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Metaphor and War

The Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf

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Metaphors can kill. The discourse over whether we should go to war in the gulf is a panorama of metaphor. Secretary of State Baker sees Saddam as ‘‘sitting on our economic lifeline.’’ President Bush sees him as having a ‘‘stranglehold’’ on our economy. General Schwartzkopf characterizes the occupation of Kuwait as a ‘‘rape’’ that is ongoing. The President says that the US is in the gulf to ‘‘protect freedom, protect our future, and protect the innocent’’, and that we must ‘‘push Saddam Hussein back.’’ Saddam is seen as Hitler. It is vital, literally vital, to understand just what role metaphorical thought is playing in bringing us to the brink of war.

Metaphorical thought, in itself, is neither good nor bad; it is simply commonplace and inescapable. Abstractions and enormously complex situations are routinely understood via metaphor. Indeed, there is an extensive, and mostly unconscious, system of metaphor that we use automatically and unreflectively to understand complexities and abstractions. Part of this system is devoted to understanding international relations and war. We now know enough about this system to have an idea of how it functions.

The metaphorical understanding of a situation functions in two parts. First, there is a widespread, relatively fixed set of metaphors that structure how we think. For example, a decision to go to war might be seen as a form of cost-benefit analysis, where war is justified when the costs of going to war are less than the costs of not going to war. Second, there is a set of metaphorical definitions that that allow one to apply such a metaphor to a particular situation. In this case, there must be a definition of ‘‘cost’’, including a means of comparing relative ‘‘costs’’. The use of a metaphor with a set of definitions becomes pernicious when it hides realities in a harmful way.

It is important to distinguish what is metaphorical from what is not. Pain, dismemberment, death, starvation, and the death and injury of loved ones are not metaphorical. They are real and in a war, they could afflict tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of real human beings, whether Iraqi, Kuwaiti, or American.

War as Politics; Politics as Business

Military and international relations strategists do use a cost-benefit analysis metaphor. It comes about through a metaphor that is taken as definitional by most strategic thinkers in the area of international politics.

Clausewitz's Metaphor: WAR IS POLITICS PURSUED BY OTHER MEANS.

Karl von Clausewitz was a Prussian general who perceived war in terms of political cost-benefit analysis. Each nation-state has political objectives, and war may best serve those objectives. The political ''gains'' are to to be weighed against acceptable ''costs.'' When the costs of war exceed the political gains, the war should cease.

There is another metaphor implicit here:

POLITICS IS BUSINESS

where efficient political management is seen as akin to efficient business management. As in a well-run business, a well-run government should keep a careful tally of costs and gains. This metaphor for characterizing politics, together with Clausewitz's metaphor, makes war a matter of cost-benefit analysis: defining beneficial ''objectives'', tallying the ''costs'', and deciding whether achieving the objectives is ''worth'' the costs.

The New York Times, on November 12, 1990, ran a front-page story announcing that ''a national debate has begun as to whether the United States should go to war in the Persian Gulf.'' The Times described the debate as defined by what I have called Clausewitz's metaphor (though it described the metaphor as literal), and then raised the question, ''What then is the nation's political object in the gulf and what level of sacrifice is it worth?'' The ''debate'' was not over whether Clausewitz's metaphor was appropriate, but only over how various analysts calculated the relative gains and losses. The same has been true of the hearings of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where Clausewitz's metaphor provides the framework within which most discussion has taken place.

The broad acceptance of Clausewitz's metaphor raises vital questions: What, exactly, makes it a metaphor rather than a literal truth? Why does it seem so natural to foreign policy experts? How does it fit into the overall metaphor system for understanding foreign relations and war? And, most importantly, what realities does it hide?

To answer these questions, let us turn to the system of metaphorical thought most commonly used by the general public in comprehending international politics.

What follows is a two-part discussion of the role of metaphorical reasoning about the gulf crisis. The first part lays out the central metaphor systems used in reasoning about the crisis: both the system used by foreign policy experts and the system used by the public at large. The second part discusses how the system has been applied to the crisis in the gulf.

