



Hope for change in public debate?

By Thomas Medvetz
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One of the main stances that set Barack Obama's candidacy apart from those of his opponents was his early opposition to the Iraq war. This anti-war view, expressed most famously in an October 2002 speech in Chicago, undoubtedly helped the junior senator from Illinois in the fierce primary contest against Sen. Hillary Clinton. Likewise, in the general election against Sen. John McCain, Obama's early opposition to the war helped to distance him from President Bush's foreign policy and to neutralize the argument that he lacked experience.

Yet the idea that Obama possessed superior foresight actually helps to obscure what I believe is one of the Iraq war's main lessons. For the woeful fact is that it did not really require unusual prescience or exceptionally good judgment to oppose the war from the start. Rather, it required sorting through a complex but mostly vacuous discussion and heeding rather conventional expertise on the most relevant topics.

Here, for example, were Middle East experts Conrad C. Crane and W. Andrew Terrill of the Army War College, writing in February 2003, one month before the Iraq invasion: "The possibility of the United States winning the war and losing the peace in Iraq is real and serious. . . . Rehabilitating Iraq will consequently be an important challenge that threatens to consume huge amounts of resources without guaranteed results."

One could also cite Scott Ritter, the chief U.N. weapons inspector in Iraq from 1991 to 1998, who correctly predicted that Iraq would not have weapons of mass destruction. Or longtime foreign affairs adviser Brent Scowcroft, whose August 2002 Wall Street Journal piece, "Don't Attack Saddam," warned that an invasion would weaken America's international partnerships, prove more costly than anticipated and probably require a "large-scale, long-term military occupation."

There were also many academic scholars who understood that Americans would not be "greeted as liberators," and that invading a country whose boundary was drawn arbitrarily around three rival ethnic groups by the British Empire would likely produce sectarian violence. Prominent among them was the group Historians Against the War, whose members also decried "the undermining of constitutional government in the U.S. [and] the egregious curtailment of civil liberties and human rights at home and abroad."

Of course, those who made these predictions publicly saw their arguments overwhelmed (and their loyalty to the nation questioned) in a public debate that was essentially over before it began. Since the false premises and reckless mismanagement of the Iraq war have become widely known, there has been a great deal of soul-searching about the content of our public debate. But in my view the problem with this soul-searching is that, like the discussion above, it tends to reduce very quickly to a tallying of individual credit and blame rather than an examination of the profound misfirings of institutions. A postgame score card is no substitute for genuine inquiry into the deeper rules of public debate, which at present tend to ensure victory to the holders of the loudest megaphone over the bearers of evidence, to broadcast ratings over journalistic integrity, and to vigorous flag-waving over rigorous analysis.

A revealing symptom of this problem is that the best soul-searching has arguably been carried out by comedy shows such as "The Daily Show" and "The Colbert Report," which lampoon the insipidness of mass media discussion on a nightly basis, but in their solitariness and ironic detachment – that is to say, in their role as court jesters – are perhaps better positioned to inoculate the general public against serious reflexivity than to give them a taste for more of it.

The pre-war debate also show that moneyed interests and entrenched political authorities can establish their own intellectual machinery as a substitute for more self-directed knowledge. This situation is perhaps best personified by the think tank-affiliated “policy expert,” who cultivates all the trappings of an expert save for the capacity to actually challenge the current political orthodoxy. The policy expert's main credentials are the ability to speak in sound bites, to anticipate “hot” policy issues before they arise and to carry out rapid-response production according to the cycles and norms of Washington. It is fitting that the Bush Doctrine was devised by members of one think tank, the Project for the New American Century, and given the patina of expert support by many others. That policy experts have one foot in the academic world only obscures the fact that their role with respect to the political field is essentially a sheltering one.

Make no mistake, I believe President-elect Obama deserves an 'A' in courage for opposing the Iraq war publicly in 2002. Yet there is something deeply problematic in the idea that anticipating this failure required some kind of superhuman prescience. Perhaps one of the war's few bright spots is its capacity to illuminate the mechanics of American public debate, which run deeper than party or ideology. The decision to invade Iraq was not just a matter of faulty individual judgment, but also of collective judgment. My wish for the Obama presidency is that stillborn public discussions will no longer be seen as an inevitable part of our national landscape.

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