emptive strike against real or imagined enemies (do one to others before they do one to you), including smart little

nuclear weapons. Twenty years ago embracing dear Saddam Hussein, now become a demon, our worst enemy. This is American fundamentalism born-again, and to some it seems analogous to suicide bombers (al-Quaeda, Palestine, Sri Lanka), to Islamic fundamentalism and to Hindu extremism in India. You who have read Karen Armstrong's "The Battle for God" will be as scared as I am.

But what lies behind this enormous thrust of American power? Concern with Saddam Hussein alone cannot be the whole story, nor can the personal fixations of the president. No doubt Saddam Hussein had become a serious threat to stability in the Middle East, and that was sufficient reason for Security Council concern. But why the stand-off between the US and Britain versus France and Germany? If you are trying to make sense of all this, a plausible explanation is that what we are seeing is in effect a war between the US dollar and the Euro. Who owns oil and the petro-dollar? Displacement of the dominant dollar by the Euro would be a major disaster for the American economy with its global outreach. This would undercut the American imperium. Britain's refusal to join the Euro system would then explain the love affair between Washington and London. Could this be our new world war?

Where does this leave the UN and the US? In the short run, the US will be stuck in Iraq, a military presence for who knows how many years. I leave it to the experts to predict what the regional repercussions will be, including the resurgence of terrorism, and what this implies for the US presence in the Middle East. At the very least, Tony Blair got Mr. Bush to come out and endorse the Quartet Road Map for moving toward Israeli-Palestinian peace. Will Mr. Bush follow through? Will the US pour billions into building up Iraq? And what about Afghanistan? The usual thing is for the military, as in Kosovo and Afghanistan, to hand over to the UN the job of humanitarian aid and nation building. The military has lots of money, the UN gets little. Promises, promises.

So much for the short run. What about the long run? Will there be a long run for the UN? The possibility of planetary nuclear disaster is our most urgent concern, it could happen. If it does not, the UN will be around for a long time. So much depends on whether Washington's pre-emptive strategy is here to stay. My American friends are dismayed at what is happening at home and abroad. Why did Washington go to the UN on terror and Iraq? Even now, Washington has more than one voice. Colin Powell says the UN is important, the US will stay. The role of the Security Council will be diminished, maybe clarified is the better word. Superpower US will not take any of its important concerns to the Council; but then, all through the Cold War, it rarely did, and the UN survived. The Iraq case is not unique. There remains plenty for the Council to do, mediating family conflicts and putting houses in order throughout the world. There will also be holding operations for the Council, as now between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Security Council operations are already becoming integrated into human development, human rights, international law, relieving poverty, all helping to prevent violent conflict. And that is where the UN as a whole, including the specialized agencies, will continue to be desperately needed. The alternative is chaos.

Coming back to Iraq, the US and the UN, how about a more hopeful reading of what is happening. The fact is that the UN has been at the centre of this whole international debate. Regardless of outcome, the UN certainly has not been ignored. Money and politics will give the UN a leading role in rebuilding Iraq. Few of us realize that over half of Iraqi population has been surviving on the UN oil-for-food programme. For that reason alone, the UN cannot be ignored. Politically, the US needs the UN as much as the UN needs the US.

Seventy years have passed since Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud exchanged letters on the causes of war, "Why War". Both saw in mankind a lethal struggle between love and hate, life and death. We like to love and we like to kill. It is easy to whip up war hysteria. War gives license to murder. Instead of prison, we get medals. What about love, that much prostituted word? What about compassion then? Compassion is work, it begins with ourselves, it begins in humility, it leads to trust, to sharing, to the security of friends.

Beyond sentiment, I recommend to you the pioneering WHO Report, issued last year, on violence and health with its thoughtful introduction by Nelson Mandela.

Right now we are lost in a fog of violence, of cynicism, of despair. We need a touch of old-fashioned Utopianism, don't we, that future nowhere, a world at peace. Marx died with Stalin, and socialism lay wounded. Where is our hope? It surely is not neo-liberal unconstrained greed. Is there a better starting point than the UN Charter? Read it again. Here are bits of the Preamble:

We the peoples of the United Nations determined:

To save succeeding generations from the scourge of war...

To reaffirm our faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women, and of nations large and small.

To establish conditions... under which international law can be maintained.

To practice tolerance, and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors.

To ensure... that armed force shall not be used save in the common interest.

Have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these ends...

And to hereby establish an international organization to be known as the United Nations.

It took a bloody war and fifty million lives to give us this Charter. Must there be another? The future is inevitable after it happens.