Cultural Cont

Wrong time

By Peter Wehner

Critics of the Iraq war have offered no serious strategic alternative to the president's freedom agenda, which is anchored in the belief that democracy and liberal institutions are the best antidote to the pathologies plaguing the Middle East

A small group of current and former conservatives — including George Will, William F Buckley, Jr and Francis Fukuyama — have become harsh critics of the Iraq war. They have declared, or clearly implied, that it is a failure and the president's effort to promote liberty in the Middle East is dead — and dead for a perfectly predictable reason: Iraq, like the Arab Middle East more broadly, lacks the democratic culture that is necessary for freedom to take root. And so for cultural reasons, this effort was flawed from the outset. Or so the argument goes.

Let me address each of these charges in turn.

The war is lost: "Our mission has failed," Mr Buckley wrote earlier this year. "[I]t seems very unlikely that history will judge either the intervention itself or the ideas animating it kindly," saith the man (Mr Fukuyama) who once declared "the end of history" and in 1998 signed a letter to congressional leaders stating, "US policy should have as its explicit goal removing Saddam Hussein's regime from power and establishing a peaceful and democratic Iraq in its place."

These critics of the war are demonstrating a peculiar eagerness to declare certain matters settled. We certainly face difficulties in Iraq — but we have seen significant progress as well. In 2005, Iraq's economy continued to recover and grow. Access to clean water and sewage treatment facilities has increased. The Sunnis are now invested in the political process, which was not previously the case. The Iraqi security forces are far stronger than they were. Our counterinsurgency strategy is more effective than in the past. Cities like Tal Afar, which insurgents once controlled, are now back in the hands of free Iraqis. Al Qaeda's grip has been broken in Mosul and disrupted in Baghdad. We now see fissures between Iraqis and foreign terrorists. And in the aftermath of the mosque bombing in Samarra, we saw the political and religious leadership in Iraq call for an end to violence instead of stoking civil war — and on the whole, the Iraqi security forces performed well. These achievements are authentic grounds for encouragement. And to ignore or dismiss all signs of progress in Iraq, to portray things in what Norman Podhoretz has called "the blackest possible light", disfigures reality.

One might hope our own democratic development — which included the Articles of Confederation and a "fiery trial" that cost more than 600,000 American lives — would remind critics that we must sometimes be patient with others. We are engaged in an enterprise of enormous importance: helping a traumatised Arab nation become stable, free and self-governing. Success isn't foreordained — and neither is failure. Justice Holmes said the mode in which the inevitable comes to pass is through effort.

The freedom agenda is dead: The president's freedom agenda is now "a casualty of the war that began three years ago . . .," according to Mr Will. The Bush Doctrine is in "shambles", Mr Fukuyama insists. We cannot "impose" democracy on "a country that doesn't want it", he says.

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Why is Mr Fukuyama so sure people in Iraq and elsewhere don't long for democracy? Just last year, on three separate occasions, Iraqis braved bombs and bullets to turn out and vote in greater numbers (percentage-wise) than do American voters, who merely have to brave lines. Does Mr Fukuyama believe Iraqis prefer subjugation to freedom? Does he think they, unlike he, relish life in a gulag, or the lash of the whip, or the midnight knock of the secret police? Who among us wants a jackboot forever stomping on his face? It is a mistake of a large order to argue that democracy is unwanted in

e to lose our nerve

Iraq simply because (a) violence exists three years after the country's liberation — and after more than three decades of almost unimaginable cruelty and terror; and (b) Iraq is not Switzerland.

Beyond that, the critics of the Iraq war have chosen an odd time to criticise the appeal and power of democracy. After all, we are witnessing the swiftest advance of freedom in history. According to Freedom House's director of research, Arch Puddington, "The global picture . . . suggests that 2005 was one of the most successful years for freedom since Freedom House began measuring world freedom in 1972. . . . The 'Freedom in the World 2006' ratings for the Middle East represent the region's best performance in the history of the survey."

Mr Will says it is time to "de-emphasise talk about Iraq's becoming a democracy that ignites emulative transformation in the Middle East." Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a democracy activist from Egypt, says different. Mr Ibrahim, who originally opposed the war to liberate Iraq, said it "has unfrozen the Middle East, just as Napoleon's 1798 expedition did. Elections in Iraq force the theocrats and autocrats to put democracy on the agenda, even if only to fight against us."

Cultural determinism: The problem with Iraq, Mr Will said in a Manhattan Institute lecture, is that it "lacks a Washington, a Madison, a [John] Marshall — and it lacks the astonishingly rich social and cultural soil from which such people sprout". There is no "existing democratic culture" that will allow liberty to succeed, he argues. And he scoffs at the assertion by President Bush that it is "cultural condescension" to claim that some peoples, cultures or religions are destined to despotism and unsuited for self-government. The most obvious rebuttal to Mr Will's first point is that only one nation in history had at its creation a Washington, Madison and Marshall — yet there are 122 democracies in the world right now. So clearly founders of the quality of Washington and Madison are not the necessary condition for freedom to succeed.

A mark of serious conservatism is a regard for the concreteness of human experience. If cultures are as intractable as Mr Will asserts, and if an existing democratic culture was as indispensable as he insists, we would not have seen democracy take root in Japan after World War II; Southern Europe in the 1970s; Latin America and East Asia in the '80s; and South Africa in the '90s. It was believed by many that these nations' and regions' traditions and cultures — including by turns Confucianism, Catholicism, dictatorships, authoritarianism, apartheid, military juntas and oligarchies — made them incompatible with self-government.

This is not to say that culture is unimportant. It matters a great deal. But so do incentives and creeds and the power of ideas, which can profoundly shape culture. Culture is not mechanically deterministic — and to believe that what is will always be is a mistake of both history and philosophy.

Americans have debated matters of creed and culture before. John C Calhoun believed slavery was a cultural given that could not be undone in the South. Lincoln knew slavery had deep roots — but he believed that could, and must, change. He set about to do just that. Lincoln believed slavery could be overcome because he believed human beings were constituted in a particular way. In the "enlightened belief" of the Founders, he said, "nothing stamped with the Divine image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on, and degraded, and imbruted by its fellows". Lincoln believed as well that the self-evident truths in the Declaration were the Founders' "majestic interpretation of the economy of the Universe. This was their lofty, and wise, and noble understanding of the justice of the Creator to His creatures. Yes, gentlemen, to all His creatures, to the whole great family of man".

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Critics of the Iraq war have offered no serious strategic alternative to the president's freedom agenda, which is anchored in the belief that democracy and liberal institutions are the best antidote to the pathologies plaguing the Middle East. The region has generated deep resentments and lethal anti-Americanism. In the past, Western nations tolerated oppression for the sake of "stability". But this policy created its own unintended consequences, including attacks that hit America with deadly fury on Sept 11. President Bush struck back, both militarily and by promoting liberty.

In Iraq, we are witnessing advancements and some heartening achievements. We are also experiencing the hardships and setbacks that accompany epic transitions. There will be others. But there is no other way to fundamentally change the Arab Middle East. Democracy and the accompanying rise of political and civic institutions are the only route to a better world — and because the work is difficult doesn't mean it can be ignored. The cycle has to be broken. The process of democratic reform has begun, and now would be precisely the wrong time to lose our nerve and turn our back on the freedom agenda. It would be a geopolitical disaster and a moral calamity — and President Bush, like President Reagan before him, will persist in his efforts to shape a more hopeful world. COURTESY WSJ

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