Part 1: The Systems

The State-as-Person System

> A state is conceptualized as a person, engaging in social relations within a world community. Its land-mass is its home. It lives in a neighborhood, and has neighbors, friends and enemies. States are seen as having inherent dispositions: they can be peaceful or aggressive, responsible or irresponsible, industrious or lazy.
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> Well-being is wealth. The general well-being of a state is understood in economic terms: its economic health. A serious threat to economic health can thus be seen as a death threat. To the extent that a nation's economy depends on foreign oil, that oil supply becomes a 'lifeline' (reinforced by the image of an oil pipeline).
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> Strength for a state is military strength.
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> Maturity for the person-state is industrialization. Unindustrialized nations are 'underdeveloped', with industrialization as a natural state to be reached. Third-world nations are thus immature children, to be taught how to develop properly or disciplined if they get out of line. Nations that fail to industrialize at a rate considered normal are seen as akin to retarded children and judged as ''backward'' nations.
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> Rationality is the maximization of self-interest.

There is an implicit logic to the use of these metaphors:

Since it is in the interest of every person to be as strong and healthy as possible, a rational state seeks to maximize wealth and military might.

Violence can further self-interest. It can be stopped in three ways: Either a balance of power, so that no one in a neighborhood is strong enough to threaten anyone else. Or the use of collective persuasion by the community to make violence counter to self-interest. Or a cop strong enough to deter violence or punish it. The cop should act morally, in the community's interest, and with the sanction of the community as a whole.

Morality is a matter of accounting, of keeping the moral books balanced. A wrongdoer incurs a debt, and he must be made to pay. The moral books can be balanced by a return to the situation prior to the wrongdoing, by giving back what has been taken, by recompense, or by punishment. Justice is the balancing of the moral books.

War in this metaphor is a fight between two people, a form of hand-to-hand combat. Thus, the US might seek to ‘‘push Iraq back out of Kuwait’’ or ‘‘deal the enemy a heavy blow,’’ or ‘‘deliver a knockout punch.’’ A just war is thus a form of combat for the purpose of settling moral accounts.

The most common discourse form in the West where there is combat to settle moral accounts is the classic fairy tale. When people are replaced by states in such a fairy tale, what results is a scenario for a just war.

The Fairy Tale of the Just War

Cast of characters: A villain, a victim, and a hero. The victim and the hero may be the same person.

The scenario: A crime is committed by the villain against an innocent victim (typically an assault, theft, or kidnapping). The offense occurs due to an imbalance of power and creates a moral imbalance. The hero either gathers helpers or decides to go it alone. The hero makes sacrifices; he undergoes difficulties, typically making an arduous heroic journey, sometimes across the sea to a treacherous terrain. The villain is inherently evil, perhaps even a monster, and thus reasoning with him is out of the question. The hero is left with no choice but to engage the villain in battle. The hero defeats the villain and rescues the victim. The moral balance is restored. Victory is achieved. The hero, who always acts honorably, has proved his manhood and achieved glory. The sacrifice was worthwhile. The hero receives acclaim, along with the gratitude of the victim and the community.

The fairy tale has an asymmetry built into it. The hero is moral and courageous, while the villain is amoral and vicious. The hero is rational, but though the villain may be cunning and calculating, he cannot be reasoned with. Heroes thus cannot negotiate with villains; they must defeat them. The enemy-as-demon metaphor arises as a consequence of the fact that we understand what a just war is in terms of this fairy tale.

The most natural way to justify a war on moral grounds is to fit this fairy tale structure to a given situation. This is done by metaphorical definition, that is, by answering the questions: Who is the victim? Who is the villain? Who is the hero? What is the crime? What counts as victory? Each set of answers provides a different filled-out scenario.

As the gulf crisis developed, President Bush tried to justify going to war by the use of such a scenario. At first, he couldn't get his story straight. What happened was that he was using two different sets of metaphorical definitions, which resulted in two different scenarios:

The Rescue Scenario: Iraq is villain, the US is hero, Kuwait is victim, the crime is kidnap and rape.

The Self-Defense Scenario: Iraq is villain, the US is hero, the US and other industrialized nations are victims, the crime is a death threat, that is, a threat to economic health.

The American people could not accept the second scenario, since it amounted to trading lives for oil. The administration has settled on the first, and that seems to have been accepted by the public, the media, and Congress as providing moral justification for going to war.

