

# Bush's Napoleon Complex

What the French experience in Spain could teach us about Iraq

By Gregory Cochran

NO TWO WARS are ever the same any more than you can step on the same banana peel twice. That said, Napoleon's invasion and occupation of Spain, from 1808 to 1814—the war that gave us the word “guerrilla” and was immortalized in Goya's “Third of May,” the war that drained France's army, smashed Napoleon's reputation for invincibility, and left Spain thrashing like a broken-backed snake for decades—has striking similarities to our invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Both wars started under the influence of similar delusions. Napoleon thought that the Spanish would roll over and play dead as so many other European states had; he thought marching to Madrid and placing his brother Joseph on the throne would complete the subjugation of Spain. We pretty much thought the same: crushing Saddam's army would be easy; we would then install a pro-American government (Ahmad the Thief) and have most of our Army home by fall.

The invasions went well, as expected, but in each case a tiresome guerrilla war broke out. The French eventually lost over a quarter of a million men in “the Spanish ulcer,” as Napoleon called it, while Iraq has tied down half of the Army and is costing us more than \$75 billion a year. What went wrong? As it turns out, Boney and Bush made some of the same mistakes.

Despite his tremendous organizational skills, Napoleon never managed to establish authority in Spain. He smashed the Bourbon state without ever

being able to replace it with his own. We've done the same in Iraq. We have been much more systematic about it, sacking the Iraqi army and banning most of the top layer of Ba'athist civil servants from government employment. The French made their mistakes rather casually: “Who wouldn't want to have my big brother as king?” Napoleon seems to have thought. On the other hand, our administration seems to have tried to fail, going out of its way to alienate and radicalize the entire Iraqi ruling class.

Like the French, we've managed not to have much of a side in Iraq: few Iraqis seem eager to wage war in our interest. Some of them are against us, while for the most part the others just watch as if it's not their fight. We hear a lot about how Iraqi National Guard units need more training. The true problem is that they're short on motivation. The insurgents manage to fight without years of professional training. The French too had some Spanish troops, who usually deserted at the first opportunity. They didn't make up fantasies about a training deficiency to explain it.

Both Spain and Iraq had notoriously inefficient armies, and that must have made the idea of invasion seem more plausible. The Spanish were certainly weaker and easier to beat (in conventional battles) than the Prussians or Austrians, while the Iraqis—some of the worst soldiers the world has ever seen—have been known to surrender to a film crew in an unarmed helicopter back in 1991. Compared to them, the

Italians of World War II were unkillable demons of battle.

The odd thing is that the same qualities that make an army fight well—strong central control, discipline, and a grassroots inclination to co-operate and obey orders—also allow it to surrender completely, rather like a CEO and his dominatrix. According to historian John Tone in *The Fatal Knot*, the French in Napoleon's time found the “Germans and Austrians, conditioned by militarism and centralization, unable or unwilling to act without the permission of their superiors.” We've seen it too, more recently: the Germans fought all too well in World War II but once defeated were quiet as mice under Allied occupation. The Japanese went further in that direction: willing, even eager, to die for the Emperor, more fanatical than any other army in history, they were utterly peaceful after surrender. Of course, Donald Rumsfeld seems to think that those post-World War II occupations were plagued by guerrilla resistance—but then, he also thinks that Iraq is a lot like colonial America: you know, prosperous, bourgeois, literate, British, Protestant, used to self-government and rule of law. Most likely he's from some other dimension. If only we could get him to say his name backwards.

The general disorganization in Spain and Iraq seems paradoxical. The Bourbons were autocratic by the standards of the day, while Saddam's Iraq was a

notorious dictatorship. But that hardly means that their central governments controlled everything. It just means that they wanted to. In Spain, attachment to village and province was more robust than national feeling, while most Iraqis are still tribalists. There obviously can be a number of reasons for the lack of a strong attachment to the state—considering Verdun and Stalingrad, maybe we'd all be better off without one—but Iraq and Spain shared at least one reason: they were rentier states. Most government revenue came from an exterior source, not from the sweat of taxpayer brows—Latin American silver for Spain, oil for Iraq. European governments (for example, Prussia) had modernized, built efficient administrations, and forged strong ties to the middle classes that paid the bills. They had to in order to compete. As long as the mines in Potosi held out, Spain didn't have to. Saddam didn't have to either, not as long

as he held the second-largest oil reserves in the world.

Such countries are weak in actual combat, even when their hardware looks impressive. The Spanish had the largest ship in the world at Trafalgar, the *Santisima Trinidad*, while Saddam had all kinds of fancy toys in the Gulf War. How

verse as this. Of course, they didn't have PowerPoint in those days.

Religion mattered in Spain. It matters in Iraq, too. Napoleon didn't think it would, and certainly the seers who created our Iraq policy didn't. In Spain, priests told the peasants that the invaders threatened their festivals, their saints,

## GOVERNMENT REVENUE CAME FROM AN EXTERIOR SOURCE, NOT FROM THE SWEAT OF TAXPAYER BROWS—LATIN AMERICAN SILVER FOR SPAIN, OIL FOR IRAQ.

did that work out? The two countries' high cash flow, combined with military weakness, made them tempting targets. Napoleon certainly expected to get a lot of revenue from Spain, and although the U.S. government denies it, I have to think that we would have had trouble staying interested in Iraq if it had nothing but sand.

