Why the Bush Administration Invaded Iraq

Making Strategy after 9/11

Jeffrey Record

The conviction that Saddam Hussein was an imminent threat to America and therefore necessitated removal by force began as a kind of communicable agent to which some in the administration had great resistance and others not. Its host bodies belonged to, among others, Vice President Dick Cheney; his chief of staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby; Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz; and Douglas J. Feith, undersecretary of defense for policy. The agent resided in these four men, and in lesser hosts, well before September 11. But after the attack on America, the contagion swept through the Beltway and insinuated itself into the minds of many—including the White House national security adviser and the president of the United States.

—Robert Draper
Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush

The United States is headed into the sixth year of an exceptionally frustrating war whose consequences so far have been largely injurious to America's long-term national security. Preoccupation with that war understandably has obscured the original decision for launching it. That decision cannot be repealed, and the controversies surrounding it offer little guidance to those grappling with the political and military challenges confronting the United States in Iraq today. Knowing the way into Iraq is not knowing the way out. That said, it is critical that Americans come to understand how the United States came to invade and occupy Iraq, if for no other reason than to inform future discussion of whether, when, and how to employ US military power. Understanding how we got into Iraq may help us avoid future "Iraqs."

Americans have been treated to an avalanche of finger-pointing over who is responsible for the war and its consequences. The blame games between

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Democrats and Republicans, hawks and doves, military leaders and their civilian superiors, and Congress and the executive branch seem headed for extra innings. What Americans deserve, however, is a reasoned, dispassionate debate over why and how the United States found itself in a bloody and protracted war in the middle of a country that posed no significant threat to the United States. They deserve an objective, no-holds-barred examination of the motivations and assumptions behind the George W. Bush administration's decision for war. That decision brought us to where we are in Iraq, and failure to understand it could encourage disastrous future decisions.

Indeed, why the United States invaded Iraq in the first place is perhaps the most perplexing of many perplexing questions about the Iraq War, and one that is likely to bedevil historians for decades to come. "It still isn't possible to be sure—and this remains the most remarkable thing about the Iraq War," observed George Packer in *The Assassins' Gate*, his best-selling indictment of America's misadventure in Iraq. "It was something some people wanted to do. Before the invasion, Americans argued not just about whether a war should happen, but for what reasons it should happen—what the real motives of the Bush administration were and should be. Since the invasion, we have continued to argue, and will go on arguing for years to come."[1] John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt are no less stumped. The "decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein even now seems difficult to fathom. . . . In the aftermath of 9/11, when one would have expected the United States to be focusing laser-like on al Qaeda, the Bush administration chose to invade a deteriorating country that had nothing to do with the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and was already effectively contained. From this perspective, it *is* a deeply puzzling decision."[2] Even before the invasion, Brent Scowcroft, former national security adviser to Pres. George H. W. Bush, warned in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, "Don't Attack Iraq," that an invasion of Iraq would be both a diversion from and an impediment to the war against al-Qaeda. "Our preeminent security policy . . . is the war on terrorism," which a war with Iraq "would seriously jeopardize" because the unpopularity of an attack on Iraq would result in a "serious degradation in international cooperation with us against terrorism."[3]

Why did Pres. George W. Bush order the invasion of Iraq? Why, especially given the absence, during the run-up to the invasion (and since), of any evidence of either Iraqi complicity in the 9/11 al-Qaeda attacks on the

World Trade Center and Pentagon or an operational relationship between al-Qaeda and the Baathist regime in Baghdad?

Afghanistan's link to 9/11 was self-evident. In contrast, the administration simply asserted Iraq's connection for the purpose of mobilizing public and congressional support for a war that otherwise would have been a hard, even impossible, sell. Indeed, policy makers and commentators who had been gunning for Saddam Hussein ever since the Gulf War of 1991 successfully converted public rage over the al-Qaeda attacks into a war to bring down the Iraqi dictator. They converted the reality of Osama bin Laden as an avowed enemy of "apostate" secular regimes in the Middle East into the fantasy of bin Laden as an ally of Saddam Hussein. President Bush and other war proponents repeatedly spoke (and still do) of al-Qaeda, Saddam, and 9/11 in the same breath. As the president declared in September 2002, "You can't distinguish between al Qaeda and Saddam when you talk about the war on terror. . . . I can't distinguish between the two, because they're both equally as bad, and equally as evil, and equally as destructive."[4] (By this reasoning the United States should have declared war on Hitler *and* Stalin in December 1941.) Thus, Saddam Hussein suddenly became a crazed, undeterrable dictator just months away from acquiring nuclear weapons and happily sharing them with bin Laden.

It is impossible to explain the road from 9/11 to the invasion of Iraq without recognizing the tremendous influence of neoconservative opinion, both inside and outside the administration, on the Bush White House.[5] The neoconservatives had a ready explanation for the 9/11 attacks, provided the intellectual justification for the war, and persuaded Pres. George W. Bush, untutored in foreign policy and ignorant of the Middle East, that the global assault on al-Qaeda had to include regime change in Iraq. And the neoconservatives reinforced the president's predisposition to see the world in terms of "good versus evil" and to view the use of military power as the fundamental decider of relations among states.[6] In their 2004 definitive assessment of neoconservative ideology and its influence on post-9/11 US foreign policy, *America Alone*, Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke convincingly argue:

> The situation of unending war in which we find ourselves results in large part from the fact that the policies adopted after 9/11, the initial strike against the Taliban aside, were hardly specific to that event. Unlike the policy of containment that evolved in direct response to Soviet moves in Central and Eastern Europe and involved radical new thinking on the part of those involved, the post-9/11 policy was in fact grounded in an ideology that existed well before the terror attacks and

> that in a stroke of opportunistic daring by its progenitors, has emerged as the new orthodoxy. The paper trail is unambiguous. Minds were already made up. A preexisting ideological agenda was taken off the shelf, dusted off, and relabeled as *the* response to terror. . . .
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> In neo-conservative eyes, the Iraq war was not about terrorism; it was about the pivotal relationship between Saddam Hussein and the assertion of American power. Hussein provided, in effect, the opportunity to clarify America's global objectives and moral obligations. His continued survival in power was a metaphor for all that had gone wrong with American foreign policy since the Soviet collapse in the sense that the first Bush administration's Realpolitik and Clinton's wishful liberalism had left the Iraqi dictator in power. Iraq was now the arena in which to demonstrate the crucial tenets of neo-conservative doctrine: military preemption, regime change, the merits of exporting democracy, and a vision of American power that is "fully engaged and never apologetic" (emphasis in original).[7]

President Bush's post-9/11 receptivity to the neoconservative agenda was manifest in the administration's provocative September 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, which embraced rogue-state regime change, aggressively promoted democracy, viewed American military supremacy as a given, and (in a stunning departure from traditional US foreign policy norms) asserted the right to launch preventive wars to protect national interests.

