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Monday 17 March 2003

We stand on the brink of war, having willfully sauntered up to the precipice in the period since September 11. In those days immediately after those horrific yet spectacular attacks on Washington and New York, there was much debate about the world having changed fundamentally. But change it has, though perhaps not in the manner most anticipated. Few would have predicted that the US would be ready to effectively take unilateral action against Iraq some 18 months later. This was a risk in the weeks after the attack - a threat that should have passed by now.

But no. The US is still angry and scared, and as a result its looking for a fight. And they are willing to start a fight with barely a token of international support and in the absence of UN backing.

So here's how it looks. The US are hell bent on invading Iraq. There are over 200,000 troops in position and they will launch operations within days. There is no hope that they will hold off, short of Saddam being hung by meat hooks in the square in Baghdad. There's a range of reasons given for this, sometimes its to stop WMD from spreading to terrorist groups, sometimes its to protect Iraq's neighbors or even to set her people free. Other times its part of a grand scheme to create the Arab world's first liberal democracy franchise, complete with a Mc-parliament and drive through judiciary. It all depends when you ask. Opponents to the war say that its about oil - if only there was that much though being put into it all.

Its all about regime change - a dumb idea who's time has come because of the ascendancy of neo-conservative ideologues in the administration. The balance of risks and potential benefits is out of whack by a Texas mile. There is a problem with Iraq but this is not the solution. In fact, the central problem facing the world *is* the proposed solution. Some fear that both the UN system and the underlying Western alliance are under threat as a result - that's probably true even though I don't think its quite the loss implied by that statement.

But the US is not alone. Blair and Howard are there shoulder to shoulder with Bush. Their story is a little simpler than that of the US. Its all about WMD and the threat of proliferation to terrorist groups. But its just a story, and not a very convincing one. Ultimately they are both there because they think that it is in their respective country's strategic best interest to keep in good with the US. Even if that means following the US on a folly of historical proportions. And, most extraordinarily, even if that means that they have to squander their own political fortunes in the process. For Blair and Howard this has been, and will continue to be, a gamble.

First, they gambled that they could get a UN resolution and mollify the substantial anti-war sentiments in their country's. They lost.

Second, they are gambling on a quick, clean and successful war followed by a peace that is seen as fair, just and stable. On this roll of the dice their individual political fates will hang.

Third, and most important, they are gambling that the US is worth having as a ally. This means that they hope the US will remember the support they have been given and repay the debt in due course. It also means that that they hope the US will eventually moderate its unilateral and bellicose tendencies. In the long run there's little point in having an alliance with a nation that makes emotive and dumb strategic choices.

Of course all of this is the result of another leader taking a big gamble. Osama Bin Lardin's roll of the dice was September 11. Up until now he's lost big time. He's seen his terrorist network rolled back to the point that he's living in a damp cave in the hills of Pakistan with little or no influence. And to nil strategic effect. US forces have not left the Gulf – far from it – and no moderate Arab regime seems in peril of reverting to Islamic theocratic rule.

But has he really lost? I suspect that the barbaric terrorist attacks of September 2001 were an attempt to elicit a disproportionate and imprudent response from the US, which in turn would ignite the Arab street against them. It failed in the first instance, though not for want of trying by the neo-conservatives in the US administration. But the dice has now been passed to Bush to roll. What more could Osama Bin Lardin ask for than what the US is now on the verge of doing?

One Moment in Annihilation's Waste

One Moment, of the Well of Life to taste – The Stars are setting, and the Caravan  
Draws to the Dawn of Nothing – Oh make Haste!

Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam