

Our Moral Duty in Iraq

How would U.S. withdrawal affect the Iraqi people?

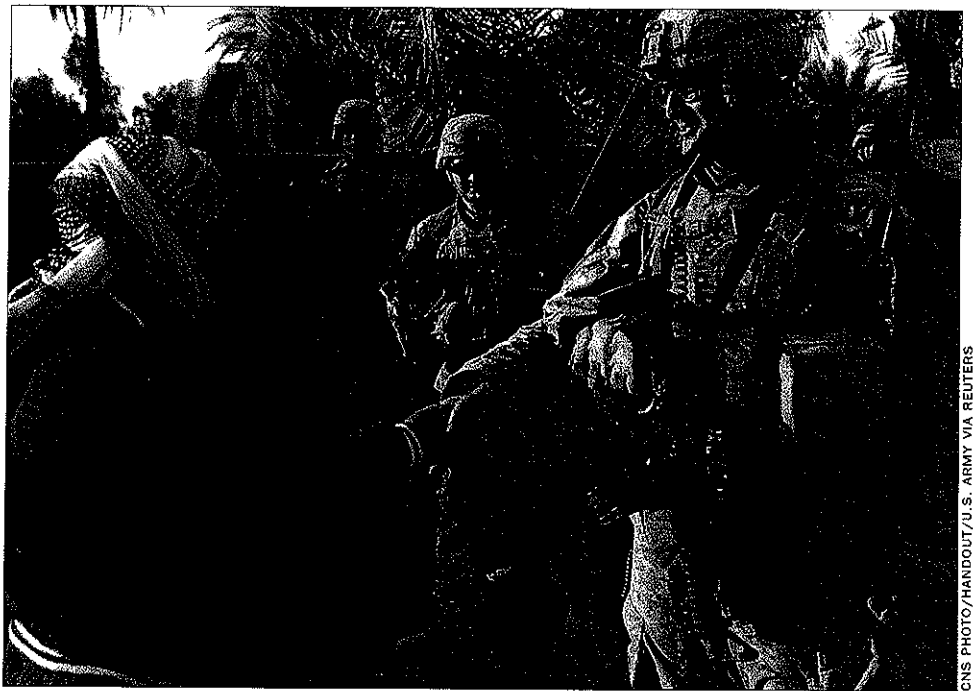
BY GERARD F. POWERS

LAST YEAR 14 CATHOLIC Democrats sent a letter about Iraq to the U.S. Catholic bishops. After citing church leaders' just war arguments against the original intervention, Tim Ryan, Rosa DeLauro, Marcy Kaptur and their colleagues concluded that it is time "to seek an end to this injustice." They urged the bishops to support their efforts to force a withdrawal of U.S. troops as a way to "bring an end to this war."

If it was immoral to intervene in Iraq in the first place, is it immoral to stay? Even Hillary Clinton, who supported the intervention, has claimed that Barack Obama is inconsistent because he opposed the intervention but later supported funding for U.S. troops to remain. Clearly, the ethics of intervention and the ethics of exit are related. The widespread, and correct, belief that the original intervention was illegitimate, the lack of broad international support and the failure to tie the toppling of a brutal regime in Iraq to a realistic and clear post-intervention plan have contributed to the debacle there. That said, as Bishop William Skylstad, then president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, emphasized in November, the focus now should be "more on the ethics of exit than on the ethics of intervention," for the two, while related, are distinct. A just war can lead to an unjust peace; less often, an unjust war can lead to a just peace. Today's challenge in Iraq is to ensure that an unjust war does not lead to an unjust peace.

Many in the antiwar camp fail to acknowledge that the

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A U.S. soldier shakes hands with a local resident in a newly established checkpoint in Adwaniya, Iraq, 12 miles southeast of Baghdad, in late 2007.

United States bears a moral burden to help Iraqis build a just peace, a burden made heavier precisely because the war is unjust. As an uninvited occupying power, the United States has assumed a whole set of moral obligations to promote the common good of the Iraqi people until Iraqis can take control of their own affairs.