The Ruler-for-State Metonymy

There is a metonymy that goes hand-in-hand with the State-as-Person metaphor:

THE RULER STANDS FOR THE STATE

Thus, we can refer to Iraq by referring to Saddam Hussein, and so have a single person, not just an amorphous state, to play the villain in the just war scenario. It is this metonymy that is invoked when the President says ''We have to get Saddam out of Kuwait.''

Incidentally, the metonymy only applies to those leaders perceived as rulers. Thus, it would be strange for us, but not for the Iraqis, to describe an American invasion of Kuwait by saying, ''George Bush marched into Kuwait.''

The Experts' Metaphors

Experts in international relations have an additional system of metaphors that are taken as defining a ''rational'' approach. The principal ones are the Rational Actor metaphor and Clausewitz's metaphor, which are commonly taught as truths in courses on international relations. We are now in a position to show precisely what is metaphorical about Clausewitz's metaphor. To do so, we need to look at a system of metaphors that is presupposed by Clausewitz's metaphor. We will begin with an everyday system of metaphors for understanding causation:

The Causal Commerce System

The Causal Commerce system is a way to comprehend actions intended to achieve positive effects, but which may also have negative effects. The system is composed of three metaphors:

> Causal Transfer: An effect is an object transferred from a cause to an affected party.

For example, sanctions are seen as ‘‘giving’’ Iraq economic difficulties. Correspondingly, economic difficulties for Iraq are seen as ‘‘coming from’’ the sanctions. This metaphor turns purposeful actions into transfers of objects.

> The Exchange Metaphor for Value: The value of something is what you are willing to exchange for it.

Whenever we ask whether it is ‘‘worth’’ going to war to get Iraq out of Kuwait, we are using the Exchange Metaphor for Value plus the Causal Transfer metaphor.

> Well-being is Wealth: Things of value constitute wealth. Increases in well-being are ‘‘gains’’; decreases in well-being are ‘‘costs.’’

The metaphor of Well-being-as-Wealth has the effect of making qualitiative effects quantitative. It not only makes qualitatively different things comparable, it even provides a kind of arithmetic calculus for adding up costs and gains.

Taken together, these three metaphors portray actions as commercial transactions with costs and gains. Seeing actions as transactions is crucial to applying ideas from economics to actions in general.

Risks

A risk is an action taken to achieve a positive effect, where the outcome is uncertain and where there is also a significant probability of a negative effect. Since Causal Commerce allows one to see positive effects of actions as ‘‘gains’’ and negative effects as ‘‘costs’’, it becomes natural to see a risky action metaphorically as a financial risk of a certain type, namely, a gamble.

Risks are Gambles

In gambling to achieve certain ‘‘gains’’, there are ‘‘stakes’’ that one can ‘‘lose’’. When one asks what is ‘‘at stake’’ in going to war, one is using the metaphors of Causal Commerce and Risks-as-Gambles. These are also the metaphors that President Bush uses when he refers to strategic moves in the gulf as a ‘‘poker game’’ where it would be foolish for him to ‘‘show his cards'', that is, to make strategic knowledge public.

The Mathematicization of Metaphor

The Causal Commerce and Risks-as-Gambles metaphors lie behind our everyday way of understanding risky actions as gambles. At this point, mathematics enters the picture, since there is mathematics of gambling, namely, probability theory, decision theory, and game theory. Since the metaphors of Causal Commerce and Risks-as-Gambles are so common in our everyday thought, their metaphorical nature often goes unnoticed. As a result, it is not uncommon for social scientists to think that the mathematics of gambling literally applies to all forms of risky action, and that it can provide a general basis for the scientific study of risky action, so that risk can be minimized.

Rational Action

Within the social sciences, especially in economics, it is common to see a rational person as someone who acts in his own self-interest, that is, to maximize his own well-being. Hard-core advocates of this view may even see altruistic action as being ones self-interest if there is a value in feeling righteous about altruism and in deriving gratitude from others.

In the Causal Commerce system, where well-being is wealth, this view of Rational Action translates metaphorically into maximizing gains and minimizing losses. In other words:

Rationality is Profit Maximization

This metaphor presupposes Causal Commerce plus Risks-as-Gambles, and brings with it the mathematics of gambling as applied to risky action. It has the effect of turning specialists in mathematical economics into ''scientific'' specialists in acting rationally so as to minimize risk and cost while maximizing gains.

