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Commentary

The only constants in Iraq's war-ravaged history are change, uncertainty

University of Texas law professor Philip Bobbitt advises us that we should think about war with Iraq by comparing imaginable alternative futures (March 12 essay, "Today's war is against tomorrow's Iraq"), and he then argues for one. Still, Bobbitt's book "The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History" encourages us to explore the past. Let's then use history to consider alternative futures in Iraq.

First, what has the Bush administration accomplished for us in 18 months of lone-lawman rhetoric? We have bullied, bribed and alienated allies. We denied Turkish leaders their request for time that could have worked to our strategic advantage. We have denigrated the democratic procedures of the international organization the United States founded on our soil after the last unequivocally good war we fought and completely won. Our use of force against Iraq will be an unprecedented pre-emptive attack upon another country. Although

Bobbitt sums up all this history as an "American-led intervention," it colors the consequences of the military action are taking.

The administration's single-minded demonizing of Saddam Hussein as the one true Lucifer who would use nuclear or biological weapons conjures up just one potential future. How will deposing Saddam prevent al Qaeda or other terrorist organizations from using nuclear devices "no larger than a case of beer"? It will certainly not banish fundamentalist terrorism from the Earth. Saddam did not put out a contract on Salman Rushdie for writing a book; an Islamic holy leader did. One diabolical alternative future is clear: Osama bin Laden wants us to attack Iraq so that more Islamic extremists will see America as an imperialist Satan.

What are the chances that the "peace" we impose and the magical prosperity Bobbitt imagines it bringing to the Iraqi people — almost certainly by first creating desolation —

will be stable? A look back does not inspire confidence, but it explains why President Bush believes he is acting in close concert with God.

In the long view, Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Mongols and Ottomans have all taken turns at dominating Iraq (ancient Mesopotamia). The world powers thought they could do so when they created Iraq after World War I. In its beginning was the word, and the word was oil.

The long history of great leaders trying futilely to control Mesopotamia should be sobering. When we contemplate the heritage of Hammurabi, Cyrus, Alexander the Great, Muhammad, and Genghis Khan, is it any wonder Saddam Hussein postures as king of kings? All these mighty leaders also had their own "imaginable alternative futures" in mind for Mesopotamia. Many believed God supported them, even that they themselves were gods. But Alexander did not make the inhabitants of the "land between

rivers" Greeks or embrace Greek values, Genghis Khan did not turn them into Mongols, and the Ottomans did not make them Turks. Only Muhammad has made them what they still are — Muslims.

Born in the backwater of Mecca in 570, by 610 Muhammad believed that God had chosen him to spread the new faith of Islam. The authorities in Mecca considered his preaching so dangerous that in 622, he fled to Medina. This flight, called the Hegira, was his life-turning point. He gained many followers in Medina and returned to conquer Mecca in 630. By 711, Arab armies rallied around the new faith, conquering the lands from western India across North Africa to Spain. Unlike Christian conquests, Islam predominates mainly in the same lands where it started.

Christians have never been happy about this. On November 27, 1095, Pope Urban II protested that the Seljuk Turks were defiling Christian holy places. This was among the most

effective speeches in history. It inspired many Christian attempts to wrest the Holy Lands centered in Jerusalem from Islamic control. The First Crusade captured Jerusalem. It was lost by 1187, regained in the Sixth (1227) and lost again in 1244. The Eighth Crusade failed to regain Jerusalem in 1270. One might argue that the Ninth was the Israeli re-occupation of Jerusalem from the Palestinians in 1948. The Tenth (Gulf War) under the first President Bush failed to recapture Baghdad, the seat of the Muslim caliphate since 762. Now the second President Bush is mobilizing his own Eleventh Crusade.

History offers us one clear imaginable future. Many would-be conquerors have preceded Bush, but even with God on their side, they have not imposed their will for long.

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