The Washington Post

Book World
Going It Alone

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974 Wörter
19 Dezember 2004
The Washington Post
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Englisch

WAR AND THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY

By Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. Norton.160 pp. $23.95

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., the author of such magisterial works as The Age of Roosevelt, is the doyen of American historians. He is also a fervent liberal, and the two roles -- the intellectual and the partisan -- do not always mesh smoothly. But if we make generous allowance for his politics while paying due respect to his preeminence, this elegant and learned little book (a mere 160 pages in large type) offers a luminous and provocative guide for the perplexed in times of war.

The targets of Schlesinger's passion are the Iraq war and the uber-imperial presidency of George W. Bush. Some arrows hit home; some end up among the trees. One central instance is the chapter on "How to Democratize American Democracy," where Schlesinger complains bitterly about a president who won only a minority of the popular vote dragging the country into a foolish war. But since John Quincy Adams in 1824, minority presidents have been almost as American as apple pie. The sad but strictly constitutional fact is that the states, not the people, elect the president, a system that tends to overrepresent tiny or sparsely populated states. So don't blame W., blame the Founding Fathers.

Or blame the people, who, in spite of a nasty, inconclusive war in Iraq, have returned Bush to the White House with a nice margin, adding some 9 million votes to his 50.4 million tally in 2000 and letting him carry the popular vote. So the principle of "one person, one vote," which Schlesinger advocates with a vengeance to guard against misbegotten foreign adventures, is a tricky thing; it all depends on what vox populi is saying. Having preached the wisdom of majorities, Schlesinger must be aghast at the outcome of November 2. One wonders whether he would still target George W. Bush today -- or the "false consciousness" of the electorate.

Still, even those who (like this reviewer) supported the Iraq war now often harbor second thoughts. But foolish foreign ventures also are practically as old as the republic -- beginning with America's second war against Britain, the War of 1812, which almost ended in a humiliating rout when the Brits burned the Capitol and the White House. And it is not so obvious, as Schlesinger avers, that the folly in both 1812 or 2003 was glaringly self-evident ex ante.

For the "logic" of either war was hardly demented. Heavily dependent on European markets, those young Americans in 1812 rightly railed against the motherland for press-ganging their sailors and choking their trade. The "logic" of the Iraq war was no less plausible: Since the "root cause" of anti-American terrorism was the pathologies of Arab political culture, going for "regime change" and democracy was evidently the right thing to do.

The real problem, as so often in American history, was neither the "imperial presidency" nor national hubris but the woeful gap between means and ends. In 1812, it was foolhardy to attack the mightiest navy in the world with a handful of creaky ships. In 2003, it was tragically reckless to believe that the United States could just slice through Saddam Hussein's armies, hand over power in Baghdad and go home. Approvingly, Schlesinger quotes President George H.W. Bush's secretary of defense in 1991: "Once you've got Baghdad, it's not clear what you do with it. . . . It's not clear what kind of government you would put in. . . . How much credibility is [that] government going to have if it's set up by the United States military?. . . . To have American military forces engaged in a civil war inside Iraq would fit the definition of quagmire, and we have absolutely no desire to get bogged down in that fashion." The name of that defense secretary, of course, was Dick Cheney.

A lesser historian would have stuck to the diatribes; Schlesinger, however, resists pat prescriptions. He reminds those who inveigh against Bush-style "unilateralism" that this impulse also is as American as motherhood and the flag: "There is no older American tradition in the conduct of foreign affairs," he rightly notes -- from Thomas Jefferson to William Jefferson Clinton. The common denominator of both isolationism and interventionism is precisely unilateralism, the conviction that America can go it alone -- in 1812 as in 2003.

Needless to say, Schlesinger does not cherish this reflex. Tracing Sen. John Kerry's "global test" for intervention abroad back to the 18th century, Schlesinger quotes the 63rd Federalist: "In doubtful cases, particularly where the national councils may be warped by some strong passion or momentary interest, the presumed or known opinions of the impartial world may be the best guide that can be followed." Alas, that guide can be treacherous. Those nations who opposed the Iraq war were hardly "impartial." They followed their own interests, the most urgent of which was to prevent the United States from setting itself up as arbiter over the Middle East.

Nonetheless, Schlesinger has it right where he transcends passion in favor of prudent principle: "The United States, as it seeks to advance its national interests, will increasingly discover, I believe, that joint action may often be the best way to safeguard those interests." This is not the counsel of wimpishness but of realism. Indifference to consequences was driven by weakness in 1812, by fabulous strength in 2003. In both cases, America might have been better off staying at home rather than going it alone. *

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Dokument WP00000020041219e0cj0001k