Legally, the United States is no longer occupying Iraq, but by almost any measure Iraq is a failed state. Morally, therefore, the United States retains significant residual responsibilities to Iraqis. The Iraq intervention may have been an optional, immoral war; but given the U.S. government's shared responsibility for the ensuing crisis, its continued engagement is not an optional moral commitment.

What Matters Morally?

Others calling for U.S. withdrawal acknowledge the ethics of exit, but give too much weight to an ethic of efficacy (Is U.S. intervention working?) over an ethic of responsibility (What do we owe Iraqis?).

Efficacy must be part of any moral analysis of Iraq. At a forum sponsored by Fordham's Center on Religion and

Culture and Notre Dame's Kroc Institute, the ethicist Michael Walzer, a vocal opponent of the Iraq intervention, argued that "we are consequentialists for the moment. Neither staying on nor leaving Iraq is a categorical imperative" (see <http://kroc.nd.edu/events/07fordhamevent.-shtml>).

Unlike many in the debate, Walzer is clear about the breadth of moral obligations that exist in Iraq and thus the range of consequences that matter morally. According to Walzer, "We have to figure out a strategy that produces the least bad results for the Iraqi people, for other people in the Middle East, and for American soldiers."

Arguments for withdrawal tend to give most weight to what is good for U.S. soldiers (and, I would add, U.S. interests). It would be morally irresponsible not to take into account legitimate U.S. interests, not least our moral obligations to the small percentage of Americans who are helping to shoulder the burden in Iraq, and the moral costs of spending more than \$2 billion per week on the war while other pressing needs go unmet.

Moral clarity about what we owe ourselves is often not matched by moral clarity about what we owe Iraqis. The Catholic Democrats and presidential candidates who rally antiwar support by equating a withdrawal of U.S. troops with "ending the war" in Iraq define the "ought" mostly without reference to the Iraqi people. Proposals to deauthorize and stop funding the war and to set strict timetables for redeployment might "end the war" for Americans. But would they end the war between Sunnis and Shiites? Would they end the insurgency, the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks or the widespread criminality in Iraq?

The moral question, then, is not the one put by Senator John Warner to Gen. David Petraeus: What policies and strategies will best serve U.S. national security interests? Rather, it is: What policies and strategies will best serve the interests and well-being of the Iraqi people?

What the United States Owes the Iraqis

When U.S. obligations to Iraqis are taken into account, they are often defined in a minimalist way, such as: combating terrorist groups in Iraq; training and equipping Iraqi security forces; providing reconstruction assistance; pressing Iraqis to meet benchmarks for political "reconciliation"; taking in more Iraqi refugees, including those who have supported U.S. efforts; protecting the Kurds; and deterring Iranian aggression or regional instability. These are legitimate goals, but they do not seem commensurate with the

magnitude of the needs of the Iraqi people, especially for security.

Despite the fact that ensuring order is the primary responsibility of an occupying power, the Bush administration did not make protecting Iraqi civilians a priority until the "surge." The leading Democratic presidential candidates are clear that protecting civilians is not a U.S. obligation, despite abundant evidence that Iraqi security forces cannot do it alone. The inadequacy of such minimalist goals is clearer when tied to early deadlines for withdrawal. Senator Carl

Levin, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, argues that such deadlines would force Iraqis "to look into the abyss" of a civil war. Would proponents of this high stakes game

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of chicken be so confident of its efficacy or be so willing to impose the burden of moral risk on a long-victimized Iraqi people if their calculations began with a more robust understanding of U.S. ethical responsibilities to Iraqis?

