



Tempering Ambitions [in Iraq]

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Whether the Iraqi expedition is judged a success or failure depends almost exclusively on the views of Americans—not those of Iraqis, other coalition partners, or anyone else. So, [fellow Americans](#), let's debate the topic. My take:

It was right to pre-empt Saddam Hussein before he could oppress his Iraqi subjects further, invade another country, deploy more chemical weapons or build nuclear weapons. The world is a better place with this abominable thug in jail, not lording it in his "presidential palaces."

Alongside the easy and fast victory over Saddam Hussein, the Bush Administration made a critical conceptual mistake—raising short-term expectations too high. Nomencla-

ture alone required Operation Iraqi Freedom to quickly produce a vibrant, healthy, open, calm Iraq, with anything less constituting failure. Talk of a "free and prosperous" Iraq serving as a regional model foisted ambitions on Iraqis that they—just emerging from a thirty-year totalitarian nightmare, saddled with extremist ideologies, deep ethnic divisions and predatory neighbors—could not fulfill.

As Iraqis failed to play their appointed role, frustration grew in Washington. Deepening the trap of its own making, the administration forwarded these ambitions by bogging itself down in such domestic Iraqi minutiae as resolving inter-tribal conflict, getting electricity and water grids to work and involving itself in constitution writing.

Had the U.S.-led coalition pitched its ambitions lower, aspiring only to a decent government and economy while working much more slowly toward democracy, Iraq's progress over the past four years would be more apparent. The occupying forces should have sponsored a [democratically-minded strongman](#) to secure the country and eventually move it toward an open political process; and this approach would have the benefit of keeping Islamists out of power at a moment of their maximal popular and electoral appeal.

The basic coalition message to Iraqis should have been: You are adults, here is your country back, good luck. Transfer some seed money and station coalition forces in the deserts with a clearly defined mandate—defend Iraq's international borders, ensure the security of oil and gas exports, search for Saddam Hussein and his henchmen, prevent large-scale atrocities.

These should-have-beens remain relevant as 2007 approaches. The administration can still frame the debate in terms of U.S. interests, not Iraqi ones. It can contrast Iraq today with yesteryear's totalitarian model rather than a potential ideal. It can distance itself from Iraq's fate by reminding the world that Iraqis are responsible for shaping their destiny.

But the administration shows no signs of gearing down its ambitions in Iraq along these proposed lines. Should it stick with its unrealistically high goals, I fear failure then looms. The implications of that failure, as in Vietnam, will primarily be domestic, with conservatives and liberals returning to their pre-Reagan battle stations and the United States reverting back to what [Richard Nixon](#) in 1970 dubbed its "pitiful, helpless giant" status.