Suppose we now add the State-as-Person metaphor to the Rationality-as-Profit-Maximization metaphor. The result is:

International Politics is Business

Here the state is a Rational Actor, whose actions are transactions and who is engaged in maximizing gains and minimizing costs. This metaphor brings with it the mathematics of cost-benefit calculation and game theory, which is commonly taught in graduate programs in international relations.

Clausewitz's metaphor, the major metaphor preferred by international relations strategists, presupposes this system.

Clausewitz's Metaphor:
War is Politics, pursued by other means.

Since politics is business, war becomes a matter of maximizing political gains and minimizing losses. In Clausewitzian terms, war is justified when there is more to be gained by going to war than by not going to war. Morality is absent from the Clausewitzian equation, except when there a political cost to acting immorally or a political gain from acting morally.

Clausewitz's metaphor only allows war to be justified on pragmatic, not moral, grounds. To justify war on both moral and pragmatic grounds, the Fairy Tale of the Just War and Clausewitz's metaphor must mesh: The ''worthwhile sacrifices'' of the fairy tale must equal the Clausewitzian ''costs'' and the ''victory'' in the fairy tale must equal the Clausewitzian ''gains.''

Clausewitz's metaphor is the perfect expert's metaphor, since it requires specialists in political cost-benefit calculation. It sanctions the use of the mathematics of economics, probability theory, decision theory, and game theory in the name of making foreign policy rational and scientific.

Clausewitz's metaphor is commonly seen as literally true. We are now in a position to see exactly what makes it metaphorical. First, it uses the State-as-Person metaphor. Second, it turns qualitative effects on human beings into quantifiable costs and gains, thus seeing political action as economics. Third, it sees rationality as profit-making. Fourth, it sees war in terms of only one dimension of war, that of political expediency, which is in turn conceptualized as business.

War as Violent Crime

To bear in mind what is hidden by Clausewitz's metaphor, we should consider an alternative metaphor that is *not* used by professional strategists nor by the general public to understand war as we engage in it.

> WAR IS VIOLENT CRIME: MURDER, ASSAULT, KIDNAPPING, ARSON, RAPE, AND THEFT.

Here, war is understood only in terms of its moral dimension, and not, say, its political or economic dimension. The metaphor highlights those aspects of war that would otherwise be seen as major crimes.

There is an Us-Them asymmetry between the public use of Clausewitz's metaphor and the War-as-Crime metaphor. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait is reported on in terms of murder, theft and rape. The planned American invasion is never discussed in terms of murder, assault, and arson. Moreover, the US plans for war are seen, in Clausewitzian terms, as rational calculation. But the Iraqi invasion is discussed not as a rational move by Saddam, but as the work of a madman. We see US as rational, moral, and courageous and Them as criminal and insane.

War as a Competitive Game

It has long been noted that we understand war as a competitive game like chess, or as a sport, like football or boxing. It is a metaphor in which there is a clear winner and loser, and a clear end to the game. The metaphor highlights strategic thinking, team work, preparedness, the spectators in the world arena, the glory of winning and the shame of defeat.

This metaphor is taken very seriously. There is a long tradition in the West of training military officers in team sports and chess. The military is trained to win. This can lead to a metaphor conflict, as it did in Vietnam, since Clausewitz's metaphor seeks to maximize geopolitical gains, which may or may not be consistent with absolute military victory.

The situation at present is that the public has accepted the rescue scenario of the just war fairy tale as providing moral justification. The president, for internal political reasons, has accepted the competitive game metaphor as taking precedence over Clausewitz's metaphor: If he must choose, he will go for the military win over maximizing geopolitical gains. The testimony of the experts before Congress falls largely within Clausewitz's metaphor. Much of it is testimony about what will maximize gains and minimize losses.

For all that been questioned in the Congressional hearings, these metaphors have not. It important to see what they hide.

Is Saddam Irrational?

The villain in the Fairy Tale of the Just War may be cunning, but he cannot be rational. You just do not reason with a demon, nor do you enter into negotiations with him. The logic of the metaphor demands that Saddam be irrational. But is he?

