

**Iraq Forum: Midnight or Dawn**

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We cannot understand how the world reached this crisis in Iraq without considering the historical traditions behind some of the key protagonists. This conflict began not on 9/11 or even in 1990-91, as is commonly suggested. It has its roots much further back in the history of the West's intervention in the Middle East during the 20th century.

The *Age* on Saturday carried an article featuring the faces of Bush, Blair and Howard. In many ways this has become a Wild West contest between men who stand as personifications of their nations. Most intriguingly, in the case of Blair and Howard, these men have come to believe that they monopolise the knowledge of what the national interests are, regardless of the fact that so many people disagree with them.

What is motivating them? It is tempting to stray into psycho history: theories such as that Bush needs to prove to George Bush Senior that the son can complete the work left half done by the father; or perhaps that the son can do even better than the father. Similarly, the fact that Howard was in the US on 9/11 is often said to have had a profound emotional effect on him.

But a more useful tool than psychohistory is an understanding of national styles of diplomacy and warfare. National styles is a political-science concept that argues that diplomacy are anchored in a nation's assumptions about the international system and its own traditions. National styles transcend specific issues and have the power to shape the rhetoric and the strategies used in foreign policy making. They mean that, when faced with certain choices, politicians almost intuitively choose one option in favour of another.

For example, many people outside the United States are perhaps shocked at their willingness to go it alone without the United Nations. But history shows that the US foreign policy tradition is as much one of isolationism (a variant on going it alone) and distrust of Europe, as it is commitment to international institutions. (Rumsfeld's bizarre comments about old Europe resonate with long-standing US diplomatic mythology that Europe is corrupt, decadent, characterised by intrigue and secret diplomacy. Moreover, the League of Nations failed not –as the Bush administration would like to claim – because it failed to take action against nazi Germany in 1938 (though this was part of its demise) but because the US Congress refused to be a member of the League because it would impose unacceptable constraints on US sovereignty.

Similarly, the US has a style of warfare that has been described as the historian John Ellis as "brute force": that is, in order to minimise their casualties, US forces bring to bear on all military situations a massive – and usually excessive – use of firepower, being via bombardment or air power. It is this style of warfare that causes me to have grave concerns about the current conflict. Given the US tradition of brute force, can the conflict can be fought in a way that it is consistent with the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law: particularly, the need to discriminate between military and civilian targets; and, above all, the need to have some proportionality between the military force applied and the political goals achieved by the war. How much physical destruction can be legitimately inflicted in pursuit of regime change?

In the case of Britain, there is an even stronger sense of reverting to the national style of the past: that is, the style of the global imperial power. It is not fanciful to see Blair's unqualified support for the United States as part of fifty-year-old saga of the loss of empire. If you read a short history of the Iraqi nation over the 20<sup>th</sup> century it is – yes – a story of corruption, violence, cruelty and the abuse of human rights and the rights of minorities. But it also a history of recurring intervention by the West. Britain created the modern Iraqi state when it gained the League of Nations mandate immediately after

the first world war. It defined the borders that have been a source of enduring tension between Iraq and its neighbours such as Kuwait. It established the Iraqi monarch (*God save the King* was actually played at the coronation of Faisal in 1921). When the Iraqi government was pro-German in second world war, Britain overthrew it violently. The Iraqis only gained control, from western companies, their own oil when they nationalised it forcibly in 1972. The Middle East, therefore, for much of the last one hundred years was Britain's imperial sphere of influence. And inserting their right to intervene yet again, Britain is arguably reverting to a imperial tradition, with shades of gunboat diplomacy.

Blair is also returning to another British tradition: the special relationship with the United States. When Winston Churchill realised that the cost of taking on Nazi Germany was to be British bankruptcy and imperial decline, he turned to face across the Atlantic. British foreign policy has often invoked the concept of the English-speaking peoples – the “coalition of the willing” is a new incarnation of this. Thatcher during the Falklands War mobilised this ideal and Blair has done the same. The special relationship is a way of perpetuating an unnaturally dominant global role for postwar Britain – and also of distancing Britain from Europe. The French after all are their historic enemy. During the Crimean war the British commander who was then fighting against the Russians in alliance with French, turned to

his allies as he saw the enemy coming over the hill to say "here come the French!"

So onto Australia: what is our national tradition that might be driving Howard] to think he knows better than the Australian people what is the national interest? Historians have often commented upon an expeditionary force mentality in the history of Australian defence and foreign policy: a kind of knee jerk reaction that says wherever there's a war on Australia must be there. This is simplistic but it is remarkable how often Australian forces have fought in the Middle East in the last century. The Middle East was the sire of Australia's first actions in both world wars (if you count Gallipoli as being in the Middle East). In the late 1940s Menzies seriously considered deploying Australian forces in the Middle East in anticipation of a third world war – and of course, we committed forces to the Gulf in 1990-91. In each case there were strategic arguments as to why Australian forces should be deployed in this region but it is a striking phenomenon nonetheless for a country that is positioned on the edge of the Asia Pacific region.

This can only be explained by exploring the dominant national tradition of Australia in foreign and defence policy: that is, our believing that our security can only be guaranteed as part of a global alliance network, particularly with what Robert Menzies called our great and powerful friends, Britain and the United

States. This has been a leitmotif of Australian defence policy for decades. Howard quite clearly has taken Australian back that close relationship with the United States that led to Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war. We are again "showing the flag" with the US (to use the Vietnam regime). Howard may rationalise this in terms of new agenda: international security from terrorism but for those of us who lived through Vietnam the resonance with the "all the way with LBJ" – or even John Gorton's "We'll go waltzing a-matilda with you" – is disturbing.

So too is the way in which seems that Howard has succumbed to the old established pattern of being wowed by that phone call from Washington. I would not underestimate the power of flattery in international relations, particularly when it means that Australian prime ministers can punch way above their weight on the international stage. All those photographs on the mantelpiece of Howard shaking hands with a galaxy of world leaders!

Clearly, therefore, if asked whether we are at midnight or dawn, I believe that we are closer to midnight. Our government – at incalculable cost to the relationship with the Asia Pacific region and to our personal security at home and abroad – has regressed to an old tradition of unqualified alignment with its historical alliance partners, Britain and the United States. The cause and the rhetoric may be different but the alignment is familiar. Let us hope profoundly that the cost of being one of

the "coalition of the willing" will not match that incurred when one of Howard's predecessors, said in 1914 that Australia would back the British to "the last man and the last shilling". I am confident that it will not, but then Australians in August 1914 thought the war would be over by Christmas.