

DESKNOTE

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Truth and Beauty...

(and Russian Finance)

Deeper into the Minefield – The Iraq Follies

Foreword

After 20 years in the service at the US State Department, career diplomat John Brady Kiesling resigned from his post as political officer at the American Embassy in Athens. In a letter to Secretary of State Powell, Kiesling stated that he was leaving the service because he could no longer countenance US policy on Iraq. He wrote: *“Our fervent pursuit of war with Iraq is driving us to squander the international legitimacy that has been America’s most potent weapon of both offense and defense since the days of Woodrow Wilson... We should ask ourselves why we have failed to persuade more of the world that a war with Iraq is necessary... We have over the past two years done too much to assert to our world partners that narrow and mercenary US interests override the cherished values of our partners.”*

We are very impressed by the personal courage of Mr. Kiesling, who has walked away from a lifelong career for the sake of deeply held moral values. It should perhaps serve as an example to those of us who might be tempted to apply our habitual cynicism to issues of life and death.

Deeper Into the minefield

In any war, truth is the first casualty

Our recent piece on the coming Iraqi war has proved rather controversial. This, in itself, is an excellent thing. We are, of course, no strangers to controversy, and we hold it self-evident that, before embarking on a potentially devastating war, open, public debate is vital.

Of those readers who have been kind enough to reply, the great majority have been supportive. Several have written detailed replies, supporting or challenging some of our arguments; we are in the process of replying to them individually.

Alas, a few respondents in the US took our criticism of the American administration more personally, seeming to suggest that there was something seditious about our criticism of American foreign policy. We would thus like to take this opportunity to correct several possible misunderstandings:

-First of all, the author has no relationship whatsoever with the US firm Sovlink Inc. Eric Kraus is happily employed as Chief Strategist by OOO Sovlink / Aljba-Alliance (Moscow), a Russian bank / brokerage, unrelated to the eponymous US firm. We wish to express our gratitude to our employer for their steadfast support for our independence and freedom of expression, and apologize for any misunderstandings which may have arisen concerning corporate attribution.

-The second misconception is that there was anything remotely “anti-American” about our broadside. We will address this latter issue, in detail, below.

1. T&B is deeply concerned by what we see as a growing climate of censorship and the use of fear to suppress all dissent. Whilst opinion polls show that the US public (like that of every country where polling is allowed) remains opposed to unilateral action against Iraq. The media, on the other hand, are overwhelmingly hewing to the administration line – with little, if any, public debate. Attempts to run advertisements against the war on national television have been met with blanket refusals by the networks. MSNBC has just fired its top-rated anchorman, Phil Donahue for daring to challenge Bush’s foreign policy.

Whether the corporate ownership of these networks is responsible for this policy we will leave to the reader’s judgment. It is our own belief that ownership of the media by conglomerates is no less antithetical to freedom of expression than would be its ownership by the government. Censorship and self-censorship generally tend to be imposed at the worst possible time, i.e. when governments are attempting to force something down the throats of the body politic which it simply does not wish to swallow!

2. Several readers suggested a hint of European anti-Americanism. This is entirely untrue. We are indeed strongly opposed to multiple aspects of the policy of the current US administration, but certainly not to the United States itself. Indeed, as great believers in Jeffersonian democracy, we expect a far higher standard of behavior from a great democracy such as the US than we would from a country without such tradition, say, for instance...Iraq. Furthermore, previous empires, however absolute, had nothing like the global sweep of American power. This power confers a singular responsibility on the United States to ensure that it is used for good, not simply for self-interest; the latter would be to impose an unprecedented global tyranny.
3. No one contests the right of countries to defend themselves. The US decision to invade Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11 was a credible case of self-defense. The Taliban government was openly harboring a military group which had carried out a devastating attack on the United States, costing thousands of innocent lives. It is perhaps unfortunate that, having won the war, the US does not see fit to try to win the peace. The 2003 Federal Budget allots no funds for the rebuilding of this unfortunate country; if it is to be abandoned to the warlords, it will provide fertile ground for future generations of Islamic extremists. This, we fear, would be a likely outcome of a far more costly and destructive war against Iraq. We believe that US interests would be far better served by rebuilding a livable Afghanistan than by devastating Iraq.
4. While we accept the right to self-defense, the issue of preemptive wars fought against any nation which could, conceivably pose a threat at some time in the future, is an entirely different kettle of fish! Logically, this “right” would not be limited to the United States; indeed, every country in the world could claim it as its special right to attack anyone it thought could potentially threaten it. With some 185 countries on earth – many with axes to grind – our war correspondent friends would have a very busy time of it!
5. Reducing a vital issue to *ad hominem* arguments simply trivializes it. The author is, indeed, a French national, of Eastern European parentage, and Latin American upbringing, now permanently resident in Moscow. While strongly supporting the position of the French government on the Iraq issue, we judge on merits, not upon national allegiance; we are often mordantly critical of French policy. Whatever the motives of the French government, we strongly support their position on Iraq. Finally, we would note that 2 million Spaniards, i.e. 5% of the total population of the country, marched against the war last week,