With respect to Iraq, however, a review of administration statements and of the neoconservatives' official and unofficial arguments reveals no coherent grand strategy. Such a strategy would have paid at least some attention to how a successful and friendly post-Baathist political order would be established in Iraq. Rather, what we find is a mélange of declared and undeclared war aims with differing appeal to various policy makers who themselves were motivated by disparate and sometimes contradictory agendas—"an 'overlapping agreement' about the wisdom of invasion among individuals who differed about the ends that an invasion promised to serve."[8] Those individuals included the president and vice president, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, and the influential neoconservative coterie of I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas J. Feith, and Richard Perle.[9] Administration war aims—"the ends that an invasion promised to serve"—included preventing nuclear proliferation; exploiting Iraq's weakness; completing the "unfinished business" of the 1991 Gulf War; demonstrating a willingness to use American military power and use it unilaterally; asserting the principle of preventive military action; intimidating Iran, North Korea, and other rogue states; transforming the Middle East via establishing

a model democracy in Iraq for other Arab states to emulate; creating an Arab client state alternative to Saudi Arabia; eliminating an enemy of Israel; and vindicating the Pentagon's "revolutionary" employment of force.

The very number and diversity of aims, and the mutual antagonism of some, reflect a lack of consensus on what, exactly, the war was all about, as well as a lack of confidence in the persuasiveness of any single aim. Was the war about avenging 9/11, eliminating weapons of mass destruction (WMD), knocking off an "ally" of Osama bin Laden, punishing a dictator, freeing an oppressed people, flexing America's high-tech military muscle, helping Israel, democratizing the Middle East, intimidating other rogue states, suppressing global terrorism—or all of the above? Did the multiplicity of war aims betray a felt need by war proponents to drape, for public consumption, the clothes of a war of necessity over what was in fact a war of choice?

It remains unclear how seriously war proponents took the Iraqi threat they so grossly inflated for political purposes. Bush and Cheney were certainly not alone in imagining the horror of a repetition of the 9/11 attacks conducted with WMDs; indeed, the spector of terrorists armed with destructive power heretofore monopolized by states was a legitimate fear long before 9/11. And it was certainly reasonable, given Saddam Hussein's longstanding enmity toward the United States as well as his track record of reckless miscalculation, to imagine the possibility of his collaboration with anti-American terrorist organizations.

Forestalling a Nuclear 9/11

The Bush White House probably believed what it said repeatedly—namely, that war with Iraq was necessary to prevent Saddam Hussein from acquiring nuclear weapons and possibly transferring them to al-Qaeda. Calamity terrorizes the imagination. The shock of 9/11 frightened many Americans into believing in all sorts of terrifying possibilities, but the White House had the responsibility for protecting the country from future attacks. Yet it bears repeating that by March 2003, when Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) was launched, there was no evidence of Iraqi complicity in the 9/11 al-Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. And though the White House had sought to conflate al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein as a unitary threat, there was no evidence of operational collaboration between the terrorist organization and Baghdad's

Baathist regime. Nor was there, notwithstanding official talk of smoking guns and mushroom clouds, evidence of a functioning Iraqi nuclear weapons program—much less an imminent Iraqi bomb. As later recalled by Richard Haass, who in 2003 was director of the State Department's policy planning staff, "When it came to nuclear weapons, the intelligence at the time did not support acting. Iraq did not possess nuclear weapons or even a nuclear weapons program worthy of the name. Nor was it inevitable that over time Iraq would have been able to develop nuclear weapons, given the international sanctions in place."[10] Saddam Hussein's purported nuclear intentions thus were simply *wished* into imminent capabilities.

Haass might have added that there was, in any event, no reason to believe that Saddam Hussein's potential use of WMDs, including nuclear weapons had he possessed them, was exempt from the grim logic of nuclear deterrence. True, he had employed chemical weapons against Iranian infantry and Kurdish villagers in the 1980s, but his victims were incapable of effective retaliation. More notable was his refusal during the Gulf War of 1991 to launch such weapons against Israel or coalition forces, both of which were capable of devastating retaliation. Saddam Hussein, to be sure, was prone to miscalculation. He ran a personality cult dictatorship in which his lieutenants eagerly told him what he wanted to hear, and he repeatedly misjudged US willingness to use force. But Saddam was homicidal, never suicidal; he always loved himself more than he hated the United States. The White House suggestion that Saddam might transfer nuclear munitions to al-Qaeda was always far-fetched. The Iraqi dictator could never be sure that such a transfer could be made undetected, and like all Stalinist-styled dictators, Saddam was not in the habit of handing over power—to say nothing of the destructive power of nuclear weapons—to any organization outside his complete control. He was certainly aware that Osama bin Laden regarded the Baathist regime in Baghdad as an "apostate" government. As Adam Cobb has observed,

> no state has ever given terrorists more power than it, itself, possesses. There is no incentive for rogue regimes to hand over their hard won nuclear capabilities, prestige and power to AQ [al-Qaeda]. Regimes like Kim Jong Il's North Korea, Ahmadinejad's Iran, or Saddam's Iraq tend to be paranoid and obsessed with finding and eliminating alternative sources of power to their rule. The President and others have repeatedly said that Saddam "could" hand over WMD to AQ. It is certainly technically possible, but they have never provided more than vague innuendo to suggest what incentives Saddam might gain from doing so—this is because the proposition does not bear scrutiny.[11]

