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Another Lesson from the Iraq War

Liberals and conservatives are short-sighted even when claiming to have learned their lessons.

Barton Hinkle

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"For years," says Haroon Moghul, "Many have argued that Muslims and Arabs, like other humans, don't appreciate being bombed or occupied. Finally we have a study to confirm this suspicion."

Moghul, a fellow at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, made this sardonic observation with regard to a new poll showing that 93 percent of young Iraqis consider the United States their enemy. Herein lies a lesson or two for many conservatives—and for liberals as well.

One lesson for conservatives of the more belligerent type involves the value of empathy. Consider how the two leading Republican candidates, Donald Trump and Ted Cruz, have been acting toward Muslims lately. Trump has proposed denying Muslims entry to the United States entirely. Cruz wants to authorize law enforcement to "patrol and secure Muslim neighborhoods." This, mind you, from the man who said during one GOP debate: "I will never compromise away your religious liberty. And for me, Bret, religious liberty has been a lifelong passion."

Trump and Cruz staked out those extreme positions because of the recent terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, in which 146 people (perpetrators included) died. The 9/11 attacks killed almost 3,000. Conservatives bristle at President Obama's assertion that you are more likely to die from falling in the bathtub than from a terrorist attack. And conservatives are partly right: The odds of dying from a terrorist attack are not really that low. They're actually lower: You're more likely to die from a lightning strike than a terrorist attack.

But let's say that the next terrorist attack turns out vastly worse than even 9/11 was. Suppose it killed 10,000 Americans. Suppose it killed 50,000. That is still less than half the number of Iraqis who died in the six years following the U.S. invasion in 2003—in a country with a population only one-tenth that of the U.S. (Sure, some of those casualties were soldiers. But Americans do not blithely dismiss the deaths of American soldiers who die in combat. To the contrary, we honor their noble sacrifice for defending their country.)

If Americans can experience such outrage over the slaughter of a few scores or hundreds of Westerners, should we be surprised by the reaction by Muslims and Arabs to the slaughter of tens or hundreds of thousands?

Another lesson concerns hubris. On the eve of the Gulf War, Dick Cheney famously predicted American invaders would be "greeted as liberators." The U.S. would invade, straighten the country out in a couple of months, and Iraq would become a stable, peace-loving democracy. You could write a book about such delusions: *The Audacity of Hype*.

Things didn't work out that way, obviously. Conservatives blame this on President Obama, for drawing down the troop surge at the end of 2011. They never stop to ask why the surge was needed in the first place—or why, if it was such a success, the country fell apart so quickly after.

Many conservatives—or at least neoconservatives—seem to think any problem can be easily solved with the firm application of American force, no matter how much evidence to the contrary piles up. But then, so do liberals. The only difference is who's on the receiving end.

Liberals of a certain stripe—those who talk up "soft power" and diplomacy and disdain militarism—oppose efforts by America to impose its will by force abroad. "There are no easy or magical solutions," as Bernie Sanders says in the "War and Peace" section of his campaign website. Yet he and those of his persuasion are ceaselessly enthusiastic about imposing their will by force at home, through the endless expansion of government power and control.

Wages too low? Force employers to pay more.

Too many uninsured? Force Americans to buy coverage.

Not enough parental leave? Force companies to provide it.

Rich people speaking too freely about politics? Rewrite the First Amendment so you can stop them.

A horrific school shooting? Take guns away from people who didn't do it.

People drinking too much soda? Ban big servings or tax the stuff.

Fantasy sports gambling getting too popular? Shut it down.

The list could run on for pages. Except for abortion, there seems to be nothing in America for which the progressive answer is not "more government"—their own magical solution to everything.

And like the Iraqi people, Americans are somehow supposed to be grateful—because it's for their own good! Why can't they see that? Why do they hate government, when it's only trying to help?

Maybe, like other humans, they don't like being ordered about by men with guns. If only someone would do a study to confirm that suspicion.