along with millions of Italians, English, Germans, and that “famous Frenchman” - Nelson Mandela - has expressed HIS opposition to as US invasion of Iraq in the strongest terms possible.

6. The moral authority of the United Nations has indeed been weakened by its tragic failure to act in previous international crises, while its authority has been openly flouted by several countries (including one Middle Eastern nation on very good terms with the United States...). The solution is obviously not to undermine the single global forum aimed at bringing a semblance of rule of law to international relations – not to simply ride roughshod over international opinion.
7. We are perhaps touchingly naïve (one fault of which T&B has not been traditionally accused), but reaffirm our belief that Mr. Putin’s foreign policy on this issue is “deeply principled”. Indeed, the cynical response would be to sell out, negotiating a side deal with Washington. Given the huge bribe recently offered to Turkey, as a full member of the Security Council, Russia could undoubtedly do at least as well, probably far better!
8. The conduct of US diplomacy seems to have abandoned any semblance of decency. In a single-minded desire to force an invasion of Iraq upon an unwilling world, countries are being openly bribed or bullied, non-permanent members of the Security Council are being subjected to intolerable pressure, and in some cases, to the equivalent of economic blackmail. Democratic governments are being pressured into acting against the express wishes of their people. Long and carefully crafted alliances are being wrecked. The Western alliance is already a shambles. Any reasonable person must ask himself the question: is the game worth the candle? Is the obsessive desire to crush Saddam Hussein worth ripping apart the fabric of international relations?

Anyone interested in reading an alternative view on the war would do well to click on:

<http://www.groundswellvoters.org>

In closing, and hoping to dispel the notion that there is anything vaguely “anti-American” about our opposition to this war, we will cite below, *in extenso*, a recent speech by US Senator Byrd of West Virginia.

This speech can be found on the US Senate Website:

http://www.senate.gov/~byrd/byrd_newsroom/byrd_news_feb/news_2003_february/news_2003_february_9.html

“To contemplate war is to think about the most horrible of human experiences. On this February day, as this nation stands at the brink of battle, every American on some level must be contemplating the horrors of war.

Yet, this Chamber is, for the most part, silent -- ominously, dreadfully silent. There is no debate, no discussion, no attempt to lay out for the nation the pros and cons of this particular war. There is nothing.

We stand passively mute in the United States Senate, paralyzed by our own uncertainty, seemingly stunned by the sheer turmoil of events. Only on the editorial pages of our newspapers is there much substantive discussion of the prudence or imprudence of engaging in this particular war.

And this is no small conflagration we contemplate. This is no simple attempt to defang a villain. No. This coming battle, if it materializes, represents a turning point in U.S. foreign policy and possibly a turning point in the recent history of the world.

This nation is about to embark upon the first test of a revolutionary doctrine applied in an extraordinary way at an unfortunate time. The doctrine of preemption -- the idea that the United States or any other nation can legitimately attack a nation that is not imminently threatening but may be threatening in the future -- is a

radical new twist on the traditional idea of self defense. It appears to be in contravention of international law and the UN Charter. And it is being tested at a time of world-wide terrorism, making many countries around the globe wonder if they will soon be on our -- or some other nation's -- hit list. High level Administration figures recently refused to take nuclear weapons off of the table when discussing a possible attack against Iraq. What could be more destabilizing and unwise than this type of uncertainty, particularly in a world where globalism has tied the vital economic and security interests of many nations so closely together? There are huge cracks emerging in our time-honored alliances, and U.S. intentions are suddenly subject to damaging worldwide speculation. Anti-Americanism based on mistrust, misinformation, suspicion, and alarming rhetoric from U.S. leaders is fracturing the once solid alliance against global terrorism which existed after September 11.

Here at home, people are warned of imminent terrorist attacks with little guidance as to when or where such attacks might occur. Family members are being called to active military duty, with no idea of the duration of their stay or what horrors they may face. Communities are being left with less than adequate police and fire protection. Other essential services are also short-staffed. The mood of the nation is grim. The economy is stumbling. Fuel prices are rising and may soon spike higher.