What of nonnuclear WMDs? As war neared, it was assumed that Iraq had some chemical munitions and biological agents—i.e., residual post–Gulf War stocks that remained unaccounted for by the United Nations inspection regime when that regime was ejected from Iraq in 1998. Yet even this claim was highly suspect by the time US forces attacked Iraq on 19 March 2003. In August 1995, Gen Hussein Kamel, a son-in-law of Saddam Hussein and former director of Iraq's Military Industrial Corporation (which was responsible for all of Iraq's weapons programs), defected to Jordan, where he told debriefers that all of the country's chemical and biological weapons had been destroyed on his orders back in 1991. More instructive, in November 2002, Saddam Hussein, succumbing to the pressure of a huge US military buildup in Kuwait and the Bush administration's increasingly strident rhetoric about the necessity of regime change in Baghdad, permitted the return of UN inspectors with more or less unfettered access to suspected weapons sites. Coercive US diplomacy had in effect forced Saddam to capitulate on the very issue that formed the primary public rationale for the coming war.[12] If he had any WMDs, the inspectors, who now had access to previously off-limits presidential palaces and other government compounds, would eventually find them, and the very presence of the inspectors would forestall any attempted use of WMDs. The inspectors, who had four months to find any WMDs and inspected 141 sites before they were pulled out because of the impending invasion, reported that there was "no evidence or plausible indication of the revival of a nuclear weapons program in Iraq."[13]

How different the world might look now had Bush pocketed his enormous victory of coercing Saddam into accepting an occupation of his country by an inspection regime, an occupation that would have precluded the necessity for a US invasion and made a laughingstock of Saddam's pretensions on the world stage! It seems that the White House's obsession with removing the Iraqi dictator blocked recognition of its stunning diplomatic triumph.

So the Bush administration went to war anyway. As later recounted by Hans Blix, the director of the UN Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC), "Although the inspection organization was now operating at full strength and Iraq seemed determined to give it prompt access everywhere, the United States appeared as determined to replace our inspection force with an invasion army."[14] The White House was completely indifferent to UNMOVIC's failure to discover any WMDs, even

though the suspected sites supplied to UNMOVIC by the United States and several other countries "were supposedly the best that the various intelligence agencies could give." Blix was prompted to wonder, "Could there be 100-percent certainty about the existence of weapons of mass destruction but zero-percent knowledge about their location?"[15] Clearly, a disarmed Saddam Hussein was not enough; the dictator himself would have to go.

The Pentagon's invasion plan, which displayed a manifest indifference to seizing and securing suspected WMD sites, reinforced the conclusion that regime change always trumped WMDs as a war aim. Did administration policy makers take the Iraqi WMD threat seriously, and if not, why not? And if so, why wasn't capturing the sites assigned top operational priority? Indeed, if the administration's primary concern was the possibility of WMDs—especially fissile material and even finished weapons—falling into al-Qaeda hands, why wasn't it focused on the most likely potential source of proliferation, which was hardly Iraq but the poorly guarded Soviet weapons and highly enriched uranium storage facilities in Russia?[16]

To seize and secure Iraq's suspected WMDs would have required a sufficiently large and dedicated invasion force to capture the hundreds of suspected sites quickly (before terrorists and profiteers got to them) and to seal Iraq's long borders to prevent any munitions and chemical and biological warfare substances from being taken out of the country. For example, US forces failed to secure the 120-acre Tuwaitha Nuclear Research Center (believed to have contained almost two tons of partially enriched uranium) before it was ransacked by people unknown.[17] If, in fact, the main purpose of the invasion was to disarm Iraq—to remove the putative threat posed by Saddam Hussein's possession of WMDs—then the invasion plan should have reflected that objective. But it did not. Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, in their incisive assessment of the invasion plan and its implementation, *Cobra II*, discovered "a surprising contradiction":

> The United States did not have nearly enough troops to secure the hundreds of suspected WMD sites that had supposedly been identified in Iraq or to secure the nation's long, porous borders. Had the Iraqis possessed WMD and terrorist groups been prevalent in Iraq as the administration so loudly asserted, U.S. forces might well have failed to prevent the WMD from being spirited out of the country and falling into the hands of the dark forces the administration had declared war against.[18]

Those who planned OIF, chief among them Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and US Central Command commander Gen Tommy Franks, either

did not take the proliferation threat seriously or were dangerously derelict in their duties. Though Rumsfeld and Franks happily dove into the minutia of planning the invasion, they apparently paid little if any attention to the requirement to seize control of Iraq's much-touted WMDs.

Iraq's conventional military forces were certainly no threat by 2003. The Iraqi air force and navy had virtually disappeared in the 1990s, and the Iraqi army had been reduced to a paper force. Crippled in 1991, further gutted by 12 years of military sanctions, commanded by professionally inferior regime loyalists, and badly positioned and trained to repel or punish a foreign invader, the army was incapable of defending Iraq, much less invading US client states in the Middle East. It quickly disintegrated upon contact with US forces.

Thus, on the eve of the US invasion, Saddam Hussein was contained and deterred. He posed no significant threat to the United States and no unmanageable threat to regional US security interests. Iraq was a nuisance, an irritant, not a deadly menace. As Colin Powell told an interviewer a week after the 9/11 attacks, "Iraq isn't going anywhere. It's in a fairly weakened state. It's doing some things we don't like. We'll continue to contain it."[19]

Iraq's fellow "axis of evil" states, Iran and North Korea, posed far more serious threats to US security interests in the Persian Gulf and Northeast Asia, respectively. Indeed, Baathist Iraq served as a barrier to the expansion of Iranian power and influence in the Gulf, which is why the Reagan administration backed Saddam Hussein in his war against the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran. Whatever else the secular Iraqi dictator may have been, he was an enemy of the mullahs in Tehran and of Islamist extremism in his own country. Saddam Hussein's Iraq was a suicide-bombing-free state[20] that effectively thwarted the establishment of an Islamist terrorist organizational presence in Iraq; al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia—the organization—emerged only in post-Baathist Iraq.

Exploiting Iraq's Weakness

Iraq's weakness relative to Iran and North Korea figured prominently among the myriad motivations that plunged the Bush administration into the present war. Clearly, by the fall of 2002 at the very latest, the White House was determined to launch a preventive war against Iraq regardless of its objectively weak case that Iraq posed a grave and gathering danger to the United States. It wanted war no matter what. Equally clearly, the administration was captivated by the speed and ease of its destruction of

the Taliban regime in Afghanistan[21] and believed it could gain a quick and decisive victory in Iraq.