Despite the obvious difficulties involved, the original U.S. objectives of building an Iraq that is "peaceful, united, stable, democratic and secure" are closer to what the United States owes Iraqis than are the minimalist alternatives. I would state the U.S. responsibilities more robustly than the Democratic presidential candidates have outlined or the Bush administration has pursued in practice. There are four: (1) not to end all political violence, but to ensure that an Iraqi government can maintain a reasonable degree of security for the whole country and minimize the threat of chaos or civil war; (2) not to impose a Western-style democracy, but to facilitate establishment of a stable, fairly representative government that respects basic human rights, especially minority rights; (3) not to promote a U.S.-style capitalist economy, but to restore Iraq's infrastructure and a viable economy that serves Iraqi needs, not U.S. interests, especially not U.S. oil interests; and (4) not to stay without the consent of a legitimate Iraqi government, or, lacking that, the United Nations.

Even if one accepts this understanding of U.S. obligations, isn't there a time when our obligations expire? Last October, a House resolution concluded that, "after more than four years of valiant efforts by members of the Armed Forces and United States civilians, the Government of Iraq must now be responsible for Iraq's future course." Such a short timetable seems less the product of a sober assessment of what it takes to succeed in the daunting nation-building project the United States has undertaken, and more a reflection of the lack of patience and long-term commitment to deal with the aftermath of interventions that is

often evident in U.S. foreign policy. Had there been a realistic plan in Iraq, would it be reasonable to expect a stable, united Iraq with an agreed constitution, a revived economy and a respected and effective government that could survive on its own—all that in five years? The fact that Iraq is a mostly failed state wracked by violence is not an argument for withdrawal, but evidence of just how far the United States is from meeting its moral responsibilities.

After almost five years of multiple U.S. missteps, misdeeds and miscalculations, serious doubts arise about whether the United States has the capacity, the competence, the moral credibility or the confidence of the Iraqi people needed to do a better job. The United States has seriously failed Iraq; but past failure need not beget future failure, nor does it absolve us of our obligations. Given what is at stake, the Bush administration (and its successor) must do more to put Iraqi interests first, to commit the necessary resources (especially for protection of Iraqi civilians and for reconstruction), to engage Iraq's neighbors and the international community, and to pursue new approaches that offer a better chance of meeting U.S. obligations. Those calling for an "end to the war" also have a heavy burden. They must show that, despite the U.S. obligations and the risks associated with failing to fulfill them, there is nothing more that can be done.

Has the Burden Been Met?

Many believe that the burden has been met. How can the United States continue to be held responsible, antiwar advocates ask, when Iraqis remain mired in sectarian conflicts born of ancient hatreds? Iraqis ultimately are responsible for resolving their deep divisions. The United States, however, is hardly a disinterested humanitarian entity, offering what Fouad Ajami has called the "foreigner's gift" of freedom. Instead, the United States supported Iraq in its war against Iran and during Saddam Hussein's genocide against the Kurds. The United States devastated Iraq during the 1991 war and the ensuing embargo, overthrew its government in 2003 and displayed gross negligence and incompetence in dealing with the aftermath. The U.S. role in Iraq might not be "ancient," but it is a part of the "hatreds" there.

Decoupling the United States from Iraq's hatreds is a complex matter. A precipitous U.S. withdrawal could end the war for the United States, but only for a while. Many analysts warn that a spiral of violence that could fill a vacuum left by an ill-timed U.S. withdrawal might necessitate a reintervention by the United States on humanitarian and security grounds. If the United States were not already in Iraq, there would be a clamor for humanitarian intervention to end the strife, which the World Health Organization estimates killed 151,000 Iraqis between 2003 and June 2006. One cannot criticize the United States and the international

community for not intervening to stop the sectarian strife in Darfur, while insisting that disengagement is the appropriate response to sectarian strife in Iraq (strife which, unlike Darfur, is both a direct and indirect result of U.S. actions).

The Best Antiwar Argument

Paradoxically, a failure to take seriously the distinction between the ethics of intervention and the ethics of exit, and to give an ethic of responsibility proper weight in the moral analysis, could undermine the original moral case against the war. The legitimate desire to end U.S. military engagement in a costly war with no end in sight has led many antiwar advocates to embrace a type of moral reasoning that is all too similar to that which they rejected when it was used by the Bush administration to justify the war. The Bush administration discarded traditional just war norms and launched a preventive war on the grounds that it was necessary to protect U.S. interests. Opponents of continued U.S. involvement must be careful not to discard norms governing U.S. responsibilities to the Iraqi people on the grounds that U.S. withdrawal is necessary to protect U.S. interests.