This Administration, now in power for a little over two years, must be judged on its record. I believe that that record is dismal.

In that scant two years, this Administration has squandered a large projected surplus of some \$5.6 trillion over the next decade and taken us to projected deficits as far as the eye can see. This Administration's domestic policy has put many of our states in dire financial condition, under funding scores of essential programs for our people. This Administration has fostered policies which have slowed economic growth. This Administration has ignored urgent matters such as the crisis in health care for our elderly. This Administration has been slow to provide adequate funding for homeland security. This Administration has been reluctant to better protect our long and porous borders.

In foreign policy, this Administration has failed to find Osama bin Laden. In fact, just yesterday we heard from him again marshaling his forces and urging them to kill. This Administration has split traditional alliances, possibly crippling, for all time, International order-keeping entities like the United Nations and NATO. This Administration has called into question the traditional worldwide perception of the United States as well-intentioned, peacekeeper. This Administration has turned the patient art of diplomacy into threats, labeling, and name calling of the sort that reflects quite poorly on the intelligence and sensitivity of our leaders, and which will have consequences for years to come.

Calling heads of state pygmies, labeling whole countries as evil, denigrating powerful European allies as irrelevant -- these types of crude insensitivities can do our great nation no good. We may have massive military might, but we cannot fight a global war on terrorism alone. We need the cooperation and friendship of our time-honored allies as well as the newer found friends whom we can attract with our wealth. Our awesome military machine will do us little good if we suffer another devastating attack on our homeland which severely damages our economy. Our military manpower is already stretched thin and we will need the augmenting support of those nations who can supply troop strength, not just sign letters cheering us on.

The war in Afghanistan has cost us \$37 billion so far, yet there is evidence that terrorism may already be starting to regain its hold in that region. We have not found bin Laden, and unless we secure the peace in Afghanistan, the dark dens of terrorism may yet again flourish in that remote and devastated land.

Pakistan as well is at risk of destabilizing forces. This Administration has not finished the first war against terrorism and yet it is eager to embark on another conflict with perils much greater than those in Afghanistan. Is our attention span that short? Have we not learned that after winning the war one must always secure the peace?

And yet we hear little about the aftermath of war in Iraq. In the absence of plans, speculation abroad is rife. Will we seize Iraq's oil fields, becoming an occupying power which controls the price and supply of that

nation's oil for the foreseeable future? To whom do we propose to hand the reins of power after Saddam Hussein?

Will our war inflame the Muslim world resulting in devastating attacks on Israel? Will Israel retaliate with its own nuclear arsenal? Will the Jordanian and Saudi Arabian governments be toppled by radicals, bolstered by Iran which has much closer ties to terrorism than Iraq?

Could a disruption of the world's oil supply lead to a world-wide recession? Has our senselessly bellicose language and our callous disregard of the interests and opinions of other nations increased the global race to join the nuclear club and made proliferation an even more lucrative practice for nations which need the income?

In only the space of two short years this reckless and arrogant Administration has initiated policies which may reap disastrous consequences for years.

One can understand the anger and shock of any President after the savage attacks of September 11. One can appreciate the frustration of having only a shadow to chase and an amorphous, fleeting enemy on which it is nearly impossible to exact retribution.

But to turn one's frustration and anger into the kind of extremely destabilizing and dangerous foreign policy debacle that the world is currently witnessing is inexcusable from any Administration charged with the awesome power and responsibility of guiding the destiny of the greatest superpower on the planet. Frankly many of the pronouncements made by this Administration are outrageous. There is no other word.

Yet this chamber is hauntingly silent. On what is possibly the eve of horrific infliction of death and destruction on the population of the nation of Iraq -- a population, I might add, of which over 50% is under age 15 -- this chamber is silent. On what is possibly only days before we send thousands of our own citizens to face unimagined horrors of chemical and biological warfare -- this chamber is silent. On the eve of what could possibly be a vicious terrorist attack in retaliation for our attack on Iraq, it is business as usual in the United States Senate.

We are truly "sleepwalking through history." In my heart of hearts I pray that this great nation and its good and trusting citizens are not in for a rudest of awakenings.

To engage in war is always to pick a wild card. And war must always be a last resort, not a first choice. I truly must question the judgment of any President who can say that a massive unprovoked military attack on a nation which is over 50% children is "in the highest moral traditions of our country". This war is not necessary at this time. Pressure appears to be having a good result in Iraq. Our mistake was to put ourselves in a corner so quickly. Our challenge is to now find a graceful way out of a box of our own making. Perhaps there is still a way if we allow more time."

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