Decisions for wars of choice rest on a reasonable assumption of success; absent military feasibility, otherwise convincing arguments for war are moot. Iraq was clearly the lowest hanging fruit among the three states the president had publicly named as candidates for forcible regime change. Though Iran and North Korea were more dangerous, they were also much tougher regimes to defeat militarily than the relatively feeble regime in Iraq. Unlike Baghdad, which had virtually no means of striking back against a US attack, Tehran had regional terrorist options and could disrupt the flow of oil out of the Persian Gulf. Pyongyang was believed to have nuclear weapons and was, in any event, in a position, via its massed artillery just north of the demilitarized zone, to rain destruction on the greater Seoul area. Iraq, in short, was helpless, whereas Iran and North Korea were not.

The Bush administration, while worst-casing the threat, best-cased the costs and consequences of overthrowing Saddam Hussein. It correctly judged the overthrow of the dictator's regime to be a relatively easy military task but profoundly misjudged the potential political and strategic results of doing so. War planning focused almost exclusively on dispatching the old regime as quickly and cheaply as possible at the expense of thinking about what would replace it and how. In some cases, administration war aims amounted to little more than expectations based on wishful thinking reinforced by a self-serving embrace of faulty historical analogies.[22] For example, the administration assumed that some form of democratic governance would naturally arise from the ashes of Baathist rule; after all, had not democracy emerged in Japan during America's postwar occupation? The administration further assumed that America's manifestly good intentions in Iraq and the Iraqi people's gratitude for being liberated from tyranny would foreclose the possibility of postwar armed resistance to US forces; after all, was this not the case when the Allies liberated France?

"We have great information," Cheney assured a skeptical House Majority Leader Dick Armey in the summer of 2002. "They're going to welcome us. It will be like the American army going through the streets of Paris. They're sitting there ready to form a new government. The people will be so happy with their freedoms that we'll probably back ourselves out of there within a month or two."[23] Indeed, Iraq was going to be easier than Afghanistan. "It is important for the world to see that first of all, Iraq is a sophisticated society

with about $16 billion [in annual oil] income," President Bush declared to a group of American conservative thinkers in the Oval Office just before the invasion. "The degree of difficulty compared to Afghanistan in terms of the reconstruction effort, or from emerging from dictatorship, is, like, infinitesimal. I mean Afghanistan has *zero*." By contrast, "Iraq is a sophisticated society. And it's a society that can emerge and show the Muslim world that it's possible to have peace on its borders without rallying the extremists. And the other thing that will happen will be, there will be less exportation of terror out of Iraq."[24]

Confidence that a quick and easy victory lay ahead in Iraq begs the question of "how to assess the guileless optimism of the war's architects," observes Stephen Holmes, "especially when professed by men who vaunt their lack of illusions. Had they never heard of worst-case scenarios? What sort of foreign policy assumes that democracy has no historical, cultural, economic, and psychological preconditions?"[25] The apparent assumption was that democracy is society's natural state and that it automatically resurfaces once "unnatural" tyranny is removed. "There was a tendency among promoters of the war to believe that democracy was a default condition to which societies would revert once liberated from dictators," recounts Francis Fukuyama, a neoconservative who supported the war he now believes to have been a mistake.[26] The other apparent assumption was that the instrument of tyranny's removal in Iraq—US military power—was irresistible. There was no expectation of an insurgent response, much less an appreciation of the limits of American conventional military supremacy as an instrument for affecting fundamental political change in foreign lands and for dealing with the challenges of irregular warfare. (Perhaps this was not surprising for an administration mesmerized by America's military power and committed to a "war on terror" that from the beginning inflated the importance of military solutions to what at bottom are political problems.)

Redeeming the Hollow Victory of 1991

Preventing nuclear proliferation and exploiting Iraq's weakness were not the only Bush administration motives for war. Right behind them was redemption of the false victory of 1991. One of the remarkable aspects of America's two wars against Iraq is the continuity of key decision makers. Saddam Hussein provided the critical continuity on the Iraq side, whereas both Bushes (father and son), Dick Cheney, Colin Powell,

Condoleezza Rice, and Paul Wolfowitz provided it for the American side. By the late 1990s there was, on the American side (except for Colin Powell, who opposed both wars with Iraq), a growing feeling that the 1991 Gulf War had been a hollow victory. This view was especially strong among leading neoconservatives, including those who moved into the George W. Bush administration. Many had believed the stunning military victory delivered by Operation Desert Storm would provoke Saddam Hussein's internal overthrow, but the Iraqi dictator remained in power, defying the United States and the international community. He became a standing embarrassment to American foreign policy, a symbol of the limits of US conventional military supremacy, and proof, even, that Americans lacked the political will to vanquish their adversaries.

Saddam's survival, and especially his implication in a 1993 plot to assassinate George H. W. Bush during the former president's visit to Kuwait, meant that it had been a mistake not to have marched on to Baghdad. Saddam Hussein's destruction became a family matter. In 1998 the younger Bush told a friend, "Dad made a mistake in not going into Iraq when he had an approval rating in the nineties. If I'm ever in that situation, I'll use it—I'll spend my political capital." During the 2000 presidential election campaign, the younger Bush told PBS's Jim Lehrer, "I'm just as frustrated as many Americans are that Saddam still lives. I will tell you this: If we catch him developing weapons of mass destruction in any way, shape, or form, I'll deal with him in a way he won't like."[27]

Neoconservative opinion unanimously condemned the unfinished war of 1991 as well as the Clinton administration's refusal to take Saddam Hussein down. In *The War over Iraq*, a book published on the eve of the 2003 invasion that encapsulated the neoconservative view of America's role in the Middle East and the relationship of the invasion to that role, Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol predictably condemned the George H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations' policies toward Iraq:

> [The] first Bush and Clinton administrations opted for a combination of incomplete military operations and diplomatic accommodation. Rather than press hard for a change of regime, President Bush halted the U.S. war against Iraq prematurely and turned a blind eye as Saddam slaughtered the insurgents whom the United States had encouraged to revolt. For its part, the Clinton administration avoided confronting the moral and strategic challenge presented by Saddam, hoping instead that an increasingly weak policy of containment, punctuated by the occasional fusillade of cruise missiles, would suffice to keep Saddam in his box.[28]

Indeed, many neoconservatives, seeing in George W. Bush the foreign policy son of the father, supported Senator John McCain in the 2000 Republican presidential primaries and did not hesitate, at least before 9/11, to lambaste the new President Bush for being "soft" on Saddam. On 30 July 2001, former CIA officer and neoconservative author Reuel Marc Gerecht denounced the Bush administration's Iraq policy in the influential neoconservative journal, *The Weekly Standard*. In an essay titled "The Cowering Superpower," Gerecht declared, "From the spring of 1996, the Clinton administration's Iraq policy was in meltdown; under the Bush administration, it has completely liquefied. . . . It would be better to see the administration start explaining how we will live with Saddam and his nuclear weapons than to see senior Bush officials, in the manner of the Clintonites, fib to themselves and the public."[29]

Would there have been a second US war against Iraq had there not been a first? Had Saddam not invaded Kuwait in 1991, or had the George H. W. Bush administration decided not to reverse the invasion by force, what would the level of enmity have been between the United States and Iraq, between the Bush family and Saddam Hussein? Would the 9/11 attacks have been sufficient to trigger an American invasion in 2003? Christian Alfonsi believes that

> what made the invasion of Iraq inevitable was Saddam Hussein's triumph over the Bush national security team in 1992 [surviving the 1991 war while Bush went on to political defeat in the United States], and the fear that he would repeat the triumph in 2004. This fixation on Saddam ran through the Bush dynasty like a malignant strain of DNA, a pathogen always a threat to appear under the right conditions of crisis. . . . Once this pathogen had been released into the American body politic [following the 9/11 attacks], the views of the neoconservatives about regime change in Iraq provided a foreign policy rationale for the war, and faulty intelligence about weapons of mass destruction provided a political rationale that resonated with the American people.[30]

Demonstrating Will to Use Decisive Force

A fourth administration objective was to demonstrate a new willingness to use force. During the 1990s, neoconservatives—many of whom entered the upper tiers of the George W. Bush administration in 2001 and pushed for war against Iraq—were openly contemptuous of the disparity between US conventional military supremacy and presidential willingness to use it aggressively on behalf of American interests and values. They worried that "the United

States, the world's dominant power on whom the maintenance of international peace and the support of liberal democratic principles depends, will shrink from its responsibilities and—in a fit of absent-mindedness, or parsimony, or indifference—allow the international order that it created and sustained to collapse. Our present danger is one of declining military strength, flagging will and confusion about our world."[31] They deplored post–Cold War cuts in defense spending and the Vietnam War's chilling effects on America's willingness to use force and use it decisively. The persistence of those effects long after the Soviet Union's demise, which in their view removed the principal check on the expansion of US power and influence in the world, was especially galling. The United States was mired in strategic bewilderment at a time when it ought to have been using its global hegemony to topple tyrannies worldwide.

Neoconservatives were particularly dismissive of the Weinberger-Powell doctrine, which they (rightly) believed proscribed the use of force in all but the most exceptionally favorable military and political circumstances. The doctrine was, in their view, a recipe for inaction—or worse, appeasement. They were highly critical of the manner in which the Gulf War was terminated because it left Saddam Hussein in power. As David Frum and Richard Perle succinctly put it, "Saddam had survived; therefore we had lost."[32] The neoconservatives also deplored the Clinton administration's hesitant and halfhearted uses of force in Somalia, Haiti, and the Balkans—all examples, they believed, of the Vietnam syndrome's persistent crippling of American statecraft.[33] They favored forcible regime change in Baghdad long before 9/11 and condemned the Clinton White House for its lack of decisiveness in dealing with Saddam Hussein.

The neoconservatives believed that the Vietnam War and subsequent US uses of force adversely affected America's strategic reputation, encouraging enemies, including Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, to believe that the United States had become a gutless superpower (or, in Richard M. Nixon's famous characterization, "a pitiful, helpless giant"), a state whose military might vastly exceed its will to use it. The United States was defeated in Vietnam, run out of Lebanon and Somalia, and had become so casualty phobic by the time of its Balkan interventions that it placed the safety of its military forces above the missions they were designed to accomplish. Iraq offered a low-cost opportunity to demonstrate the credibility of American power and to strengthen deterrence by putting other actual and aspiring rogue states on notice that defying the United States invited military destruction.

No less a target of the neoconservatives' ire was the Clinton administration's embrace of multilateralism. Neoconservatives viewed allies, alliances, and especially the United Nations as encumbrances on US use of force—Exhibit A being the 1999 NATO war with Serbia over Kosovo, in which potentially swift and decisive military action was sacrificed on the altar of preserving the lowest common denominator political consensus within the alliance. Neoconservatives believed that the Soviet Union's disappearance reduced the strategic value of allies, whose potential military contributions to collective action were in any event declining as the US lead in advanced military technologies widened. The United States could now act alone and therefore should act alone unless there were allies available free of political charge. An attendant belief was that American power, by virtue of its service on behalf of such universal values as freedom and democracy, was inherently legitimate. In their book, *The War over Iraq*, Kaplan and Kristol condemned former vice president Al Gore for characterizing the Bush Doctrine's commitment to American preeminence as glorifying the notion of dominance. "Well," they asked, "what's wrong with dominance in the service of sound principles and high ideals?"[34] Neoconservatives are true believers in American exceptionalism and the universality of American values. US military action against Iraq thus required no international legitimization in the form of a UN or NATO mandate.

Thus an invasion of Iraq, in addition to demonstrating the credibility of US military power to America's enemies, would also demonstrate to America's friends and allies, many of whom opposed the war, that the United States would no longer permit its freedom of military action to be constrained by allied opinion or the perceived need for prior international legitimization—that the United States was prepared to act unilaterally even in defiance of world opinion. From the very start of its confrontation with Iraq, the Bush administration made it clear that, in the end, it would take military action against Baghdad with or without the UN, NATO, or other international institutional approval. Vice President Dick Cheney opposed the very idea of soliciting a UN mandate. As far as the Bush White House was concerned, America's allies could either follow or get out of the way.

