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Holding Our Noses

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

I haven't written about Iraq lately because, frankly, it felt like shooting fish in a barrel.

It was sporting to write columns opposing the war back in January, when the White House was conjuring enough Iraqi anthrax "to kill several million people," as well as hordes of cheering Iraqis casting flowers on our soldiers. These days, with that anthrax as elusive as Saddam himself, with the people we've liberated busy killing us, with the bill for Iraq coming in at \$90,000 a minute — well, criticizing the war just seems too easy, like aiming a bomb at Bambi.

So I won't do it.

In any case, the real question that confronts us now is not whether invading Iraq was the height of hubris, but this: Given that we are there, how do we make the best of it?

I'm afraid that too many in my dovish camp think that just because we shouldn't have invaded, we also shouldn't stay — or at least we shouldn't help Mr. Bush pay the bill. Mr. Bush's \$87 billion budget request for Iraq and Afghanistan is getting pummeled on Capitol Hill this week, partly because people are angry at being misled and patronized by this administration.

Granted, some elements of the budget (like much of our Iraq operation) seem too rooted in our own expectations. In northern Iraq, U.S. engineers reported that it would take \$50 million to bring a cement factory in the area to Western standards. The U.S. general there, lacking that kind of money, found some Iraqis who got it going again for \$80,000.

And people like those in my hometown of Yamhill, Ore., have trouble understanding why the administration wants to buy Iraqis new \$50,000 garbage trucks. On my last visit, I was struck how Oregonians, seeing their local school programs slashed, resent having to subsidize Iraq. That resentment runs deep: the latest USA Today/CNN/Gallup poll shows Americans opposing the Iraq budget request, 57 to 41 percent.

So my fear is that we will now compound our mistake of invading Iraq by refusing to pay for our occupation and then pulling out our troops prematurely. If Iraq continues to go badly, if Democrats continue to hammer Mr. Bush for his folly, if Karl Rove has nightmares of an election campaign fought against a backdrop of suicide bombings in Baghdad, then I'm afraid the White House may just declare victory and retreat.

In that case, Iraq would last about 10 minutes before disintegrating into a coup d'etat or a civil war.

Couldn't happen, you say? We let Afghanistan fall apart after the victory over the Soviet-backed government in 1992. We let Somalia disintegrate after our pullout in 1993-94. And right now,

incredibly, the administration is letting Afghanistan fall apart all over again.

If that happens in Iraq, American credibility will be devastated, Al Qaeda will have a new base for operations, and Iraqis will be even worse off than they were in the days of Saddam Hussein.

Hmm. Who knows? In that event, Saddam might return as the warlord of Tikrit.

How do we reduce the chance that Iraq will collapse? First, by holding our noses and passing the president's budget request for Iraq and Afghanistan. Iraqis I've interviewed are often suspicious of U.S. intentions ("You're planning to steal our oil!"), but they're willing to give us a chance if we can stop rapes and get factories open. Slashing that budget — or turning it into a loan to be repaid with oil revenues — would destroy the Iraqi economy and convince many wavering Iraqis that we are conquerors who are best dealt with by blowing us up.

We can also shore up Iraq by arranging an early transfer of sovereignty back to Iraqis, as Kofi Annan and others have suggested — a move the administration initially sputtered about but now seems to accept. Sure, it may be only a symbolic gesture, but anyone who says symbols don't matter doesn't understand nationalism.

The greatest foreign policy mistake the U.S. has made over the last half-century has been its obliviousness to nationalism. Today as well, plenty of ordinary Iraqis would prefer to be misruled by Iraqis than ruled by Americans.

Above all, to stave off catastrophe in Iraq, we must keep our troops there and provide security, for that is the glue that keeps Iraq together. I believe that President Bush was wrong to go into Iraq, but he's right about staying there.