Operation Iraqi Freedom concluded with a series of startling images, many of them positive, all of them pointing to unanticipated and historic possibilities. The April 9 scenes of Baghdad residents embracing American soldiers and cheering the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein were unlike anything witnessed before in the Middle East.

With the exception of Israel, it is difficult to think of any comparable historic situation in which inhabitants of a region were so visibly enthusiastic about a demonstration of American power. Should postwar realities in Iraq take a turn for the worse, posterity will point out that the victory images in April were actually ambiguous. In Baghdad and elsewhere in the Middle East, Arabs witnessed the toppling of the garish Saddam Hussein icon, but they also noticed that it took U.S. Marines and an American tank recovery vehicle to pull down this symbol of tyranny. On-the-spot American media can be forgiven, however, for overlooking such nuances.

Operation Iraqi Freedom ended in a dizzying whirlwind of emotion, rumor (including reports of Saddam Hussein’s catlike survival), and hope. Journalists were reporting on a new reality whose specific inspiring moments and inauspicious episodes, such as the looting of Baghdad’s National Museum, were not anticipated by either army or civilian planners.

As New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof pointed out, everyone had the end-of-the-war scenario wrong. Years before the war began, neoconservative hawks like Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz suggested that popular uprisings and returned Iraqi exiles would do the job; all that would be needed would be some American weapons and air cover. Conversely, in the months leading up to the war, liberals warned of street-to-street fighting in Iraqi cities, terrorist reprisals in the U.S. or elsewhere, and other bleak events. In the meantime, the Bush administration promised the discovery of caches of nonconventional weapons. By the time of this writing at the end of April, none of these scenarios had come to the fore.

In the weeks preceding Operation Iraqi Freedom, little attention was paid to the issue of “What happens the morning after the war?” Media coverage focused on debates in the United Nations on Iraqi noncompliance with the arms-inspection process and on the case that members of the Bush administration presented to support the impending conflict. At the time, this focus appeared perfectly natural.

The lack of media discussion about the “Morning After,” however, is symptomatic of broad structural issues that hamper American coverage of the Middle East. Generally, print and visual media relate to immediate, image-friendly events and tend to neglect complex, long-term processes. They prefer incidents that either contain authentic drama or are amusing signs of the times, like the renaming of the French fries in Capitol Hill cafeterias as “Freedom fries” in a culinary rebuke of French intransigence at the U.N. The on-the-ground dynamics of social change and potential democratization in countries whose distant and recent histories are as disparate as Lebanon and Iran are largely foreign to American media. As Edward Said points out in his book Covering Islam, American journalists tend to lack basic familiarity with Islam and the various languages and cultures in the Middle East.

In the final analysis, the issue goes well beyond this or that reporter’s training and ingrained habits in American coverage of the Middle East. As in many other cases, the problem of coverage—or noncoverage—of the
Morning After isn’t entirely a media issue. It straddles the realms of pure information and moral values, media and politics. Specifically, the issue relates to conflicting beliefs about the exportability of democracy and the legacy of the 9/11 attacks.

One liberal view, passionately defended by New York Times correspondent Thomas Friedman, argues that America was well within its rights to identify Saddam Hussein as a potential patron of future terror assaults and to take military action against his criminal regime. Friedman warns, however, that should the War on Terror not be accompanied by a positive program of democratization for Iraq—and, subsequently, elsewhere in the Arab world—the Bush administration will have squandered the patriotic resolve that 9/11 generated and betrayed its global responsibilities.

Though there was no substantive Morning After debate in the American media, Friedman attempted in his New York Times columns to raise the bar sky high. If democracy building in Iraq and elsewhere “goes wrong,” Friedman warned on Feb. 26, 2003, “the world will never be the same.” Arguably, the conservative view is skeptical about this corollary of Arab democratization. The U.S.’s historic isolationism collapsed in the rubble of the World Trade Center, and yet conservatives who advocate a global War on Terror remain wary of meddling in the political affairs of other countries.

Predictably, American commentators deferred discussion of the Morning After until it became evident that the capture of Baghdad and a conclusive result to the war were within reach. By the weekend of April 4, when the newspaper headlines were reporting that the “noose around Baghdad is tightening,” some columnists finally began to wonder aloud what America and Britain might offer Iraq after the Hussein regime was taken to the gallows. “This administration wages war better than it wages diplomacy,” Nicholas Kristof fretted in The New York Times. “Today the paramount question is not whether we will win this war, but whether we can persuade ordinary Iraqis to accept our victory.”

To outsiders, Kristof and many other commentators were correct to pose this issue of the Morning After as the paramount question. But the recognition seemed belated and anomalous, given America’s unrivaled military power and the prolonged contacts with sundry Iraqi opposition figures and groups in which State Department officials have engaged since the late 1980s. To outsiders, the White House–Pentagon doctrine of overwhelming military force was accompanied by an underwhelming measure of thought about the Morning After.

Now that the war has ended, administering Iraq will be a tremendously difficult tightrope act. Western media outlets ritualistically conceptualize Iraq in tidy ethnic-religious groupings—Turk, Shiite, and Sunni—and definite geographic clusters—Shiite in the South, Kurds in the North. While these divisions might conform broadly to Iraqi reality, they ignore a multitude of details, such as 2.5 million Turkmen, 650,000 Christians, and the dense mingling of populations in key cities and regions.

Before the war ended, a handful of seasoned American journalists, such as The New York Times’s Ethan Bronner (whose expertise in the region stems from his days as a foreign correspondent for The Boston Globe), contemplated these questions by way of analogy. In an opinion piece titled “The Lesson of Lebanon—Don’t Forget to Leave,” Bronner drew on Israel’s bitter experience in Lebanon to warn that Shiite groups in southern Iraq might not extend American troops in southern Iraq a long welcome. The perception of Americans as liberators could have a short shelf life in Iraq.

Will Operation Iraqi Freedom mean exactly that for Iraq? For those of us who live in the Middle East, a war by any other name would not be the same war. If it is not about freedom and democracy, then the sacrifices of American and British servicemen have not been fully honored, nor has the region been well served.