Administration policy is confused on the issue. Clausewitz's metaphor, as used by strategists, assumes that the enemy is rational: He too is maximizing gains and minimizing costs. Our strategy from the outset has been to ''increase the cost'' to Saddam. That assumes he is rational and is maximizing his self-interest.

At the same time, he is being called irrational. The nuclear weapons argument depends on it. If he is rational, he should follow the logic of deterrence. We have thousands of hydrogen bombs in warheads. Israel is estimated to have between 100 and 200 deliverable atomic bombs. It would take Saddam at least eight months and possibly five years before he had a crude, untested atomic bomb on a truck. The most popular estimate for even a few deliverable nuclear warheads is ten years. The argument that he would not be deterred by our nuclear arsenal and by Israel's assumes irrationality.

The Hitler analogy also assumes that Saddam is a villainous madman. The analogy presupposes a Hitler myth, in which Hitler too was an irrational demon, rather than a rational self-serving brutal politician. In the myth, Munich was a mistake and Hitler could have been stopped early on had England entered the war then. Military historians disagree as to whether the myth is true. Be that as it may, the analogy does not hold. Whether or not Saddam is Hitler, Iraq isn't Germany. It has 17 million people, not 70 million. It is economically weak, not strong. It simply is not a threat to the world.

Saddam is certainly immoral, ruthless, and brutal, but there is no evidence that he is anything but rational. Everything he has done, from assassinating political opponents, to using poison gas against his political enemies, the Kurds, to invading Kuwait can be see as furthering his own self-interest.

Kuwait as Victim

The classical victim is innocent. To the Iraquis, Kuwait was anything but an innocent ingenue. The war with Iran virtually bankrupted Iraq. Iraq saw itself as having fought that war partly for the benefit of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, where Shiite citizens supported Khomeini's Islamic Revolution. Kuwait had agreed to help finance the war, but after the war, the Kuwaitis insisted on repayment of the ''loan.'' Kuwaitis had invested hundreds of billions in Europe, America and Japan, but would not invest in Iraq after the war to help it rebuild. On the contrary, it began what amounted to economic warfare against Iraq by overproducing its oil quota to hold oil prices down.

In addition, Kuwait had drilled laterally into Iraqi territory in the Rumailah oil field and had extracted oil from Iraqi territory. Kuwait further took advantage of Iraq by buying its currency, but only at extremely low exchange rates. Subsequently, wealthy Kuwaitis used that Iraqi currency on trips to Iraq, where they bought Iraqi goods at bargain rates. Among the things they bought most flamboyantly were liquor and prostitutes—widows and orphans of men killed in the war, who, because of the state of the economy, had no other means of support. All this did not endear Kuwaitis to Iraqis, who were suffering from over 70% inflation.

Moreover, Kuwaitis had long been resented for good reason by Iraqis and moslems from other nations. Capital rich, but labor poor, Kuwait imported cheap labor from other moslem countries to do its least pleasant work. At the time of the invasion, there were 400,000 Kuwaiti citizens and 2.2 millions foreign laborers who were denied rights of citizenry and treated by the Kuwaitis as lesser beings. In short, to the Iraqis and to labor-exporting Arab countries, Kuwait is badly miscast as a purely innocent victim.

This does not in any way justify the horrors perpetrated on the Kuwaitis by the Iraqi army. But it is part of what is hidden when Kuwait is cast as an innocent victim. The ‘‘legitimate government’’ that we seek to reinstall is an oppressive monarchy.

What is Victory?

In a fairy tale or a game, victory is well-defined. Once it is achieved, the story or game is over. Neither is the case in the gulf crisis. History continues, and ‘‘victory’’ makes sense only in terms of continuing history.

The president’s stated objectives are total Iraqi withdrawal and restoration of the Kuwaiti monarchy. But no one believes the matter will end there, since Saddam would still be in power with all of his forces intact. General Powell said in his Senate testimony that if Saddam withdrew, the US would have to ‘‘strengthen the indigenous countries of the region’’ to achieve a balance of power. Presumably that means arming Assad, who is every bit as dangerous as Saddam. Would arming another villain count as victory?