The issue of political will gained ever greater prominence as OIF descended into a protracted war. Along with promoting democracy, the "will to victory" became a replacement war aim for that of eliminating Iraq's nonexistent WMD threat. As the war dragged on and became increasingly unpopular, and as the White House searched in vain for a winning strategy,

"staying the course"—i.e., avoiding defeat—became the mantra. President Bush repeatedly declared that Iraq was a test of American will, that the insurgents' strategy targeted America's political stamina, and that if the United States abandoned its commitment to Iraq, horrible things would follow, including the expansion of Iranian power and influence in the Middle East. "There would be nothing worse for world peace," he told a Pennsylvania audience in October 2007, "[than] if the Iranians believed that the United States didn't have the will and commitment to help young democracies survive. If we left before the job was done, there would be chaos. Chaos would embolden not only the extremists and radicals who would like to do us harm, but it would also embolden Iran."[35]

Asserting the Principle of Preventive Military Action

A major White House objective behind OIF was to assert the principle of preventive military action. If it were imperative to demonstrate a new willingness to use force, it was equally imperative to demonstrate that the United States was prepared to strike first. The Bush administration's loud post-9/11 embrace of preventive war as a matter of declared doctrine was the most significant American foreign policy departure since the Truman administration's adoption of containment in the late 1940s. Preventive war, which is not to be confused with preemptive military action,[36] presupposes the inadequacy of such reliable Cold War policies of deterrence and containment—a conclusion President Bush drew months before ordering the invasion of Iraq. "In the Cold War," stated the White House's September 2002 *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, "we faced a generally status-quo, risk-averse adversary. . . . But deterrence based only upon the threat of retaliation is less likely to work against leaders of rogue states more willing to take risks, gambling with the lives of their people, and the wealth of their nations. . . . Traditional concepts of deterrence will not work against a terrorist enemy."[37] In an earlier speech at West Point, Bush declared, "Deterrence—the promise of massive retaliation against nations—means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend." He added that "containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies."[38]

In the run-up to the Iraq War, President Bush made repeated statements to the effect that a nuclear-armed Saddam Hussein would be undeterrable and therefore the United States had to remove him from power before he acquired nuclear weapons.[39] He made the classic argument for preventive war—that since war with Iraq was inevitable (a self-fulfilling prophesy if there ever was one), the United States should initiate it before the relative military balance became adversely affected by Saddam's possession of "the Bomb." Launching a preventive war against Iraq would not only thwart nuclear proliferation in Iraq; it would also embody US willingness to strike first against perceived emerging threats before they fully matured. "If we wait for security threats to materialize, we will have waited too long," said Bush at West Point. "We cannot let our enemies strike first."[40]

The conflation of al-Qaeda and Baathist Iraq, and more generally "shadowy terrorist networks" and rogue states, obscured critical differences between nonstate and state actors' vulnerability to deterrence. The assumption, against all logic and the available evidence, that Saddam Hussein was as undeterrable as Osama bin Laden, constituted a strategic error of the first order because it propelled the United States into an unnecessary and strategically disastrous war as well as into endorsing a form of war that violated the central norm of the international political order the United States had established after World War II.[41] As Pres. Harry Truman, in rejecting calls for preventive war against the Soviet Union in the late 1940s, declared in a 1950 radio address to the nation, "We do not believe in aggression or preventive war. Such a war is the weapon of dictators, not [of] free democratic countries like the United States."[42]

The administration's embrace of preventive war also promoted the centerpiece of the neoconservative agenda: preserving America's global military hegemony against any and all comers. The 2002 *National Security Strategy* declared, "Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States," and went on to lecture China, that in "pursuing advanced military capabilities that can threaten its neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region, China is following an outdated path that, in the end, will hamper its own pursuit of national greatness."[43] Regional challengers who refused to be dissuaded would face the prospect of credibly demonstrated preventive military action.

Intimidating Iran and North Korea

A sixth administration war aim was to intimidate Iran and North Korea. Administration war proponents believed that knocking off one "axis of evil" regime would cow the other two into abandoning their programs to acquire nuclear weapons. OIF would provide a credible demonstration to Tehran and Pyongyang of what could happen to them if they persisted in attempts to become nuclear-weapons states. Implicit in this belief was confidence that the United States could achieve a swift and decisive victory in Iraq, followed by minimal US force deployments in that country. Writing just after Saddam Hussein had been driven from power but before the emergence of a protracted insurgency in Iraq, Frum and Perle triumphantly declared that by overthrowing Saddam, "We gave other potential enemies a vivid and compelling demonstration of America's ability to win a swift and total victory over significant enemy forces with minimal US casualties. The overwhelming American victory in the battle of Baghdad surely stamped a powerful impression upon the minds of the rulers of Tehran and Pyongyang."[44]

It was also apparently assumed that Tehran and Pyongyang *could* be intimidated, even though both had established reputations of stern defiance in response to attempted external coercion. War proponents seemingly dismissed the possibility that OIF might scare Iran and North Korea into accelerating their drive for nuclear weapons' capacity. Indeed, the very fact that America's conventional military supremacy encouraged rogue state interest in neutralizing that supremacy via possession of a nuclear deterrent apparently escaped those who believed the road to a nuclear-disarmed Iran and North Korea ran through Baghdad. It can be assumed that neither Pyongyang nor Tehran were discouraged by America's descent into a protracted war in Iraq that sapped US military power and promised to exert as chilling an effect—an Iraq "syndrome"—on subsequent US use of force as had the Vietnam syndrome before it.[45]

Igniting Democracy in the Middle East

The Bush White House's most ambitious—and arguably most naïve—war aim was to provoke the political transformation of the Middle East. To be sure, not all of the Bush administration national security decision makers believed in initiating the transformation of the Middle East via the establishment of democracy in Iraq. For Wolfowitz and other neocon-

servatives, the forceful promotion of democracy in the region was a matter of profound conviction long before the 9/11 attacks. George W. Bush and Condoleezza Rice, who before 9/11 embraced the "realist" approach to foreign policy and its attendant elevation of stability over democracy, became converts to the messianic "freedom" mission only after 9/11. Indeed, Rice, following the president's lead, and to the surprise of her "realist" colleagues on the National Security Council staff, became a "fervent believer" in peace through democratization.[46] As she later declared to students at the American University in Cairo, "For sixty years, my country . . . pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East—and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people."[47] In contrast, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld never displayed—and still don't—any convincing concern over Iraq's democratic prospects. They were always much more focused on getting rid of Saddam Hussein than on nation building, including bringing democratic governance to Iraq. They preferred, if confronted with the choice, a strategically friendly authoritarian Iraq to an unfriendly democratic Iraq. They did not believe in using US military power to remake the world in America's image.[48] In short, they were not, to use current American political science jargon, democratic imperialists, but rather traditional nationalists.

