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# Getting Iraq Wrong

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The unfolding catastrophe in [Iraq](#) has condemned the political judgment of a president. But it has also condemned the judgment of many others, myself included, who as commentators supported the invasion. Many of us believed, as an Iraqi exile friend told me the night the war started, that it was the only chance the members of his generation would have to live in freedom in their own country. How distant a dream that now seems.

Having left an academic post at Harvard in 2005 and returned home to Canada to enter political life, I keep revisiting the Iraq debacle, trying to understand exactly how the judgments I now have to make in the political arena need to improve on the ones I used to offer from the sidelines. I've learned that acquiring good judgment in politics starts with knowing when to admit your mistakes.

The philosopher Isaiah Berlin once said that the trouble with academics and commentators is that they care more about whether ideas are interesting than whether they are true. Politicians live by ideas just as much as professional thinkers do, but they can't afford the luxury of entertaining ideas that are merely interesting. They have to work with the small number of ideas that happen to be true and the even smaller number that happen to be applicable to real life. In academic life, false ideas are merely false and useless ones can be fun to play with. In political life, false ideas can ruin the lives of millions and useless ones can waste precious resources. An intellectual's responsibility for his ideas is to follow their consequences wherever they may lead. A politician's responsibility is to master those consequences and prevent them from doing harm.

I've learned that good judgment in politics looks different from good judgment in intellectual life. Among intellectuals, judgment is about generalizing and interpreting particular facts as instances of some big idea. In politics, everything

is what it is and not another thing. Specifics matter more than generalities. Theory gets in the way.

The attribute that underpins good judgment in politicians is a sense of reality. "What is called wisdom in statesmen," Berlin wrote, referring to figures like Roosevelt and Churchill, "is understanding rather than knowledge – some kind of acquaintance with relevant facts of such a kind that it enables those who have it to tell what fits with what; what can be done in given circumstances and what cannot, what means will work in what situations and how far, without necessarily being able to explain how they know this or even what they know." Politicians cannot afford to cocoon themselves in the inner world of their own imaginings. They must not confuse the world as it is with the world as they wish it to be. They must see Iraq – or anywhere else – as it is.

As a former denizen of Harvard, I've had to learn that a sense of reality doesn't always flourish in elite institutions. It is the street virtue par excellence. Bus drivers can display a shrewder grasp of what's what than [Nobel Prize](#) winners. The only way any of us can improve our grasp of reality is to confront the world every day and learn, mostly from our mistakes, what works and what doesn't. Yet even lengthy experience can fail us in life and in politics. Experience can imprison decision-makers in worn-out solutions while blinding them to the untried remedy that does the trick.

Having taught political science myself, I have to say the discipline promises more than it can deliver. In practical politics, there is no science of decision-making. The vital judgments a politician makes every day are about people: whom to trust, whom to believe and whom to avoid. The question of loyalty arises daily: Who will betray and who will stay true? Having good judgment in these matters, having a sound sense of reality, requires trusting some very unscientific intuitions about people.

A sense of reality is not just a sense of the world as it is, but as it might be. Like great artists, great politicians see possibilities others cannot and then seek to turn them into realities. To bring the new into being, a politician needs a sense of timing, of when to leap and when to remain still. Bismarck famously remarked that political judgment was the ability to hear, before anyone else, the distant hoofbeats of the horse of history.

Few of us hear the horses coming. A British prime minister was once asked what made his job so difficult. "Events, dear boy," he replied ruefully. In the

face of the unexpected event, a virtuoso in politics must be capable of improvisation and appear as imperturbable as possible. People do want leadership, and even when a leader is nonplussed by events, he must still remember to give the people the reassurance they deserve. Part of good judgment consists of knowing when to keep up appearances.

Improvisation may not stave off failure. The game usually ends in tears. Political careers often end badly because politicians live the human situation: making choices among competing goods with only ordinary instincts and fallible information to go by. Of course, better information and factual criteria for decision-making can reduce the margin of uncertainty. Benchmarks for progress in Iraq can help to decide how long America should stay there. But in the end, no one knows — because no one can know — what exactly America can still do to create stability in Iraq.

The decision facing the United States over Iraq is paradigmatic of political judgment at its most difficult. Staying and leaving each have huge costs. One thing is clear: The costs of staying will be borne by Americans, while the cost of leaving will be mostly borne by Iraqis. That in itself suggests how American leaders are likely to decide the question.

But they must decide, and soon. Procrastination is even costlier in politics than it is in private life. The sign on Truman's desk — "The buck stops here!" — reminds us that those who make good judgments in politics tend to be those who do not shrink from the responsibility of making them. In the case of Iraq, deciding what course of action to pursue next requires first admitting that all courses of action thus far have failed.

In politics, learning from failure matters as much as exploiting success. [Samuel Beckett's](#) "Fail again. Fail better" captures the inner obstinacy necessary to the political art. Churchill and De Gaulle kept faith with their own judgment when smart opinion believed them to be mistaken. Their willingness to wait for historical validation, even if far off, looks now like greatness. In the current president the same faith that history will judge him kindly seems like brute stubbornness.

Machiavelli argued that political judgment, to be effective, must follow principles more ruthless than those acceptable in ordinary life. He wrote that "it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong, and to make use of it or not according to necessity." Roosevelt and Churchill

knew how to do wrong, yet they did not demand to be judged by different ethical standards than their fellow citizens did. They accepted that democratic leaders cannot make up their own moral rules, a stricture that applies both at home and abroad — in Guantánamo, at Abu Ghraib or anywhere else. They must live and be judged by the same rules as everyone else.

