



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

[fff@fff.org](mailto:fff@fff.org) [www.fff.org](http://www.fff.org)

## **Subjective Value Theory in Iraq**

**by Jacob G. Hornberger**

Subjective value theory in economics holds that value is subjective — that is, that the value of any item, like beauty, lies in the eyes of the beholder. Moreover, value is comparative, rather than absolute: In response to the question, “Are diamonds valuable?” the proper answer is, “Compared with what?” For example, while we might be tempted to assume that a one-carat diamond is more valuable than a glass of water, a man dying of thirst on the desert might well be willing to give up his diamond in exchange for a glass of water. While he would ordinarily place a high value on his diamond, under those circumstances he would be placing a higher value on the water than on the diamond.

Subjective value theory, however, is not limited to economic analysis. It can also help us analyze the relative values that we hold in other parts of life, such as the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

For example, many Americans are ecstatic over the arrest of Saddam Hussein. But it would be a mistake to permit such ecstasy to cloud the real issue, which is: How valuable to you is Saddam’s arrest compared to what has been sacrificed to achieve it, i.e., the lives of American GIs (and Iraqi citizens) that have been killed (or maimed) in the invasion and occupation that resulted in the capture of Saddam Hussein? (It was the likelihood — or actually, the certainty — of those deaths that were a primary reason for the Pope’s opposition to the president’s invasion and war of aggression against Iraq — he considered those lives more valuable than the capture of Saddam Hussein.)

To put it another way, suppose you were asked prior to President Bush’s invasion: Are you willing to sacrifice the lives of hundreds of American soldiers and thousands of Iraqi citizens in order to arrest Saddam Hussein and bring him to trial? If you responded “yes,” then you would be saying that you place a lower value on the lives of those people, including American servicemen, than you do on the arrest of Saddam Hussein.

For the record, my own personal value scheme holds that the arrest of Saddam Hussein was not worth the life of one single American soldier, which is saying, in other words, that I place a higher value on the lives of our troops than on the arrest of Saddam Hussein.

Of course, prior to the invasion of Iraq, U.S. officials exhorted the American people to “support the troops,” knowing that some of them were almost certain to die, not in order to arrest Saddam Hussein but to protect Americans from an imminent threat of an attack with weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein’s forces. Terrified by the thought that a “mushroom cloud” (to use the president’s pre-invasion image) was about to arise over some American city, most Americans supported the invasion. They were effectively saying, “While I place a high value on the lives of our troops, I place a higher value on the security of our nation and on the lives of large numbers of Americans who would lose their lives in a WMD attack.”

For the record, one of the reasons that I opposed the invasion of Iraq was that I never believed for a moment that Saddam Hussein posed a threat to the United States. Instead, my belief was that the real reason for the president’s invasion was “regime change” — that is, replacing the Saddam Hussein regime (which had been an ally of the first Bush administration) with a new regime that would do the bidding of the U.S. government. Thus, in opposing the president’s invasion, I was placing a higher value on the lives of American soldiers than on “regime change” in Iraq.

As everyone now knows, once the invasion and war were over it quickly became clear that the president’s primary justification for garnering public support for the invasion — the threat of imminent attack by weapons of mass destruction — proved to be false: Saddam Hussein had no such weapons. That revelation forced the president to make an after-the-invasion shift in his primary justification for invading. His new primary justification for invading Iraq became the “liberation” of the Iraqi people.

That postwar shift placed those Americans who had supported the invasion in an interesting quandary with respect to valuation. Before the invasion, believing that they were under imminent threat of a massive WMD attack, they had reached the conclusion that the security of their nation and the lives of a large number of Americans had a higher value than the lives of their troops. Now, because of the president’s “bait and switch,” they were placed in a position of making a completely different valuation: Which has a higher value — the lives of American troops or the “liberation” of the Iraqi people? The query, however, was entirely theoretical, given that the invasion and war were already over and dozens of U.S. soldiers (as well as thousands of Iraqi citizens) were already dead.

The president is now asking the American people to make a similar evaluation with respect to the occupation of Iraq. We should first note that if the justification for the invasion had truly been to liberate the Iraqi people from the clutches of Saddam Hussein, that goal was achieved within 60 days of the invasion. At that point, the president could have left Iraq to the Iraqis, declaring. "Since my mission to liberate you from Saddam has been achieved, you are now free to establish a new government on your own. Goodbye and good luck!"

The president, however, chose not to do that, one primary reason being that he was still hoping that those weapons of mass destruction on which he had initially relied to garner public support for his invasion would still turn up. By the time it became clear that no WMDs were going to surface, the president's mission had morphed into "rebuilding" Iraq into a "free and democratic" country.

Now, it should be fairly obvious to everyone that despite the destruction of the Saddam Hussein regime, there is still no freedom in Iraq, at least not the way Americans understand the term. Saddam Hussein's authoritarian regime has been replaced by a military regime that exercises dictatorial powers over the Iraqi people, including arbitrary arrests and detentions, warrantless searches and seizures, gun control, curfews, military edicts, and many other attributes of life common to military dictatorships all over the world. The fact that the regime is ruled by the U.S. military might mean that it is more benign than, say, the military regimes that rule Burma or Pakistan, but military rule is military rule; it is not freedom.

Thus, it is impossible to know whether the U.S. occupation of Iraq will indeed be successful in achieving its goal of establishing "freedom and democracy" in Iraq. The best we can say is that there is a *hope* of establishing "freedom and democracy" in Iraq.

Therefore, in comparing relative values, the question becomes: Do you place a higher value on the hope of achieving "freedom and democracy" in Iraq or on the lives of U.S. soldiers? Those who favor the occupation of Iraq place a higher value on the former than they do on the latter. Those who oppose the occupation are effectively saying, "We place a higher value on the life of every single American soldier than we do on the hope for achieving 'freedom and democracy' in Iraq."

Given that the occupation of Iraq is also likely to produce terrorist responses here in the United States (just as U.S. Middle East policy in the 1990s produced the 9/11 attacks), Americans must also make a similar evaluation here at home: Do you place a higher value on your own life or the lives of your fellow citizens, or on the hope of achieving "freedom and democracy" in Iraq? Those who favor the continued occupation obviously place a higher value on the hope of achieving "freedom and democracy" in Iraq than they do on their own lives and on the lives of

their fellow citizens. Of course, that valuation must be discounted by the fact that people will conclude that it's highly unlikely that they or anyone they know will be killed by a terrorist response here at home.

Just for the record, I myself place a higher value on the life of every single American, soldier and civilian, than I do on "freedom and democracy" in Iraq or the hope for "freedom and democracy" in Iraq, just as I place a higher value on the lives of our troops (and on the lives of Iraq citizens) than I do on the arrest of Saddam Hussein. That subjective valuation is one reason I oppose both the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Mr. Hornberger is president of The Future of Freedom Foundation.