If we go to war, what will constitute ‘‘victory’’? Suppose we conquer Iraq, wiping out its military capability. How would Iraq be governed? No puppet government that we set up could govern effectively since it would be hated by the entire populace. Since Saddam has wiped out all opposition, the only remaining effective government for the country would be his Ba’ath party. Would it count as a victory if Saddam’s friends wound up in power? If not, what other choice is there? And if Iraq has no remaining military force, how could it defend itself against Syria and Iran? It would certainly not be a ‘‘victory’’ for us if either of them took over Iraq. If Syria did, then Assad’s Arab nationalism would become a threat. If Iran did, then Islamic fundamentalism would become even more powerful and threatening.

It would seem that the closest thing to a ‘‘victory’’ for the US in case of war would be to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait; destroy just enough of Iraq’s military to leave it capable of defending itself against Syria and Iran; somehow get Saddam out of power, but let his Ba'ath party remain in control of a country just strong enough to defend itself, but not strong enough to be a threat; and keep the price of oil at a reasonably low level.

The problems: It is not obvious that we could get Saddam out of power without wiping out most of Iraq's military capability. We would have invaded an Arab country, which would create vast hatred for us throughout the Arab world, and would no doubt result in decades of increased terrorism and lack of cooperation by Arab states. We would, by defeating an Arab nationalist state, strengthen Islamic fundamentalism. Iraq would remain a cruel dictatorship run by cronies of Saddam. By reinstating the government of Kuwait, we would inflame the hatred of the poor toward the rich throughout the Arab world, and thus increase instability. And the price of oil would go through the roof. Even the closest thing to a victory doesn't look very victorious.

In the debate over whether to go to war, very little time has been spent clarifying what a victory would be. And if ''victory'' cannot be defined, neither can ''worthwhile sacrifice.''

The Arab Viewpoint

The metaphors used to conceptualize the gulf crisis hide the most powerful political ideas in the Arab world: Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism. The first seeks to form a racially-based all-Arab nation, the second, a theocratic all-Islamic state. Though bitterly opposed to one another, they share a great deal. Both are conceptualized in family terms, an Arab brotherhood and an Islamic brotherhood. Both see brotherhoods as more legitimate than existing states. Both are at odds with the state-as-person metaphor, which sees currently existing states as distinct entities with a right to exist in perpetuity.

Also hidden by our metaphors is perhaps the most important daily concern throughout the Arab world: Arab dignity. Both political movements are seen as ways to achieve dignity through unity. The current national boundaries are widely perceived as working against Arab dignity in two ways: one internal and one external.

The internal issue is the division between rich and poor in the Arab world. Poor Arabs see rich Arabs as rich by accident, by where the British happened to draw the lines that created the contemporary nations of the Middle East. To see Arabs metaphorically as one big family is to suggest that oil wealth should belong to all Arabs. To many Arabs, the national boundaries drawn by colonial powers are illegitimate, violating the conception of Arabs as a single ''brotherhood'' and impoverishing millions.

To those impoverished millions, the positive side of Saddam's invasion of Kuwait was that it challenged national borders and brought to the fore the divisions between rich and poor that result from those lines in the sand. If there is to be peace in the region, these divisions must be addressed, say, by having rich Arab countries make extensive investments in development that will help poor Arabs. As long as the huge gulf between rich and poor exists in the Arab world, a large number of poor Arabs will continue to see one of the superstate solutions, either Arab nationalism or Islamic fundamentalism, as being in their self-interest, and the region will continue to be unstable.

The external issue is the weakness. The current national boundaries keep Arab nations squabbling among themselves and therefore weak relative to Western nations. To unity advocates, what we call ''stability'' means continued weakness.

Weakness is a major theme in the Arab world, and is often conceptualized in sexual terms, even more than in the West. American officials, in speaking of the ''rape'' of Kuwait, are conceptualizing a weak, defenseless country as female and a strong militarily powerful country as male. Similarly, it is common for Arabs to conceptualize the colonization and subsequent domination of the Arab world by the West, especially the US, as emasculation.

