

Sein Kampf by Dan Jacoby

In his press conference yesterday, George W. Bush called our seemingly interminable occupation of Iraq an “ideological struggle.” All evidence to the contrary, Bush still believes that he can create an atmosphere in which American values, systems and lifestyles will magically flourish in Iraq.

In the short term it is obvious that Bush is wrong. The only time in the history of the planet that one people imposed a non-totalitarian system of government on another was in 1945, and we had to drop a couple of atomic bombs on the Japanese first. Unless Bush & Co. are planning to nuke Iraq, there is no way that region’s people are going to surrender their history and customs to our political system.

In the long term Bush is still wrong, although it is not quite as obvious. An argument could be made that as Iraqis get used to the concepts of “freedom” and “democracy” the natural superiority of our political and economic systems will take over. The argument states that Iraqis are being exposed constantly to American methods of doing things, methods that created the richest, strongest, most powerful nation in history, and that as these methods create wealth and power in Iraq the Iraqis will embrace them.

There are three major flaws in that argument.

The first flaw is that post-revolutionary America was favored with tremendous natural resources. We began with some of the best farmland in the world, huge ore deposits, and a population small enough to take advantage of that natural wealth. In contrast, Iraq has few natural resources, and a much larger population (imagine cramming twenty-five million people into the state of Arizona).

The second flaw is that the newly-minted United States of America was separated from the great powers of the Earth by a wide ocean, giving America the opportunity to grow, unimpeded by global concerns. Iraq is surrounded by several countries that aren’t exactly eager to let an invading and occupying force from the other side of the world impose anything on anyone in their back yard.

The third flaw is an ideological paradox. How can we create a feeling of freedom in Iraq – or anywhere – by force? The feeling of freedom that eventually grew in Japan was not created by the imposition of a constitution on that country, it was established first by thoroughly demolishing the Japanese will to resist, then helped along by spending billions of dollars to rebuild their economy, and finally sprouted out of America’s fairly rapid willingness to let the Japanese run their own affairs. Even then, the Japanese culture remained fairly rigid for generations, and the country lived under what was effectively one-party rule for half a century. The Iraqis’ will to resist is anything but demolished, we are not spending the money needed to rebuild their economy, and George W. Bush is stubbornly unwilling to let them run their own affairs.

Until Bush and the Republicans come to understand that this “ideological struggle” cannot be won, or the Democratic leadership in Congress finds their spine, we will continue to absorb hundreds (thousands?) of casualties in a doomed mission. Bush’s struggle will be to America’s detriment, because it will continue to fail.