

The high cost of the now-defunct war in Iraq

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U.S. military personnel in Baghdad lower their heads during the Thursday ceremony of the encasing of colors of the U.S. Forces in Iraq. The U.S. military officially ended its war in Iraq, packing up a military flag at a ceremony with U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta almost nine years after the invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein. (CNS photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais, Pool via Reuters)

And, like that, the war is over.

Over with a somber ceremony in a highly secured location in Baghdad.

Over with a simple, two-word "Welcome home" from President Barack Obama in a ceremony at Fort Bragg, N.C.

Conspicuously missing were the throngs of cheering, pro-American Iraqis that existed so long ago in the fevered imaginations of former President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and those who manufactured a war out of misrepresented intelligence and fictions about threats and weapons of mass destruction.

We are grateful to President Obama for persisting in bringing this nightmare to an end. It is one of several actions he has taken that has brought a welcome sobriety and realism to our foreign policy.

We are inspired beyond words by the thousands of young people who placed themselves in harm's way in service to country. One need not agree with the cause to be impressed with the courage of those who placed themselves in horrific circumstances in pursuit of what they perceived a noble venture. Our hope, of course, is that the youthful yearning to serve a great purpose, to project this country's best attributes onto a wider world, to partake in bold adventure can be engaged and satisfied in the future with pursuits other than war.

History will judge the decision to go into Iraq, President Obama said. Hindsight has its advantages in cutting through the fog of war, but it doesn't take special vision or a particularly long historical view to understand the ongoing flaws in our engagement in Iraq.

It is at the least awkward winding down a war with which one disagreed from the start, and that was largely the business of a previous administration. During the muted ceremony in Baghdad, Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta paid tribute to the troops, acknowledging the bloodshed and enormous loss of life and treasury on both

sides, declaring that in the end it was not in vain because we are leaving an "independent, free and sovereign Iraq." We'll see.

It is true that Iraq has been rid of a dictator, but the United States should not move from this chapter without acknowledging that he was, once upon a time, our dictator. And a bloody one at that, armed and financed by the U.S. while he was sending youngsters to the slaughter in his border war with Iran. The weapons, chemical and otherwise, that eventually became part of the rationale for our invasion were, in an earlier era, an easy purchase for Saddam Hussein, directly from the United States. At the beginning, there was little doubt that we were in this to protect access to another country's resource -- oil. It was only later that the exorbitant military venture got spun into a human rights and democracy campaign.

But the price for getting rid of a dictator has been the loss of much of Iraq's middle class, whose members must now decide whether and when to return from refugee status in other countries, and the loss of much of its Christian population. How will the country now reconstruct schools and hospitals and attract back engineers, pilots, doctors, teachers?

What, indeed, will become of what we want to characterize a democratic government when so many issues, central among them security, remain unresolved in a place that, in its modern origins, was a country cobbled together of widely disparate cultures?

And what will become of us? How do we contend with a legacy that includes the atrocities at Abu Ghraib in a war that cost us nearly 4,500 U.S. dead, tens of thousands of wounded, and tens of thousands more dead Iraqis, mostly civilians. Estimates of Iraqi dead range from the 100,000 figure used by the U.S. to more than 600,000, according to other researchers.

The language used in describing recent events refers to the end of an eight-year war. The reality is that we have been waging war against Iraq almost nonstop, since the first invasion during the first Bush administration in 1991. What followed during the Clinton terms were repeated bombings, nearly weekly, in no-fly zones in the north and south regions of that country. Those sorties reinforced the imposition of what we declared the most severe sanctions ever imposed against a country. Nothing got in: not medicine or medical equipment, hardly any food for most of that period, and no equipment or means to fix or improve infrastructure. Iraq crumbled. There really was very little left to invade in 2003. The United Nations, following an exhaustive study in 1999, released a report saying that the U.S./U.N. sanctions were directly responsible for the deaths of more than 500,000 Iraqi children under the age of 5, mostly from diseases easily preventable with timely medical treatment.

The futility of all of that is underlined by another statistic: According to the website costofwar.com [1], the Iraq war has cost more than \$800 billion. So far, the war in Afghanistan has cost \$467 billion. And we're watching Congress engage in repeated brinkmanship over funding the activity of government here in the United States. That reality is, itself, surreal.

The war now may well belong to history, as Obama put it. But we hope its immediate lessons are not too soon lost. And one of the most important ones was also uttered by the president during the ceremony at Fort Bragg: "It is harder to end a war than to begin one."

Welcome home, indeed.

Links:

[1] <http://www.costofwar.com>