An Arab proverb that is reported to be popular in Iraq these days is that ''It is better to be a cock for a day than a chicken for a year.'' The message is clear: It is better to be male, that is, strong and dominant for a short period of time than to be female, that is, weak and defenseless for a long time. Much of the support for Saddam among Arabs is due to the fact that he is seen as standing up to the US, even if only for a while, and that there is a dignity in this. If upholding dignity is an essential part of what defines Saddam's ''rational self-interest'', it is vitally important for our government to know this, since he may be willing to go to war to ''be a cock for a day.''

The US does not have anything like a proper understanding of the issue of Arab dignity. Take the question of whether Iraq will come out of this with part of the Rumailah oil fields and two islands giving it a port on the gulf. From Iraq's point of view these are seen as economic necessities if Iraq is to rebuild. President Bush has spoken of this as ''rewarding aggression'', using the Third-World-Countries-As-Children metaphor, where the great powers are grown-ups who have the obligation to reward or punish children so as to make them behave properly. This is exactly the attitude that grates on Arabs who want to be treated with dignity. Instead of seeing Iraq as a sovereign nation that has taken military action for economic purposes, the president treats Iraq as if it were a child gone bad, who has become the neighborhood bully and should be properly disciplined by the grown-ups.

The issue of the Rumailah oil fields and the two islands has alternatively been discussed in the media in terms of ‘‘saving face.’’ Saving face is a very different concept than upholding Arab dignity and insisting on being treated as an equal, not an inferior.

What is Hidden By Seeing the State as a Person?

The State-as-Person metaphor highlights the ways in which states act as units, and hides the internal structure of the state. Class structure is hidden by this metaphor, as is ethnic composition, religious rivalry, political parties, the ecology, the influence of the military and of corporations (especially multinational corporations).

Consider ‘‘national interest.’’ It is in a person’s interest to be healthy and strong. The State-as-Person metaphor translates this into a ‘‘national interest’’ of economic health and military strength. But what is in the ‘‘national interest’’ may or may not be in the interest of many ordinary citizens, groups, or institutions, who may become poorer as the GNP rises and weaker as the military gets stronger.

The ‘‘national interest’’ is a metaphorical concept, and it is defined in America by politicians and policy makers. For the most part, they are influenced more by the rich than by the poor, more by large corporations than by small business, and more by developers than ecological activists.

When President Bush argues that going to war would ‘‘serve our vital national interests’’, he is using a metaphor that hides exactly whose interests would be served and whose would not. For example, poor people, especially blacks and Hispanics, are represented in the military in disproportionately large numbers, and in a war the lower classes and those ethnic groups will suffer proportionally more casualties. Thus war is less in the interest of ethnic minorities and the lower classes than the white upper classes.

Also hidden are the interests of the military itself, which are served when war is justified. Hopes that, after the cold war, the military might play a smaller role have been dashed by the president’s decision to prepare for war. He was advised, as he should be, by the national security council, which consists primarily of military men. War is so awful a prospect that one would not like to think that military self-interest itself could help tilt the balance to a decision for war. But in a democratic society, the question must be asked, since the justifications for war also justify continued military funding and an undiminished national political role for the military.

Energy Policy

The State-as-Person metaphor defines health for the state in economic terms, with our current understanding of economic health taken as a given, including our dependence on foreign oil. Many commentators have argued that a change in energy policy to make us less dependent on foreign oil would be more rational than going to war to preserve our supply of cheap oil from the gulf. This argument may have a real force, but it has no metaphorical force when the definition of economic health is taken as fixed. After all, you don't deal with an attack on your health by changing the definition of health. Metaphorical logic pushes a change in energy policy out of the spotlight in the current crisis.

I do not want to give the impression that all that is involved here is metaphor. Obviously there are powerful corporate interests lined up against a fundamental restructuring of our national energy policy. What is sad is that they have a very compelling system of metaphorical thought on their side. If the debate is framed in terms of an attack on our economic health, one cannot argue for redefining what economic health is without changing the grounds for the debate. And if the debate is framed in terms of rescuing a victim, then changes in energy policy seem utterly beside the point.

The ''Costs'' of War

Clausewitz's metaphor requires a calculation of the ''costs'' and the ''gains'' of going to war. What, exactly, goes into that calculation and what does not? Certainly American casualties, loss of equipment, and dollars spent on the operation count as costs. But Vietnam taught us that there are social costs: trauma to families and communities, disruption of lives, psychological effects on veterans, long-term health problems, in addition to the cost of spending our money on war instead of on vital social needs at home.

