

Reasoning about war: Violence as a last resort

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In the course of defending U.S. policy in Iraq, President Bush admitted several times in December that faulty intelligence led the U. S. to overestimate Saddam Hussein's weapons program. Bush said the invasion of Iraq was nevertheless justified, because "the world is better off" with the tyrant removed from power and with Iraq on its way to democracy.

The world is indeed better off without Saddam Hussein in power. And the rise of a stable, democratic Iraq, if it can emerge, would be a force for reform in the Middle East. But such benefits do not constitute a moral case for war. A preemptive attack on a nuclear-armed Iraq about to launch its weapons may have fit under the criteria for a just war. An invasion aimed at remaking the political culture of the Middle East clearly does not.

As Pennsylvania representative John Murtha points out, "There are many evil, dictatorial regimes around the world." It is not the calling of the U.S. (or any other nation) to remove such regimes by force simply because the world would be "better off" without them. "The American people rarely have been supportive of a policy of using the American military for regime change simply because we could potentially better the lives of the oppressed in other countries," said Murtha. "There also must be an overriding national security interest."

In the just war tradition, war is justifiable only as an emergency response, undertaken in self-defense and as a last resort. Respect for the sovereignty of other states is a basic component of the international order. In other words, war is not an ordinary instrument for improving the world.

Arguing this point three years after the invasion of Iraq may seem an academic matter. After all, the decision to go to war was made, and the pressing question for the U.S. now is how to make the best of the situation in Iraq. But as Murtha says, Saddam's Iraq did not represent the only evil regime in the world. The U.S. faces

other regimes and other occasions that tempt it to remake the world by force.

It is engaged, for example, with Iran, whose president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, calls for wiping Israel off the map and terms the holocaust a myth. Iran not only is a repressive regime with links to terrorists, but appears intent on developing nuclear weapons. A nuclear-armed Iran led by Ahmadinejad is indeed a frightening thought.

The U.S. and European nations have been trying for years to get Iran to drop its nuclear ambitions. The negotiations have some of the elements of the run-up to the Iraq war: ambiguous statements from the suspect nation, halting negotiations, and disagreements between Western allies. We may hear calls for a preemptive strike on Iran as the best way to address the threat. At that point, it will be important for Americans to remember both the failed intelligence on Iraq and the question that Murtha poses: Is there an overriding and demonstrable threat to the safety of the American people?