The Bush administration's case was based on best-case scenarios: a preventive war would prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction to terrorists, and Iraq would quickly become a model democracy in the Middle East. Opponents countered that war in the world's most volatile

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region would unleash the kind of uncontrollable, unintended consequences that have, in fact, ensued. If such realistic assessments of the risks of negative consequences were a reason for opposing the original intervention, they should also be a reason for opposing too rapid a withdrawal. Hopes that things could not get worse in Iraq might be tragically misplaced and deadlines might backfire. Reliance on best-case scenarios got us into our current predicament; it is not a strategy for getting us out of it.

The strongest argument against the Iraq intervention was that preventive wars are wars of aggression, which often become wars of occupation. And wars of occupation often degenerate into wars of repression, as the occupier resorts to indiscriminate and disproportionate force, emergency measures (even torture) and other heavy-handed tactics to pacify a resistant population. Wars of occupation, moreover, invariably involve a sustained, extremely difficult, long-term commitment to nation building that is at odds with U.S. political culture. Holding the Bush administration to this high standard of moral responsibility—rather than suggesting that responsibilities to Iraqis can easily be overridden by U.S. interests and by calculations of necessity and efficacy—would help hold the line on preventive war in the future.

Given the fears generated by terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction, such preventive wars will remain all too tempting and all too easy for the United

States, if it is not required to bear the burden of what it has wrought.

The best antiwar argument must address two moral failures in Iraq, not just one: it was immoral to intervene; in the ensuing nation-building process, the United States has failed the Iraqi people by willing an end (a peaceful and prosperous Iraq) without willing the means to achieve it.

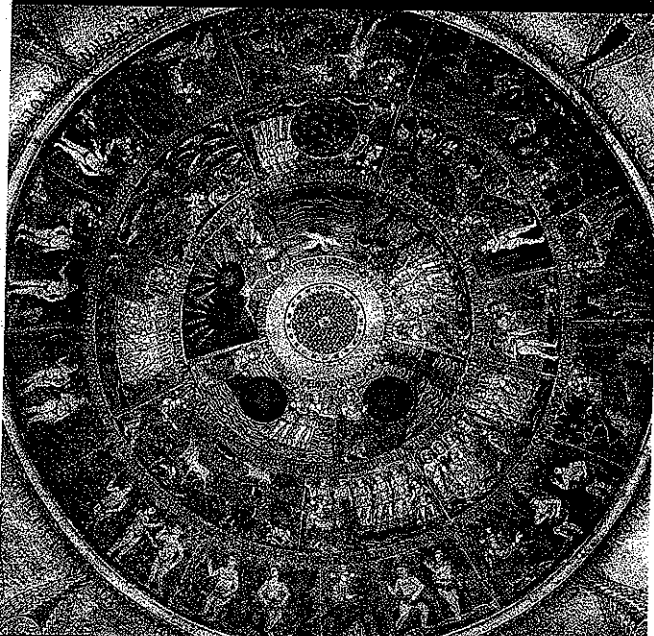
A preoccupation with what is good for U.S. troops and U.S. interests, coupled with speculative, short-term assessments of success and necessity, could compound this double moral failure. Those who say that it is too late and too costly to fix what we have broken must not forget what we owe Iraqis, lest they too readily impose on Iraqis alone the risks of a serious humanitarian, security and political crisis if the U.S. withdraws too soon. The antiwar position must find a better balance between an ethics of efficacy and an ethics of responsibility, between meeting U.S. needs and interests and Iraqi needs and interests. Some might still conclude that strict deadlines for withdrawal are called for. I doubt it. But at least then withdrawal would be pursued, not with self-righteous calls to “end” an immoral war, but with a deep sense of anguish, remorse and foreboding over our nation’s failure to live up to its obligations to the Iraqi people. **A**



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