President Bush endorsed transformation in his February 2003 American Enterprise Institute speech and again in his 17 March address to the nation in which he gave Saddam Hussein 48 hours to leave the country. "Unlike Saddam Hussein," he said, "we believe the Iraqi people are deserving and capable of human liberty. And when the dictator has departed, they can set an example to all the Middle East of a vital and peaceful and self-governing nation."[49] Replacing dictatorship with democracy, even democracy imposed by a foreign power (beginning with his American Enterprise Institute speech, Bush has made repeated references to the US success in transforming Imperial Japan into a democracy), would change Iraq from an aggressor into a peaceful state and therefore no longer a threat to global security. Indeed, Bush and the neoconservatives believed that Islamist terrorism was rooted in the prevalence of autocratic rule and economic stagnation in the Arab world; democratization would thus cure the disease of terrorism. In a televised address to the nation on 7 September 2003, Bush declared:

> In Iraq, we are helping . . . to build a decent and democratic society at the center of the Middle East. . . . The Middle East will either become a place of progress and peace, or it will be an exporter of violence and terror that takes more lives in America and in other free nations. The triumph of democracy and tolerance in Iraq, in Afghanistan and beyond would be a grave setback for international terrorism. The terrorists thrive on the support of tyrants and the resentments of oppressed peoples. When tyrants fall, and resentment gives way to hope, men and women in every culture reject the ideologies of terror, and turn to the pursuits of peace. Everywhere that freedom takes hold, terror will retreat.[50]

The combination of the 9/11 attacks and the influence of neoconservative thinking prompted both Bush and Rice, self-avowed "realists" before 9/11, to embrace the "democratic peace" theory, which holds that democracies are inherently peaceful towards one another and therefore that America's (and the world's) long-term security is best served by promoting the spread of democracy worldwide. For the Bush White House, this meant that the United States should use its strength to change the global status quo, including the employment of military force to overthrow tyrannical regimes. It also meant, given the inherent righteousness of America's intentions in the world, that the United States should brook no constraints on its use of force from allies, friends, and international institutions.

Establishing a Regional Alternative to Saudi Arabia

Another objective of OIF was to create a regional alternative to Saudi Arabia. Before the Iranian revolution of 1979, the United States had relied on the "twin pillars" of Iran and Saudi Arabia to secure its oil interests in the Persian Gulf. The fall of the Shah of Iran made oil-bloated but militarily weak Saudi Arabia the centerpiece of that interest, and it was the implicit threat to Saudi Arabia that prompted President George H. W. Bush's decision for war in 1991.

Twelve years later, neoconservatives hoped to transform Iraq into both a democracy and a surrogate for US security interests in the Persian Gulf. As such, it would replace Saudi Arabia, which Wolfowitz, Perle, and others regarded as a major ideological, financial, and recruiting source for terrorism (most of the 9/11 hijackers were Saudi nationals) by virtue of massive private Saudi financing of al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups and the Saudi monarchy's official promotion, throughout the Muslim world, of its own extreme Wahhabist version of Islam.[51] Though there is little evidence that this

view was shared by Bush or Cheney, the 9/11 attacks threatened to undermine the half-century-old security bargain between the United States and Saudi Arabia (i.e., US military protection in exchange for access to Persian Gulf oil at acceptable prices). If Islamist terrorism was, as Bush and Rice argued, rooted in Arab autocracy, then Saudi Arabia was part of the problem. It certainly became more difficult to remain silent on the Saudi monarchy's corruption, religious and gender bigotry, and propagation of the very kind of Islamist extremism that produced the 9/11 attacks (Saudi Arabia was one of only three states that recognized the Taliban regime of Afghanistan). Even were there no connection between Saudi Arabia and terrorism, there were prewar concerns about the longevity of the Saudi regime. The combination of explosive population growth, drastic decline in per capita income, and the staggering profligacy of the 30,000-member House of Saud all pointed toward inevitable collapse absent fundamental reform of the Saudi state.[52]

> Iraq's experience of liberal democratic rule . . . could increase the pressure already being felt by Tehran's mullahs to open that society. Iraq's model will be eyed warily by Saudi Arabia theocrats to the south, where male unemployment stands at 30 percent, population growth is rapid, and the populace is restive for change. Meanwhile, Iraq could even replace Saudi Arabia as the key American ally and source of in the region. A democratic Iraq would also encourage the region's already liberalizing regimes—such as those in Qatar, Morocco and Jordan—to continue on their paths toward democracy. Then too, a Baghdad *under American supervision* would surely improve its relations with the region's other democracies, Turkey and Israel.[53] (emphasis added)

For neoconservatives, Operation Iraqi Freedom offered an opportunity to groom a new Persian Gulf heavyweight strategic partner as an insurance policy against the political uncertainties surrounding the future US-Saudi relationship while freeing the United States to take a less tolerant and more demanding attitude toward the House of Saud. The underlying assumption was, of course, that Iraqis would be so grateful for their liberation from Saddam Hussein that they would happily agree to the establishment of their country as a regional surrogate for US strategic interests. Such a client state might even be persuaded to recognize Israel, withdraw from OPEC, and permit the establishment of US military bases on Iraqi soil as a means of containing the expansion of Iranian power and influence in the region.

Eliminating an Enemy of Israel

Yet another administration war aim was to eliminate an enemy of Israel. The personal and ideological ties of prominent neoconservatives to the state of Israel and particularly the Likud Party are matters of fact and have been much remarked upon.[54] It is also true that George W. Bush arguably has been the most pro-Israel American president since the Israeli state was founded in 1948. This does not mean that the Bush White House went to war for the sake of Israel's security interests. It does mean, however, that administration war proponents, especially the president and the neoconservatives, believed the elimination of a declared enemy of Israel was a major benefit offered by OIF. "The neocons were American nationalists who believed it was always in America's interest to help Israel succeed over its enemies," observes Gary Dorrien. "They never claimed that the United States needed to sacrifice some interest of its own for the sake of Israel's well-being. To them, the assertion of closely related interests and identical values was an article of faith that secured Israel's protection and provided the United States with its only democratic ally in the Middle East."[55]

The neoconservatives believed the United States and Israel had profound shared interests in the Middle East, especially when it came to the war on terror which, as defined by the Bush White House, made little practical or strategic distinction among al-Qaeda, Hamas, and Hezbollah, or for that matter between the US campaign against al-Qaeda and Israeli counterterrorist operations in the West Bank, Gaza, and southern Lebanon. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon certainly wasted no time asserting that Israel's war against Hamas and Hezbollah was the same as America's war against those who perpetrated the 9/11 attacks. Sharon placed Israel in the vanguard of the Bush administration's declared war on terror, and there is no evidence that the White House made any more of a distinction between Palestinian and al-Qaeda terrorism than it did between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein.

