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**The Big Idea; Did America's view of itself as unique lead to the Iraq war?**

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THE SILENCE OF THE RATIONAL CENTER

Why American Foreign Policy Is Failing

By Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke

Basic. 312 pp. \$26.95 In the 1940s, the theory known as "From Luther to Hitler" was all the rage. This was the seductive notion that Germany's career had been preordained by culture and history. As you looked backward, you would see nothing but an unbroken chain of necessity that inexorably led from "then" to "here and now."

Historians have long ago discredited this theory as a way of understanding national behavior, but in *The Silence of the Rational Center*, Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke succumb to a similar no-no with regard to the United States. Their vantage point is the Iraq war, which is vying for first place in the history of American foreign policy crack-ups. In their view, the "Big Idea" (plus assorted minor villains such as cable TV) is the main culprit driving U.S. actions. So what is that idea?

The "Big Idea" is American exceptionalism, which has imbued the republic with a mission to redeem the world. Its seed, Halper and Clarke argue, was planted as early as 1630, when John Winthrop famously sermonized, "Wee shall be as a City upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon Us." Alas, they don't quote the rest: "Soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our God . . . and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world." In other words, no mission statement here. Winthrop was making an appeal to his flock "to love the Lord our God" and "one another, to walke in his wayes" so that God "may blesse us in . . . the good Land."

This was an inward-looking mission, not a blueprint for global salvation. Nor was "manifest destiny" (a 19th-century shibboleth the authors invoke) a precursor of regime change in Iraq. Instead, it laid out an ideology for continental expansion -- for a kind of domestic imperialism. Real U.S. imperialism takes up but a short footnote in American history: the 1898 war against Spain, which netted the Philippines.

What about "making the world safe for democracy," as Woodrow Wilson proclaimed in World War I? A nice catchphrase, but a far better explanation for America's belated entry into the war should read "Germany's unrestricted U-boat warfare" -- in other words, pure realpolitik.

World War II, Korea and Vietnam were also classic balance-of-power wars, never mind all the grandiloquent rhetoric. Nor is the "Big Idea" peculiar to America; all great powers from Athens on down have justified their wars in terms of transcendental principles. Remember Britain's "white man's burden" and France's "mission civilisatrice"? America sounds exceptional, but behind its lofty ideals have always lurked hard-core national interests.

So what about Iraq? The impetus for the invasion was not one Big Idea, as Halper (of Cambridge University) and Clarke (of the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs) have it, but too many -- a rolling rationale including nukes, terrorism, democracy-building. . . . And the authors ignore the obvious one: sheer opportunity. The Bush team went to war in 2003 because it could -- because there was nobody to stop them after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Neither the first President Bush nor the second would have unleashed America's awesome might so close to Russia's underbelly if Moscow's Cold War-era power had still been intact. Opportunity makes not only thieves but power-mongers.

Perhaps *The Silence of the Rational Center* suffers from too many ideas as well. There is a chapter on cable-news pundits and their terrible simplifications. There is another on intelligence and its errors. A third one deals with the tribulations of asymmetric warfare. And a final one fastens on China as the "main security challenge for the United States." All of them are unexceptionable but also unexceptional. And you wonder how they fit in with the "Big Idea."

On one issue, though, the authors do have a Big Point: Why was there so little opposition to the Iraq gamble during the run-up to the invasion in 2002-03? Where, beyond the loony fringe, were the reasoned questions about the future of Iraq after "V-I Day"? How would the United States redeem a country of which it knew nothing? Why would a democracy stay the course in a place only remotely related to its core security?

The authors describe that fiasco by squaring off against media, politicians and think tanks, both left and right. The result is the most original part of the book. It rightly attacks the failure of collective intelligence. But we still need to know why a free and boisterous polity fell for the notion that the United States could just wade into the hellhole of Iraq and transform it at the snap of a precision-guided missile. That book still needs to be written. And it should be. \*

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