

US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: lessons from Humpty Dumpty

BY WILLIAM R. POLK

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.*

This rhyme that we all learned as children has had many interpretations: the defeat of a king, the explosion of a cannon, the overturn of a siege tower, and even the downfall of President Richard Nixon.

Over the years, people have found the verses memorable because, although apparently simple, they jog us to think about important truths. That is probably why they have endured and are reinterpreted in light of contemporary affairs, age after age.

For our times, “Humpty Dumpty” points to something so taken for granted that we often overlook it: the “social contract.”

The social contract is the basis for a healthy, functioning society. Yet it is fragile.

American foreign policy in the past decade has been rooted in the notion that overwhelming force – “all the king’s horses and all the king’s men” – could, in fact, fix a broken social contract (Afghanistan) or create a new, improved one (Iraq).

The results have been unending and tragic costs.

Sometimes written out in constitutions, laws, and treaties, but more often just unwritten custom, the social contract is the convention in which we manage to live relatively peacefully next to one another. Whether written or not, it is based on a consensus of what we think of as “normal” or “right.” In more traditional societies, it is referred to as “the way.”

Historically, the idea of a social contract probably grew out of kinship. Our remote ancestors, who lived in small clans, were able to get along with one another because they were fathers and children or brothers and sisters. Few were more remote from one another than first cousins.

Then, about 4,000 years ago, clans grew into villages and towns grew into cities. Kinship became too vague or too remote to explain or enforce social peace. Some new means was required.

And, in the urban revolution, the idea of kinship was transformed into neighborhood. One was supposed to treat his neighbor as though he were a kinsman rather than a foreigner or, as foreigner often meant, an enemy.

That was not an easy transformation and is still incomplete, but over the past few thousand years, society after society has struggled with the challenge of making this notion effective.

Traditional pictures of the rhyme suggests this by making Humpty Dumpty a fragile egg.

Where societies succeeded, they created what the rhyme pictures as Humpty, sitting up on a wall, above the occasional rough and tumble, the push and shove, the give and take of daily life, but a presence that in some abstract and idealized way facili-

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tates and brings order to the challenging process of living together.

As long as this “egg” exists and we accept it, we do not need massive and intrusive military force to keep from robbing, raping, or killing one another. Under its benign influence, we mostly continue to do what we do and refrain from what we should not do.

But if Humpty Dumpty is knocked off his perch, we lose our implicit agreement on what is right and proper.

This is more or less what the 17th-century philosophers thought of as returning to the “state of nature.”

It evoked the great English philosopher Thomas Hobbes’s memorable phrase in which he pictured men living outside the social contract as being in a state of war “of every man, against every man.” Living in a time of great turmoil, Hobbes thought that the only way to keep order was by the applica-

tion of overwhelming force.

We now know that force seldom works.

As we have seen in the attempts to impose order in Baghdad, New Orleans, and Haiti, even overwhelming military force fails. Over the past decade, we stationed a large part of the American Army in Baghdad without bringing back stability.

Indeed, history teaches us that the very act of attempting to impose security often has precisely the opposite effect.

The “trigger” of the American Revolution was the attempt of the British to impose order in Boston by military force in 1775.

The same process can be seen in the tragedy of Somalia. Today in Afghanistan, our nearly 100,000 soldiers are more targets than security forces. Once order is overthrown – Humpty is thrown down from the wall – “all the king’s horses and all the king’s men” are of no avail.

There is another message we can wring out of the rhyme: If Humpty’s fall is not long-term, that is, people do not have time to adjust to a new reality, then he can probably be resurrected by those who have lived under his spell.

Thus, the people of New Orleans and Haiti, while they suffered catastrophes, will probably fairly soon return to living with one another on reasonably satisfactory terms. Their descent into chaos was momentary, and the effects, while horrifying, will probably be self-correcting. This is because, as the usually pessimistic Hobbes tells us, people everywhere really want peace.

But if, on the contrary, the social contract is shattered and remains inoperable for a long period of time, relations of groups of people – particularly if they are easily identified by racial or religious differences – become fixed in new modes and the old shared order is virtually irreparable.

We rather deprecatingly refer to them as “failed societies” and attempt ourselves to impose order or to support warlords or dictators who promise to do so.

That is a danger America would be wise to avoid. The best way to do it is by avoiding pushing Humpty off the wall.

By shattering the social contract, invading and changing a regime (even one we regard as tyrannical) to a new “better” model, we run the risk of leaving in our wake anarchy over which we have no control and which will be a breeding ground for the very forces we thought we were taming. Then the costs to society, both ours and theirs, will be virtually unending.

We would do well to ponder the message of Humpty Dumpty.

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