

Political Paradoxes

 peterberkowitz.wordpress.com/2004/06/29/political-paradoxes

June 29, 2004

June 29, 2004 at 8:00 am

This essay originally appeared in *The New York Sun*.

Let's hope that the Iraqis, to whom sovereignty was transferred yesterday, can, along with coalition forces that have stayed behind, finish the work of bringing stability, democracy, and prosperity to their long suffering country.

Whatever the outcome, however, it is likely to have paradoxical effects on American political sensibilities. For if the conservative driven experiment in nation building in Iraq enjoys even modest success in the coming years, it will provide long-term nourishment for progressive ideas in America. And if it fails, as many progressive critics of Operation Iraqi Freedom think it is bound to, it will strengthen over the long haul conservative proclivities in America.

To understand these paradoxes, it is necessary to recall the simple truth that is increasingly blurred by the present partisan strife: Most conservatives in America as well as most progressives are small "l" liberals and small "d" democrats. They share the bedrock principles that individuals have rights that no government should infringe, and that legitimate government is grounded in the sovereignty of the people.

The partisans differ over political priorities, or how to interpret and balance the principles. Conservatives maintain a lively sense of the weaknesses of human nature; cherish custom and tradition, and put a premium on preserving what has been achieved in the way of individual freedom and equality before the law, typically by limiting government's reach.

Progressives maintain a lively sense of the possibilities of human nature, celebrate innovation and reform, and focus on expanding individual freedom and enlarging the sphere of equality, typically by increasing government's size and role.

Given these priorities, success for President Bush's policy of promoting democracy in Iraq will strengthen the progressive point of view. For what could better demonstrate the viability of large-scale government undertakings aimed at building more open and inclusive societies than the single greatest feat of social engineering America has ever undertaken, the surgical removal of a totalitarian dictator halfway around the globe and, at a cost in excess of \$100 billion, the implanting of democratic institutions on foreign soil that has never known self-government?

At the same time, failure in Iraq that so many progressives foresee would fortify typically conservative convictions. Fairly or not, it would be taken as decisive confirmation that government's competence is severely limited, and therefore its main job, at home and abroad, is not to improve the situation but to keep matters from getting worse.

So how did it happen that a conservative president staked his presidency on a foreign policy rich with progressive implications that nevertheless most progressives have roundly condemned?

As for the progressive critics, their strange reversal was fortified by the appeal to sound arguments, grounded in a more conservative emphasis on the dependence of democracy on culture and morals, for believing that we lack the know-how to democratize a large, far-away country whose language we do not speak, whose traditions differ dramatically from our own, and whose politics is riven by ethnic and religious sectarianism.

But many progressive critics might not have come to these conclusions had they not found themselves in the awkward position of opposing policies that reflect, to a degree that the critics have not grappled with, the latent progressive impulse in both neoconservatism and Mr. Bush's Christian faith.

Over the last 30 years, neoconservatives have developed a hawkish foreign policy that sees the promotion of democracy as a moral as well as a strategic imperative. To be sure, their faith in American military power as a force for good in the world has always been in tension with their characteristic skepticism about the efficacy of government programs at home. And it put them at odds with more traditional conservatives who wished to reserve the military for direct and immediate military threats.

At the same time, the neoconservative distrust of the United Nations and international institutions – more consistent with their critique of big government – distinguished their outlook from the Wilsonians and liberal internationalists in the Democratic Party. You might describe neoconservative foreign policy as one of pursuing progressive ends – the universal spread of liberal democracy – by nonprogressive means – the American armed forces.

But neoconservative voices were not prominent in the Bush campaign. Indeed, in the fall of 2000, candidate Bush was thoroughly believable in his debates with candidate Gore when he declared his opposition to a foreign policy based on nation-building. This reflected classical conservative realism. And nothing in the first seven and a half months of his presidency gave any indication that Mr. Bush was inclined to adopt a more ambitious approach.

But for the September 11 terrorist attacks, Mr. Bush's latent progressive impulse might never have come to the fore. The assault on America, however, changed the equation. Having concluded that it was too dangerous not to confront tyrannies that bred and nurtured terror

and trafficked in weapons of mass destruction, Mr. Bush was not obliged to go to war with every dictator on the face of the earth. Rather, he was obliged to establish priorities and determine the most effective means for dealing with each particular threat.

Mr. Bush's conclusion that it was appropriate to use military force to remove Saddam Hussein was bound up with his judgment that once Baghdad had been liberated, America could restore order and establish democracy in Iraq.

This is where his deep-seated Christian progressivism, his belief in the universality of the human desire and capacity for freedom, comes in and converges with the progressive impulse in neoconservatism. Time and again in his major speeches about Iraq, Mr. Bush has repeated some variant on the idea that freedom is not America's gift to the world but God's gift to humanity.

It does not follow from this belief that it is America's job to fan out into the world to prepare nations around the globe for the challenges of self-government. It does follow that when security considerations counsel regime change in a rogue state, America has a reasonable prospect of leaving the country that it has invaded a better place than it found it because democracy is the form of government to which all people, given the choice, will incline, and given the opportunity, will seize.

Who will prove right about Iraq remains to be seen. In the meantime, to find progressivism in the foreign policy of the conservative party, and conservative reservations about that policy coming from the progressive party, is a useful reminder at this bitterly polarized moment of the complexity of our partisan perspectives and the common ground that is still available.