



'Don't do stupid stuff' is smart foreign-policy advice

By: Gene Healy
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On Feb. 28, 2003, a few weeks before launching the “shock and awe” aerial assault on [Iraq](#), President George W. Bush outlined his vision for “Operation Iraqi Freedom.” His administration had “set a goal,” he told the crowd at the American Enterprise Institute's annual dinner: “We will not allow the triumph of hatred and violence in the affairs of men.”

An ambitious enough goal, you'd think, but he didn't stop there: “A liberated Iraq can show the power of freedom to transform that vital region,” Bush insisted, “it would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations” in the [Middle East](#).

The United States paid a heavy price in pursuit of that dream: some 4,500 U.S. troops killed, tens of thousands more with traumatic brain injuries, hundreds of limb amputations, \$1.7 trillion in direct budgetary costs so far and nearly half a trillion to come in [veterans' care](#) and disability. Yet today, with Sunni jihadists pushing towards Baghdad, Iraq looks less like a Middle Eastern “City on a Hill” than a sectarian thugocracy, rapidly degenerating into a dystopian hellscape.

Given that history, perhaps there's something to be said for [President Obama's](#) latest foreign-policy maxim: “don't do stupid stuff.” At the very least, you wouldn't think a “first, do no harm” approach to [foreign policy](#) would prove quite so controversial.

Yet “DDSS” has been greeted with contempt by the D.C. commentariat.

“How far we have come from the audacity of hope, yes we can” moans David Rothkopf, publisher of Foreign Policy magazine. “DDSS” just isn't an “elevating notion,” he complains. (Neither, I suppose, is the Hippocratic Oath.) “A crude, meaningless phrase cannot substitute for statecraft,” sniffs former Bush aide Karl Rove in the Wall Street Journal.

“Crude,” maybe; but “meaningless”? The concept of avoiding catastrophic error shouldn't be hard to grasp. Then again, Rove's the guy who once blustered that “we're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality,” so it's not surprising he finds it counterintuitive.

David Brooks, who once condemned Iraq War opponents for being “tolerant of tyranny,” and too skeptical of America's “ability to serve as a force for good in the world,” takes a different tack.

In his latest New York Times column, he accuses Obama of violating his own maxim. Brooks cites the Iraq reporting of the New Yorker's Dexter Filkins as evidence that "sometimes withdrawal is the stupidest thing of all."

But it's hard to see Filkins' account as a particularly compelling case against withdrawal. He faults Obama for "lack of engagement" in the negotiations over retaining a US military presence after 2011. "U.S. diplomats and commanders argue that they played a crucial role, acting as interlocutors among the factions — and curtail[ing] [Iraqi PM Nouri al-] Maliki's sectarian tendencies," he writes.

But then what? Was there a viable plan through which US nation-builders could forge unity among Iraq's fractious groups and push them toward enduring national reconciliation? Or were we just supposed to stay indefinitely?

Brooks admits that "we'll never know if all this effort and progress could have led to a self-sustaining, stable Iraq." How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for "curtail[ing] Maliki's sectarian tendencies"?

It's true that Obama has never lived up to the cautious foreign policy maxim he's coined: launching a destructive "dumb war" in [Libya](#), doubling down on [Afghanistan](#) with precious little to show for it.

But "DDSS" is a sound, even noble, foreign policy goal, one that can help us avoid further sacrifice of American blood and treasure -- even as we try to extricate ourselves from past stupidities.

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