

IRAQ VIEWPOINT

Clipping the Eagle's Wings

Why some Europeans would like to see America humbled in Iraq

Josef Joffe

COVERING WARS IN MY YOUNGER DAYS—IN THE MIDDLE East, the Gulf, the Falklands—I learned to live (and write) by the theater critic's iron rule: Don't judge a play before the final curtain. In the October War, the Israelis were surprised twice—first by the cleverly masked attack on the part of Egypt and Syria; second, by the fire-and-steel wall of antitank and antiaircraft missiles that broke the Israeli counter-attack. But for one week only. Then the Israelis changed tactics and ended up a few tens of miles from Cairo. In 1980, Saddam Hussein invited the world press to watch his glorious victory against an Iranian army whose military leadership had just been decapitated by Khomeini's followers. By the time I arrived in Basra, the Iraqi offensive into "Arabistan" had ground to a halt. I lived through some low-level Iranian bombardment, then took a cab to Kuwait.

Such are the misfortunes of war that ought to instill some caution into us instant analysts. At this point, only one thing is clear. After months of building up its forces, the United States could not possibly achieve strategic surprise. Yet Saddam has scored a tactical surprise of sorts. His armies didn't just collapse and slink off. Like the leaders of weaker forces at all times, he has resorted to asymmetric warfare: blindside attacks on Allied supply lines, human shields, fighters in civilian get-up, Soviet-style commissars who shoot unwilling soldiers in the back.

No wonder America is getting bad press in Europe and around the world. Many of those who were doubtful about this war were ready to be convinced by a quick, clean victory. Such a victory, it now appears, will not fall into Bush's lap. And so, as the U.S. dispatches over 100,000 more troops to the theater, schadenfreude has set in—softly in most quarters, loudly in some. A *Tagesspiegel* cartoon showed British and American hands carving up an Iraq-shaped piece of meat: TOUGHER THAN I THOUGHT. And the editor of *Paris Match* chided his countrymen for "unhealthy rejoicing" at the U.S. military's difficulties and "mocking the American troops for their suffering."

The gloating points to a deeper problem. One often wonders why the moral coordinates in the European debate have become so skewed, why, as here in Hamburg, little yellow posters are sprouting up around downtown that scream: AMI, GO HOME! Why is it that banners at demonstrations equate Bush with Hitler? Why is it that the Saddamite regime, one of the most repulsive in history, is given quasi-absolution through silence? Why, in short, is the "rogue state" label attached to the U. S.?

Moral revulsion against death and destruction delivered against innocents is one part of the answer, but only one. The

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larger part has to do with sheer power. In private and public discussions, one worry trumps them all. It goes like this: "America is fighting a hegemonic war, it wants to set itself up as master of the world. And we don't want a world dominated by one power only." Europeans like French President Jacques Chirac make it explicit by demanding a "multipolar world." German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder doesn't put it quite so bluntly, but his "unconditional solidarity"—something he promised Bush after 9/11—now extends to the French, suggesting that his nightmare, too, is a unipolar world.

So this war is no longer about Saddam. It is about the distribution of global power in the 21st century. Saddam is a catalyst; the underlying reason is the collapse of the Soviet Union on Christmas Day 1991—of the other superpower that had constrained and contained the U.S. throughout the cold war. It is a lonely world in which the last remaining superpower now finds itself. Power begets counterpower; this is history's oldest and meanest lesson. Yet as old as it is, it is unfamiliar to the U.S., which spent the 19th century expanding inward and the 20th in vast coalitions against the bad guys of those days: Wilhelm II, Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin.

When Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld proclaimed that in this new world the mission determines the coalition and not the other way around, he hadn't listened to what history was whispering: Eventually others will gang up on

Mr. Big. This is happening now.

In one way or another, the U.S. and Britain will win this war. Victory may intimidate rather than inflame the other Arab nations. Saddam's regime may be replaced by a "Jordanian" one—a regime less despotic and more participatory. Sobered, the Palestinians may move toward peace with Israel. But ganging up on No. 1 will persist; this is the price of excessive power. Can this dour verdict of history be averted? Yes, if this "imperial republic" learns to soften the hard edge of its power with the balm of trust. In the end, people don't hate America. They mistrust its intentions and wisdom.

When this war is over, a bit less Rumsfeld and Cheney and a bit more Truman and Eisenhower will surely help. These administrations succeeded so admirably in furthering American interests by serving those of others. And by listening to them. ■

WRONG WAR: A peace protester in Leipzig holds up a banner that compares President Bush to Hitler

ECKHARD SCHULZ—AP