

Beware the bluewash

The UN must not let itself be used as a dustbin for failed American adventures

The US government's problem is that it has built its foreign policy on two great myths. The first is that it is irresistible; the second is that as time advances, life improves. In Iraq it is trapped between the two. To believe that it can be thwarted, and that its occupation will become harder rather than easier to sustain as time goes by, requires that it disbelieves all that it holds to be most true.

But those who oppose its foreign policy appear to have responded with a myth of equal standing: that what unilateralism cannot solve, multilateralism can. The United Nations, almost all good liberals now argue, is a more legitimate force than the US and therefore more likely to succeed in overseeing Iraq's reconstruction and transition. If the US surrendered to the UN, this would, moreover, represent the dawning of a fairer, kinder world. These propositions are scarcely more credible than those coming out of the Pentagon.

The immediate and evident danger of a transition from US occupation to UN occupation is that the UN becomes the dustbin into which the US dumps its failed adventures. The American and British troops in Iraq do not deserve to die any more than the Indian or Turkish soldiers with whom they might be replaced. But the governments that sent them, rather than those that opposed the invasion, should be the ones that have to answer to their people for the consequences.

The vicious bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad last week suggests that the jihadis who now seem to be entering Iraq from every corner of the Muslim world will

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make little distinction between khaki helmets and blue ones. Troops sent by India, the great liberal hope, are unlikely to be received with any greater kindness than western forces. The Indian government is reviled for its refusal to punish the Hindus who massacred Muslims in Gujurat.

The UN will swiftly discover that occupation-lite is no more viable than occupation-heavy. Moreover, by replacing its troops, the despised UN could, in one of the supreme ironies of our time, provide the US government with the escape route it may require if George Bush is to win the next election. We can expect him, as soon as the soldiers have come home, to wash his hands not only of moral responsibility for the mess he has created, but also of the duty to help pay for the country's reconstruction. Most importantly, if the UN shows that it is prepared to mop up after him, it will enhance his incentive to take his perpetual war to other nations.

It should also be pretty obvious that, tough as it is for both the American troops and the Iraqis, pinned down in Iraq may be the safest place for the US army to be. The Pentagon remains reluctant to fight more than one war at a time. One of the reasons that it has tackled Iran and North Korea with diplomacy rather than missiles is that it has neither the soldiers nor the resources to launch an attack until it can disentangle itself from Iraq.

It is clear, too, that the UN, honest and brave as many of its staff are, possesses scarcely more legitimacy as an occupying force than the US. The US is now the only nation on the security council whose opinion really counts: its government can ignore other governments' vetoes; the other governments cannot ignore a veto by the US. In other words, a handover to the UN cannot take place unless George Bush says so, and Bush will not say so until it is in his interests to do so. The UN, already tainted in Iraq by its administration of sanctions and the fact that its first weapons inspection mission (Unscm) was infiltrated by the CIA, is then reduced to little more than an instrument of US foreign policy.

Until the UN, controlled by the five permanent members of the security council, has itself been democratized, it is hard to see how it can claim the moral authority to oversee a transition to democracy anywhere else. This problem is compounded by the fact that Britain, which is hardly likely to be perceived as an honest broker, is about to assume the council's presidency. A UN mandate may be regarded by Iraqis as bluewash, an attempt to grant retrospective legitimacy to an illegal occupation.

None of this, of course, is yet on offer anyway. The US government has made it perfectly clear that the UN may operate in Iraq only as a subcontractor. Foreign troops will take their orders from Washington, rather than New York. America's occupation of Iraq affords it regional domination, control of the second biggest oilfields on earth

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and, as deputy defence secretary Paul Wolfowitz has hinted, the opportunity to withdraw its troops from Saudi Arabia and install them in its new dependency instead. Republican funders have begun feasting on the lucrative reconstruction contracts, and the Russians and the French, shut out of the banquet, are being punished for their impudence.

Now that the US controls the shipping lanes of the Middle East and the oilfields of central Asia and West Africa, it is in a position, if it so chooses, to turn off the taps to China, its great economic rival, which is entirely dependent on external sources of oil. The US appears to be seeking to ensure that when the Iraqis are eventually permitted to vote, they will be allowed to choose any party they like, as long as it is pro-American. It will give up its new prize only when forced to do so by its own voters.

So, given that nothing we say will make any difference to Bush and his people, we may as well call for a just settlement, rather than the diluted form of injustice represented by a UN occupation. This means the swiftest possible transition to real democracy.

Troy Davis of the World Citizen Foundation has suggested a programme for handing power to the Iraqis which could begin immediately, with the establishment of a constitutional convention. This would permit the people both to start deciding what form their own government should take, and to engage in the national negotiation and reconciliation without which democracy there will be impossible. From the beginning of the process, in other words, the Iraqi people, not the Americans, would oversee the transition to democracy.

This is the logical and just path for the US government to take. As a result, it is unlikely to be taken. So, one day, when the costs of occupation become unsustainable, it will be forced to retreat in a manner and at a time not of its choosing. Iraq may swallow George Bush and his imperial project, just as the Afghan morass digested the Soviet empire. It is time his opponents stopped seeking to rescue him from his self-destruction. #

George Monbiot's book, The Age of Consent: A Manifesto for a New World Order, is published by Flamingo. His previous books Poisoned Arrows and No Man's Land have just been republished by Green Books.