Yet in some areas political and personal judgments are very different. In private life, you take attacks personally and would be a cold fish if you didn't. In politics, if you take attacks personally, you display vulnerability. Politicians have to learn to appear invulnerable without appearing inhuman. Being human, they are bound to revenge insults. But they also have to learn that revenge, as it has been said, is a dish best served cold.

Nothing is personal in politics, because politics is theater. It is part of the job to pretend to have emotions that you do not actually feel. It is a common spectacle in legislatures for representatives to insult one another in the chamber and then retreat for a drink in the bar afterward. This saving hypocrisy of public life is not available in private life. There we play for keeps.

But among friends and family, we also cut one another some slack. We fill in one another's sentences. What we mean matters more than what we say. No such mercies occur in politics. In public life, language is a weapon of war and is deployed in conditions of radical distrust. All that matters is what you said, not what you meant. The political realm is a world of lunatic literalism. The slightest crack in your armor — between what you meant and what you said — can be pried open and the knife driven home.

In private life, we pay the price of our own mistakes. In public life, a politician's mistakes are first paid by others. Good judgment means understanding how to be responsible to those who pay the price of your decisions. Edmund Burke, when first elected to the House of Commons, told the voters of Bristol that he would never sacrifice his judgment to the pressure of their opinion. I'm not sure my constituents would be happy to hear this. Sometimes sacrificing my judgment to theirs is the essence of my job. Provided, of course, that I don't sacrifice my principles.

Fixed principle matters. There are some goods that cannot be traded, some lines that cannot be crossed, some people who must never be betrayed. But fixed ideas of a dogmatic kind are usually the enemy of good judgment. It is an obstacle to clear thinking to believe that America's foreign policy serves God's

plan to expand human freedom. Ideological thinking of this sort bends what Kant called "the crooked timber of humanity" to fit an abstract illusion. Politicians with good judgment bend the policy to fit the human timber. Not all good things, after all, can be had together, whether in life or in politics.

In my political-science classes, I used to teach that exercising good judgment meant making good public policy. In the real world, bad public policy can often turn out to be very popular politics indeed. Resisting the popular isn't easy, because resisting the popular isn't always wise. Good judgment in politics is messy. It means balancing policy and politics in imperfect compromises that always leave someone unhappy – often yourself.

Knowing the difference between a good and a bad compromise is more important in politics than holding onto pure principle at any price. A good compromise restores the peace and enables both parties to go about their business with some element of their vital interest satisfied. A bad one surrenders the public interest to compulsion or force.

Measuring good judgment in politics is not easy. Campaigns and primaries test a candidate's charm, stamina, money-raising ability and rhetorical powers but not necessarily judgment in office and under fire.

We might test judgment by asking, on the issue of Iraq, who best anticipated how events turned out. But many of those who correctly anticipated catastrophe did so not by exercising judgment but by indulging in ideology. They opposed the invasion because they believed the president was only after the oil or because they believed America is always and in every situation wrong.

The people who truly showed good judgment on Iraq predicted the consequences that actually ensued but also rightly evaluated the motives that led to the action. They did not necessarily possess more knowledge than the rest of us. They labored, as everyone did, with the same faulty intelligence and lack of knowledge of Iraq's fissured sectarian history. What they didn't do was take wishes for reality. They didn't suppose, as President Bush did, that because they believed in the integrity of their own motives everyone else in the region would believe in it, too. They didn't suppose that a free state could arise on the foundations of 35 years of police terror. They didn't suppose that America had the power to shape political outcomes in a faraway country of which most Americans knew little. They didn't believe that because America defended

human rights and freedom in Bosnia and Kosovo it had to be doing so in Iraq. They avoided all these mistakes.

I made some of these mistakes and then a few of my own. The lesson I draw for the future is to be less influenced by the passions of people I admire – Iraqi exiles, for example – and to be less swayed by my emotions. I went to northern Iraq in 1992. I saw what [Saddam Hussein](#) did to the Kurds. From that moment forward, I believed he had to go. My convictions had all the authority of personal experience, but for that very reason, I let emotion carry me past the hard questions, like: Can Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites hold together in peace what Saddam Hussein held together by terror? I should have known that emotions in politics, as in life, tend to be self-justifying and in matters of ultimate political judgment, nothing, not even your own feelings, should be held immune from the burden of justification through cross-examination and argument.

Good judgment in politics, it turns out, depends on being a critical judge of yourself. It was not merely that the president did not take the care to understand Iraq. He also did not take the care to understand himself. The sense of reality that might have saved him from catastrophe would have taken the form of some warning bell sounding inside, alerting him that he did not know what he was doing. But then, it is doubtful that warning bells had ever sounded in him before. He had led a charmed life, and in charmed lives warning bells do not sound.

People with good judgment listen to warning bells within. Prudent leaders force themselves to listen equally to advocates and opponents of the course of action they are thinking of pursuing. They do not suppose that their own good intentions will guarantee good results. They do not suppose they know all they need to know. If power corrupts, it corrupts this sixth sense of personal limitation on which prudence relies.

A prudent leader will save democracies from the worst, but prudent leaders will not inspire a democracy to give its best. Democratic peoples should always be looking for something more than prudence in a leader: daring, vision and – what goes with both – a willingness to risk failure. Daring leaders can be trusted as long as they give some inkling of knowing what it is to fail. They must be men of sorrow acquainted with grief, as the prophet Isaiah says, men and women who have not led charmed lives, who understand us as we really are, who have never given up hope and who know they are in politics to make

their country better. These are the leaders whose judgment, even if sometimes wrong, will still prove worthy of trust.

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