

You can't go home again

Defeating Saddam Hussein won't ensure stability in the Persian Gulf, argues Josef Joffe. An American presence will be needed

Two hours after the war began, the president quoted Hollywood Huddleston, a Marine lance corporal: "Let's free these people so that we can go home." And then George Bush said it himself: "I am determined to bring the [troops] home as soon as possible."

Winning big and walking away is the dream. But it may not come true in our generation. In 1958, the U.S. Marines waded ashore in Beirut, propped up the government and sailed home. A quarter century later, they returned—and pulled back after 241 servicemen were killed in a suicide bombing attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut. The gulf showdown is different. No matter how the drama ends, the United States will be in the region for the long haul.

Even a quick and decisive victory should not be seen as a finale but as a prologue to a long-term military engagement. The Iraqi land grab was only a symptom of a deeper disease that will not vanish soon. The curse resembles Europe's in the first half of the 20th century, which was dispelled only by America's lasting entanglement. Like Europe then, the Middle East today is an area whose strategic importance is exceeded only by its chronic inability to maintain the peace.

Look at Saddam Hussein. He has simply re-enacted one of the oldest gambits in history, "Grab while the grabbing is good." The script was written by the Athenians and Spartans 2,500 years ago and replayed by every ambitious ruler for centuries—whether he be despot or democrat, Christian or Mongol or Muslim.

Imbalance of power. The moral of this tale is just as old: Power will expand until it meets its match. The tragedy of the Middle East is that it cannot generate enough power to stop power. That power will have to be borrowed, and the security lender of last resort is the United States. Japan and Germany are banks with flags. France and Britain have memories of greatness but no longer the means. The Soviet Union is turning inward toward chaos, renewed dictatorship, or both.

What about the locals with a stake in stability? There is Israel, with more tanks than France, more combat planes than Germany and with nuclear weapons in the basement. But it is accepted as legitimate player by none, and its main concern is sheer survival in a sea of hostile neighbors. There is Egypt—big, proud and, for the time being, moderate. But it is an economic basket case, a country whose wondrous fertility rate forever outpaces the meager progress of its economy.

Saudi Arabia? It is a tribal monarchy masquerading as a nation-state, a hundred-billion-dollar investment in arms without an army. Even now, a draft is strictly a no-no. Then there are Syria, Iraq and Iran—all part of the problem and anything but pillars of civic responsibility.

Iran is exhausted, but the Khomeinist fervor has not run its course. Years will pass before Iran, a natural enemy of Arab ambitions, can resume the role to which the shah once pretended—as guardian of regional order in tacit collaboration with Israel. Syria may be a bedfellow of the United States today (and beggars can't be choosers), but it remains on the State Department's list of terror sponsors. Even by the generous standards of the Middle East, the Damascus regime is a ruthless dictatorship that, first things first, used the cover of the American coalition to massacre the opposition in Lebanon.

With or without Saddam Hussein, Iraq will remain a source of trouble. A prostrate Iraq would be a tempting target for the region's two other rogue regimes, in Damascus and Tehran. If, on the other hand, Iraq is merely humiliated, the Middle East will have to live with a country licking its wounds and plotting to turn its fabulous oil wealth toward revenge.

Throw in the Arab-Israeli battle over legitimacy and land (that will not go poof just because the U.N. sponsors an international talk fest) and you get "Pax Americana—the Sequel." First, because there is nobody else to intimidate the would-be hegemonists in the strategic intersection of three continents. Second, the Middle East is not sitting on the largest sorghum pile on the planet, and though gas at \$1.30 a gallon is not among America's inalienable rights, a reliable supply of oil at a steady price is a must for the world—for rich and poor alike. Third, the story of Europe's pacification after 1945 delivers tomorrow's rule for the Middle East: Since the United States will be involved no matter what, it is better and cheaper to stay and deter than come back and fight.

Until August, 50,000 troops, plus a credible air and naval presence, might have averted the need for half a million today. Ideally, the United States should not do it alone. The coalition so deftly assembled under the U.N. should be kept in harness. The Europeans must be collared with the reminder that riches involve responsibility, that they cannot eat the cake while America guards it. The moderate Arabs must understand that the next Saddam Hussein will be a knife at *their* throats.

The bottom line is that a multinational force will be needed in Kuwait, guaranteed by American might, enlarged by European units and legitimized by Arab contributions. But the burden of leadership will fall on the United States. Having committed its purpose and power, America cannot slip out the next day. The lesson for the end of the century is not Munich—by 1938 it was too late to stop the Nazi behemoth. The fitting metaphor is Versailles. After World War I, the United States signed the 1919 peace agreement, then vanished across the ocean—only to face a more murderous war 20 years later. ■



Wrong model. At the end of World War I