

CAPITAL COMMENTARY

March 24, 2003

After the War

The United States is at war. The most lethal war machine in the history of humankind, belonging to the world's greatest, unrivaled power since the Roman Empire, has been unleashed against the totalitarian regime of an evil dictator.

I fully recognize the brutality and dangers posed by Saddam Hussein's regime. Nevertheless, I am also one who felt that all the alternatives to armed conflict were not fully pursued in the manner demanded by just war principles. But the decision for war has been made, and although the outcome is not certain, all indications suggest that the United States will quickly prevail.

The decision that has not yet been made, however, is about what the United States will do in Iraq once its military objectives are won. If the United States acts like powerful empires of the past, it will seek to impose its economic and political systems on Iraq and seek to gain politically and economically from its victory. If the United States acts as it sometimes has in the past, it will bring the troops home, hold the victory parades, and leave Iraq to its own devices. Neither of these past practices is appropriate.

Jesus Christ said, "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant." Jesus said this to his disciples among whom jealousies had broken out. But all persons in authority are called to exercise their authority not for selfish ends but for the good of those over whom they exercise that authority. Thus, it is not an oxymoron to speak of a servant-leader or a servant-legislator. Persons in leadership positions should exercise their authority and the power that goes with that authority in the service—for the welfare—of those over whom they have authority.

After victory in Iraq—if indeed the confident predictions come true and a clear and decisive victory is gained—United States military and civilian officials should see their role as one of service, of being servants to the Iraqi people as they carry out relief and reconstruction operations.

To me this means four things.

First, these officials should constantly put the interests of the Iraqi people ahead of American interests. Establishing a just order in a sad country that has known little of justice in the public realm should be the goal. That goal should take precedence over American economic or geopolitical self-interest.

Second, Americans must be ready to come with massive amounts of humanitarian and reconstruction aid. The war may devastate large areas of Iraq, but even more damage has been done by Hussein's repressive, uncaring government over many years. This aid must be distributed justly based on need and not on the power and influence of religious and ethnic groups.

Third, American officials must play a minimalist role. As much as possible and as soon as possible, Iraqi officials must be given responsibility. American officials should stay in the background, giving advice and making suggestions but allowing the Iraqi officials to make most of the actual decisions and to receive the credit.

Fourth, the United States should leave Iraq as soon as possible. A year and possibly two years—if the American presence is being reduced—would seem to be the maximum length of time they should be there at all.

Actions such as these run counter to human tendencies and to the actions of powerful empires in the past. To some, these four recommendations will sound hopelessly idealistic. But if the United States is to return to its very best ideals and heed the timeless biblical call to do justice, it must do no less. Then the United States may yet be able to demonstrate that it is a different kind of superpower.

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