

After Saddam: Anticipating the aftermath

From the Editors in the [March 22, 2003](#) issue

The hourglass seems to be running out on the chance for a peaceful end to the Iraq crisis. It will take a creative revision of policy—virtually a policy reversal—for President Bush to step back from war. Assume that the White House hawks get to pursue their war with Iraq, and assume (what is far from certain) that the war follows the rosier of scenarios—Saddam removed and Iraq disarmed in a matter of weeks. Then what? Then things may get even messier. Winning the war may prove much easier than occupying and rebuilding Iraq. In war, at least, the objective is clear.

Much less clear is the U.S. objective in occupying Iraq, and whether the U.S. has the will to deal with war's aftermath. Bush has belatedly turned his attention to this question and laid out a grandiose agenda: the U.S. "liberation" of Iraq will "show the power of freedom to transform the region by bringing hope and progress into the lives of millions." He has suggested that the U.S. postwar role will parallel its rebuilding of Germany and Japan after World War II, and said that the U.S. presence in Iraq will do nothing less than transform "the future of the Muslim world."

This is a utopian and unlikely vision on several accounts. Iraq is made up of tribes and ethnic groups with long histories of animosity and old scores to settle, and it has a meager tradition of democratic governance. Freedom from Saddam may bring social chaos, not hope and progress. And the U.S. presence in the region is likely to inflame the Muslim world in political turmoil rather than turn Iraq into a model for reform. In any case, the duties of the occupying force will be formidable: keeping the peace, feeding the populace, treating the sick and wounded, reforming and training the Iraqi police and army, organizing a political system and rebuilding the economic infrastructure. It will also be expensive. One Washington think tank estimates that war and a five-year occupation would cost \$152 billion, including military expenses, humanitarian aid, salaries for Iraqi security forces and government officials, and physical reconstruction.

Bush's vision also ignores Americans' current aversion to pursuing and paying for such long-term projects. Americans have short memories and short attention spans. Having watched the Taliban regime fall in Afghanistan, for example, they have shown little interest in the fate of that country, certainly not in the tedious task of reconstruction.

We suspect that many of the Americans now eager to send troops into Iraq will also be eager, if and when Saddam is removed, to bring the troops home and cut off development funds. Why, we can hear them complaining, should Americans fight and die for Iraq, and why should American taxpayers support that faraway country?

Robert Bellah suggested in the previous issue (March 8) that the U.S. seems to want to be an empire on the cheap: it operates a military machine and lets others pick up the pieces. The U.S. is inclined to take on responsibilities that it cannot or will not fulfill. If the U.S. does enter Iraq with force, then both those who endorse the action and those who oppose it and grieve over it will have to grapple with the old question, "What is the responsible use of American power?" in the new context of an imperial occupation.