There were many young Spaniards with idle hands back in 1808. Much of the regular Spanish army had disintegrated, and the economy was generally depressed because of the economic warfare between Britain and France. Iraq is like that—only more so. Iraqi oil is valuable, but Iraqi labor is not: if not for oil, the per capita GDP of Iraq would be less than Haiti's. There was hardly any Iraqi economy at all during most of the 1990s, thanks to the sanctions, and the Keynesian stimulus effect of an invasion is overrated. There are few private-sector jobs in Iraq, nothing to keep young men busy. (By few, I mean that unemployment is much worse than in our Great Depression—postwar estimates range from 30 to 70 percent.) Iraq is a welfare state, with most of the population receiving government food rations. There is no work, yet at the same time, you can get by without working. Guerrillas don't have to worry about starving. The French ruined the Spanish economy, but they never came up with anything as per-

and the heart of their way of life. They portrayed the French as unwholesome enemies of God who deserved any punishment the peasants could come up with. We're a lot milder than French. We aren't bayoneting mullahs, but we are definitely a lot less wholesome. After Abu Ghraib, it's pretty easy to portray us as giggling perverts. You can get much the same impression just watching prime-time TV. (Note to our guys running al-Iraqiya TV: do not show the Everclear video "Volvo Driving Soccer Mom." Try "Gunsmoke." Titles can fool you.)

Wolfowitz of Arabia said, "The Iraqis are among the most educated people in the Arab world. They are by and large quite secular. They are overwhelmingly Shia, which is different from the Wahabis of the peninsula, and they don't bring the sensitivity of having the holy cities of Islam being on their territory." He really said that, on Feb. 26, 2003. He forgot that 40 percent of Iraqis are illiterate (more than any of their neighbors), forgot that Najaf and Karbala are the holy cities of the Shi'ite majority, forgot that Islam would be the only ideology left in Iraq with the fall of the Ba'athists. We now hear about martyrs and jihad every day of the week, while Sistani, a mullah's mullah, acts as the unofficial powerbroker of Iraq. I can't read men's souls, but it certainly looks as if our decision makers and Napoleon mirror-imaged the foe:

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they personally didn't take religion seriously and so found it hard to believe that anyone else did either.

Napoleon's army in Spain ended up controlling only the ground it stood on. The roads weren't safe—every supply convoy needed an armed escort. The struggle against guerrillas was never-ending. The French, who had thought of themselves as bringing enlightenment, ended up hating the Spanish. This all sounds terribly familiar, but the parallels do end. France lost, but the U.S. won't. Spain was weaker than France but not militarily insignificant, and it had Great Britain backing it with money, troops, and Wellington. We're hundreds of times stronger than Iraq. The U.S. may tire of a pointless war and leave, but we certainly won't lose battles.

The big question is why these mistakes were made. Napoleon didn't have much excuse: Spain was France's next-door neighbor. Their histories had been intertwined for hundreds of years. Plenty of Frenchmen knew Spain, lived in Spain, and spoke Spanish. But Napoleon was probably beginning to suffer from megalomania: he had succeeded to such a tremendous extent that perhaps all things seemed possible.

The Bush administration can always plead ignorance. Certainly few of the players knew much about Iraq, the Middle East, or Islam. Judging from their frequent confused historical references, it seems as if Condi and Rummie really don't know any history at all. But the administration didn't check with anyone who did know. In fact, it rejected every form of expert advice. I'm sure someone said "wouldn't be prudent"—but Bush wasn't in a mood to listen, and no advice, no intelligence briefing, can trump that. ■

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**The former CIA chief in Baghdad is a suspect in the leaking of an assessment he wrote indicating that the security situation in Iraq was deteriorating.**

The assessment, written last autumn, was an "appraisal of situation." The document, which had a comment from then Ambassador John Negroponte disagreeing with its conclusions, was widely circulated among American policy-makers in Washington. Nevertheless, when the negative appraisal was later written about in the national press, CIA referred the matter to the Department of Justice as an unauthorized leak of classified information. The chief, who was removed from his post in November 2004, has hired a private lawyer to represent him during the ongoing FBI investigation. The CIA complaint appears to have been made at the instigation of the White House, which was incensed over the negative assessment. Negroponte, who was also angered by the report, apparently played a major role in having the chief removed. Sources in Washington believe that the report was leaked by officials at the Department of Defense who oppose Iraq policy, not by the CIA chief.



**The Department of Homeland Security might not participate in a conference of 400 senior police and public-health officers to be held in France**

in March to consider an Interpol warning that no country in the world is prepared to deal with the consequences of a bio-terrorism attack. Homeland Security is concerned that attending the meeting might be bad PR, suggesting that the White House, which has done little to defend against such an attack, has not taken necessary steps to protect the continental United States. Interpol believes that such an attack is almost certainly coming from a group like al-Qaeda, which has the resources and will to use such a weapon. The gathering in Lyons will address the issue and encourage police and emergency management agencies to set up networks that will better share information on potential threats. Security experts believe that there is potential for a spectacular biological attack that could easily spread contagious disease across a broad, heavily populated area like Europe or the U.S. eastern seaboard.



**The Abu Hafs al-Masri terrorist group has claimed in an Internet posting that a plan to launch a major terrorist operation in North America using "nuclear dust" is 95 percent completed.**

Al-Masri, a propaganda outlet for al-Qaeda, has issued a number of misleading statements in the past year, but a document seized in Saudi Arabia from an al-Qaeda safe house also states that a new operation against "Americans" is in progress and the name of the operation is Cave of Darkness. Some antiterrorism analysts fear that the planned operation will involve a dirty bomb and the phrase refers to a radioactive cloud that would block out the sun. Other analysts believe there is no necessary connection between the Saudi document and the possibly rhetorical claims of the al-Masri group. FBI officials nevertheless consider the prospect of a radioactive conventional explosion inside the U.S. a serious threat.

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