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We Have Already Been Defeated in Iraq

By Leonard Fein

Daniel Levy is one of the new stars in Washington, as also in cyberspace. Levy comes to Washington from Israel, where his distinguished record included serving as senior policy advisor to then-justice minister Yossi Beilin and as the lead Israeli drafter of the Geneva Initiative.

Now, under the auspices of The Century Foundation and the New America Foundation, he blogs at www.prospectsforpeace.com on Israel and the Middle East. There is no dearth of such blogs; indeed, under the auspice of Americans for Peace Now, I do one each week. But Levy's is consistently among the best informed and the best reasoned.

In a blog this past weekend, Levy makes an interesting and somewhat unconventional point regarding Barack Obama's candidacy. In brief, he proposes that "a strong case can be made that the most important issue for an American politician to have gotten right in the last years from a pro-Israel perspective was the Iraq war. And I mean opposition to that war."

I well remember my own argument with many friends in Israel as the clouds of war gathered in 2002 and 2003. Those friends were almost giddy from the prospect of a post-Iraq Middle East. When Iraq is defeated, they thought, we will be relieved of the most serious threat we face. And perhaps we may even look forward, as President Bush insists, to a re-fashioned Middle East, one brought to its senses by the removal of its most appalling dictator.

My response left them incredulous: "But what," I asked, "if America loses?" That seemed to them so outlandish a possibility that they simply dismissed it. It was unthinkable that America would not prevail, and handily.

I would like to think that in the aftermath of Israel's own failure to succeed in its war against Hezbollah, some learning has finally happened. Indeed, I would have supposed that such

learning might have happened in the wake of Vietnam — happened to Israelis, happened to Americans. But if Vietnam was not sufficient to teach the difficulty a high-tech army would experience in seeking to defeat an indigenous guerrilla movement, then there's no reason to suppose that repeated debacles offer improved wisdom.

Levy, in his blog, goes on to specify some of the costs of the Iraq disaster: “With the removal of its major regional competitor, Iran now has more influence and is emboldened. Al Qaeda was able to establish a new base of operations in Iraq to which it has recruited fighters from across the Arab world and from which it has been able to spread out and conduct attacks in Jordan, in the Egyptian Sinai, in Lebanese refugee camps, and there are reports of Al Qaeda copycat cells in Palestinian areas.

“That is getting very close to home for Israelis and it is a dramatically unwelcome development. America is overstretched and bogged down militarily and its reputation is battered on so many levels. None of this of course is good for America but it is also very bad news indeed for Israel... The combination of an American president deeply committed to Israel but vilified internationally and regionally, who pursues dangerously misguided Middle East policies and does so with woeful incompetence to boot, turns out not to be so ideal.”

It disturbs me that so many Jews suppose that George W. Bush has been so great a friend to Israel. Friendship among nations must be judged by consequences, and the consequences of the Bush policy in the Middle East — most notably but not exclusively Iraq — are calamitous. But the underlying fact of the Iraq matter is more disturbing still. Our fundamental concern, as Obama has pointed out, is less the way in which the war has been fought, less even the lies that begat the war, more the mindset that gave it birth.

Just after the war began, I wrote of that mindset, and what I wrote then, long before the real carnage and devastation began to happen, is valid still: “Let's suppose weapons of mass destruction and destructive connections are discovered. Let's even suppose an early ending to the current chaos, and then the emergence of a competent Iraqi government. The reason such discoveries and developments would not vindicate the promoters of the war is that we who opposed it were not in fact opposed to ‘the’ war; we were opposed to this war — this war that from the first so cavalierly dispensed with diplomacy, that treated the United Nations as an obstacle to be overcome rather than as a resource to be recruited... this war whose planners

enthusiastically rendered the sometime need for preemptive American action a virtue — nay, a commitment — this war that has soured, perhaps poisoned, America’s capacity for leadership in the family of nations.

“On the morrow of 9/11, Americans asked, ‘Why do they hate us?’ By ‘they,’ we meant the maniacal terrorists, the suicide bombers, the cult of Osama bin Laden and his counterparts. But when we ask that question today, so short a time later, the ‘they’ refers to tens of millions of people in virtually every corner of the globe. Nor is the answer to that question a mystery: they hate us because we have displayed contempt rather than regard for the good opinion of mankind. We have courted their hate. The war that might one day have been necessary, the ‘last resort’ war, was not the war we fought; we fought instead a war that gives a new meaning to the word ‘isolationism.’”

Those who say that quitting the war now means accepting defeat are quite correct. What they do not understand is that it is already a defeat. And the courage to acknowledge that and to learn from it marks a transition from childishness to maturity.