You Break It, You Pay For It

So it turns out Pottery Barn doesn’t even have a rule that says, “You break it, you own it.” According to a company spokesperson, “in the rare instance that something is broken in the store, it’s written off as a loss.” Yet the nonexistent policy of a store selling $80 corkscrews continues to wield more influence in the United States than the Geneva Conventions and the US Army’s Law of Land Warfare combined. As Bob Woodward has noted, Colin Powell invoked “the Pottery Barn rule” before the invasion, while John Kerry pledged his allegiance to it during the first presidential debate. And the imaginary rule is still the favored blunt instrument with which to whack anyone who dares to suggest that the time has come to withdraw troops from Iraq: Sure the war is a disaster, the argument goes, but we still have the favored blunt instrument with which to whack anyone who dares to suggest that the time has come to withdraw troops from Iraq: Sure the war is a disaster, the argument goes, but we can’t stop now—you break it, you own it.

Though not invoking the chain store by name, Nicholas Kristof laid out this argument in a recent New York Times column. “Our mistaken invasion has left millions of Iraqis desperately vulnerable, and it would be inhumane to abandon them now. If we stay in Iraq, there is still some hope that Iraqis will come to enjoy security and better lives, but if we pull out we will be condemning Iraqis to anarchy, terrorism and starvation, costing the lives of hundreds of thousands of children over the next decade.”

Let’s start with the idea that the United States is helping to provide security. On the contrary, the presence of US troops is provoking violence on a daily basis. The truth is that as long as the troops remain, the country’s entire security apparatus—occupation forces as well as Iraqi soldiers and police officers—will be exclusively dedicated to fending off resistance attacks, leaving a security vacuum when it comes to protecting regular Iraqis. If the troops pulled out, Iraqis would still face insecurity, but they would be able to devote their local security resources to regaining control over their cities and neighborhoods.

As for preventing “anarchy,” the US plan to bring elections to Iraq seems designed to spark a civil war—the civil war needed to justify an ongoing presence for US troops no matter who wins the elections. It was always clear that the Shiite majority, which has been calling for immediate elections for more than a year, was never going to accept any delay in the election timetable. And it was equally clear that by destroying Falluja in the name of preparing the city for elections, much of the Sunni leadership has been calling for immediate elections for more than a year, was never going to accept any delay in the election timetable. And it was equally clear that by destroying Falluja in the name of preparing the city for elections, much of the Sunni leadership would be forced to call for an election boycott.

When Kristof asserts that US forces should stay in Iraq to save “hundreds of thousands of children” from starvation, it’s hard to imagine what he has in mind. Hunger in Iraq is not merely the humanitarian fallout of a war—it is the direct result of the US decision to impose brutal “shock therapy” policies on a country that was already sickened and weakened by twelve years of sanctions. Paul Bremer’s first act on the job was to lay off close to 500,000 Iraqis, and his primary accomplishment—for which he was just awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom—was to oversee a “reconstruction” process that systematically stole jobs from needy Iraqis and handed them to foreign firms, sending the unemployment rate soaring to 67 percent. And the worst of the shocks are yet to come. On November 21, the group of industrialized countries known as the Paris Club finally unveiled its plan for Iraq’s unpayable debt. Rather than forgiving it outright, the Paris Club laid out a three-year plan to write off 80 percent, contingent on Iraq’s future governments adhering to a strict International Monetary Fund austerity program. According to early drafts, that program includes “restructuring of state-owned enterprises” (read: privatization), a plan that Iraq’s Ministry of Industry predicts will require laying off an additional 145,000 workers. In the name of “free-market reforms,” the IMF also wants to eliminate the program that provides each Iraqi family with a basket of food—the only barrier to starvation for millions of citizens. There is additional pressure to eliminate the food rations coming from the World Trade Organization, which, at Washington’s urging, is considering accepting Iraq as a member—provided it adopts certain “reforms.”

So let’s be absolutely clear: The United States, having broken Iraq, is not in the process of fixing it. It is merely continuing to break the country and its people by other means, using not only F-16s and Bradleys, but now the less flashy weaponry of WTO and IMF conditions, followed by elections designed to transfer as little power to Iraqis as possible. This is what famed Argentine writer Rodolfo Walsh, writing before his 1977 assassination by the military junta, described as “planned misery.” And the longer the United States stays in Iraq, the more misery it will plan.

But if staying in Iraq is not the solution, neither are easy bumper-sticker calls to pull the troops out and spend the money on schools and hospitals at home. Yes, the troops must leave, but that can be only one plank of a credible and moral antiwar platform. What of the schools and hospitals in Iraq—the ones that were supposed to be fixed by Bechtel but never were? Too often, antiwar forces have shied away from speaking about what Americans owe Iraq. Rarely is the word “compensation” spoken, let alone the more loaded “reparations.”

Antiwar forces have also failed to offer concrete support for the political demands coming out of Iraq. For instance, when the Iraqi National Assembly forcefully condemned the Paris Club deal for forcing the Iraqi people to pay Saddam’s “odious” debts and robbing them of their economic sovereignty, the antiwar movement was virtually silent, save the dogged but undersupported Jubilee Iraq. And while US soldiers aren’t protecting Iraqis from starvation, the food rations certainly are—so why isn’t safeguarding this desperately needed program one of our central demands?

The failure to develop a credible platform beyond “troops out” may be one reason the antiwar movement remains stalled, even as opposition to the war deepens. Because the Pottery Barn rulers do have a point: Breaking a country should have consequences for the breakers. Owning the broken country should not be one of them, but how about paying for the repairs?
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