Also hidden are political costs: the enmity of Arabs for many years, and the cost of increased terrorism. And barely discussed is the moral cost that comes from killing and maiming as a way to settle disputes. And there is the moral cost of using a ''cost'' metaphor at all. When we do so, we quantify the effects of war and thus hide from ourselves the qualitative reality of pain and death.

But those are costs to us. What is most ghoulish about the cost-benefit calculation is that ''costs'' to the other side count as ''gains'' for us. In Vietnam, the body counts of killed Viet Cong were taken as evidence of what was being ''gained'' in the war. Dead human beings went on the profit side of our ledger.

There is a lot of talk of American deaths as ''costs'', but Iraqi deaths aren't mentioned. The metaphors of cost-benefit accounting and the fairy tale villain lead us to devalue of the lives of Iraqis, even when most of those actually killed will not be villains at all, but simply innocent draftees or reservists or civilians.

America as Hero

The classic fairy tale defines what constitutes a hero: it is a person who rescues an innocent victim and who defeats and punishes a guilty and inherently evil villain, and who does so for moral rather than venal reasons. If America starts a war, will it be functioning as a hero?

It will certainly not fit the profile very well. First, one of its main goals will be to reinstate ''the legitimate government of Kuwait.'' That means reinstating an absolute monarchy, where women are not accorded anything resembling reasonable rights, and where 80% of the people living in the country are foreign workers who do the dirtiest jobs and are not accorded the opportunity to become citizens. This is not an innocent victim whose rescue makes us heroic.

Second, the actual human beings who will suffer from an all-out attack will, for the most part, be innocent people who did not take part in the atrocities in Kuwait. Killing and maiming a lot of innocent bystanders in the process of nabbing a much smaller number of villains does not make one much of a hero.

Third, in the self-defense scenario, where oil is at issue, America is acting in its self-interest. But, in order to qualify as a legitimate hero in the rescue scenario, it must be acting selflessly. Thus, there is a contradiction between the self-interested hero of the self-defense scenario and the purely selfless hero of the rescue scenario.

Fourth, America may be a hero to the royal families of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, but it will not be a hero to most Arabs. Most Arabs do not think in terms of our metaphors. A great many Arabs will see us as a kind of colonial power using illegitimate force against an Arab brother. To them, we will be villains, not heroes.

America appears as classic hero only if you don't look carefully at how the metaphor is applied to the situation. It is here that the State-as-Person metaphor functions in a way that hides vital truths. The State-as-Person metaphor hides the internal structure of states and allows us to think of Kuwait as a unitary entity, the defenseless maiden to be rescued in the fairy tale. The metaphor hides the monarchical character of Kuwait, and the way Kuwaitis treat women and the vast majority of the people who live in their country. The

State-as-Person metaphor also hides the internal structures of Iraq, and thus hides the actual people who will mostly be killed, maimed, or otherwise harmed in a war. The same metaphor also hides the internal structure of the US, and therefore hides the fact that is the poor and minorities who will make the most sacrifices while not getting any significant benefit. And it hides the main ideas that drive Middle Eastern politics.

Things to Do

War would create much more suffering than it would alleviate, and should be renounced in this case on humanitarian grounds. There is no shortage of alternatives to war. Troops can be rotated out and brought to the minimum level to deter an invasion of Saudi Arabia. Economic sanctions can be continued. A serious system of international inspections can be instituted to prevent the development of Iraq's nuclear capacity. A certain amount of ''face-saving'' for Saddam is better than war: As part of a compromise, the Kuwaiti monarchy can be sacrificed and elections held in Kuwait. The problems of rich and poor Arabs must be addressed, with pressures placed on the Kuwaitis and others to invest significantly in development to help poor Arabs. Balance of power solutions within the region should always be seen as moves toward reducing, not increasing armaments; positive economic incentives can used, together with the threat of refusal by us and the Soviets to supply spare parts needed to keep hi-tech military weaponry functional.

If there is a moral to come out of the Congressional hearings, it is that there are a lot of very knowledgeable people in this country who have thought about alternatives to war. They should be taken seriously.

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