Vindicating Rumsfeld's New Way of War

A final war aim was to vindicate the Rumsfeld Pentagon's "defense transformation." Rumsfeld came into office persuaded that new advances in reconnaissance, precision strike, command and control, and other technologies afforded the United States the opportunity to substitute speed for mass—to win future wars quickly with far less force and logistical support.

Specifically, he believed the combination of standoff precision air strikes and relatively small special operations forces on the ground could replace large and logistically ponderous regular ground forces. Army leaders resisted, believing that war could not be fought on the cheap, and that this was especially true of so-called "stability operations," including counterinsurgency, which required large numbers of "boots on the ground" for years, even decades. The Army leadership remained wedded to the Weinberger-Powell doctrine of overwhelming force, which Rumsfeld and his neoconservative and "transformationist" allies regarded as obsolete "legacy" thinking. Iraq offered an opportunity to discredit the doctrine and, with it, the requirement for a large (10-division), heavy (six armored and mechanized infantry divisions) Army.[56] "Heartened by the small-force stunning victory in Afghanistan, the rapid defeat of Iraq on his [Rumsfeld's] terms would break the spine of Army resistance to his transformation goal once and for all."[57] Thus, Rumsfeld insisted on an invasion force far smaller than that deemed prudent by experienced Army planners and dismissed the need to plan for likely stability operations in post-Baathist Iraq.

Unfortunately, going in fast, relatively light, and blind to possible post-invasion military requirements created a fundamental contradiction between the war plan and the critical objectives of quickly securing Iraq's suspected WMD sites and the provision of security necessary for Iraq's political reconstruction. "The administration convinced itself that it could dislodge the [Saddam Hussein] regime without doing the hard work of rebuilding a new Iraq or without committing itself to troop levels that were needed in most other postwar conflicts."[58] Though the White House repeatedly cited (and still does) the analogy of America's success in rebuilding postwar Japan as proof that the United States could also reconstruct Iraq as a new democracy and ally, the circumstances of postwar Japan—not the least of which was the presence of *overwhelming US military force* in Japan *after* Japan's *formal surrender*—bear no comparison to the situation in post-Saddam Iraq.[59]

What Was the Iraq War Really All About?

The Bush White House deliberately invoked the specter of a soon to be nuclear-armed Saddam Hussein allied to al-Qaeda to mobilize public and congressional support for a regime-change war against Iraq.[60] The invocation was accompanied by no convincing evidence because there was none.

But there were *no other convincing reasons to go to war*. Only a clear and present—a grave and gathering—danger would do.

> [The Bush administration] made four main arguments to persuade the public of [its] case against Saddam Hussein: (1) he was an almost uniquely undeterrable aggressor who would seek any opportunity to kill Americans virtually regardless of risk to himself or his country; (2) he was cooperating with al-Qaeda and had even assisted in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the United States; (3) he was close to acquiring nuclear weapons; and (4) he possessed chemical and biological weapons that could be used to devastating effect against American civilians at home or U.S. troops in the Middle East. Virtually none of the administration claims held up, and the information needed to debunk nearly all of them was available both inside and outside the U.S. government before the war. Nevertheless, administration officials persistently repeated only the most extreme threat claims and suppressed contrary evidence.[61]

Bush and Cheney seem to have believed in the Iraqi menace they postulated; perhaps it was a case of wish being father to the thought. But the White House also understood that the war it wanted could be sold only on the basis of Iraq as a direct national security threat.

To be sure, there were always plenty of reasons to despise Saddam Hussein and support his removal from power. But were they reasons for war, especially preventive war? A US invasion of Iraq could not be sold on purely moral, political, or reputational grounds. Singly or together, liberating Iraq from tyranny, establishing a democracy there, redeeming the botched war termination of 1991, doing Israel a strategic favor, scaring Iran and North Korea, and showing off transformed US military power were not compelling reasons for war in the marketplace of domestic public opinion. Americans were certainly not going to be led into a war solely to demonstrate a will to go to war.

Yet among war proponents, especially the neoconservatives and their key White House and Defense Department allies, considerations of power and reputation seemed paramount. To them, the war was less about Iraq than it was about the United States in the post-Soviet world. It was about perpetuating America's global military supremacy and mustering the commensurate political will to employ that supremacy on behalf of universal American values. It was about casting off, once and for all, the Vietnam syndrome and the crippling constraints of the Weinberger-Powell doctrine. It was about showing the world, friend and foe alike, who was boss. It was about supplanting realism and multilateralism with value exportation and unilateralism. It was

about ditching deterrence and containment in favor of military prevention. It was, in short, about the arrogance of power.

The supreme irony, of course, is that a military action aimed to awing the world degenerated quickly into an embarrassing advertisement of the limits of US conventional military supremacy and of the persistence of American public intolerance of protracted warfare against irregular enemies. The Iraq War's primary strategic beneficiaries have been al-Qaeda, Iran, and China, not Iraq or the United States.[62] Indeed, the experience of the Iraq War is likely to exert as chilling an effect on future US use of force as did the Vietnam syndrome so deplored by the neoconservatives.[63] Those who wanted to rid American statecraft of the curse of the first Vietnam War succeeded only in serving up a second. (And some are now salivating for a third: war against Iran.)

In the pantheon of America's strategic blunders since 1945, the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 ranks in the first tier, alongside the Truman administration's 1950 decision to cross the 38th Parallel and attempt the forcible reunification of Korea, and the Johnson administration's 1965 decision to deploy US ground troops to the Vietnam War. And for what?

What Now?

The decision to invade Iraq may turn out to be the most adversely consequential foreign war in American history. The Iraq War has alienated friends and allies around the world; exposed the limits of American military power for all to see and exploit; raised the prospect of an Iraq Syndrome that could cripple US foreign policy for decades; soured civil-military relations to the point where retired generals are publicly indicting their former civilian superiors for mismanagement and incompetence; depleted US land power and retarded the recapitalization of US air and naval power; weakened the dollar; encouraged Russian and Chinese strategic hostility; vindicated, to millions of Arabs, al-Qaeda's story line about American imperial ambitions in the Middle East; aided and abetted the electoral victories of Hamas and Hezbollah; transformed Iraq into a recruiting and training ground for Islamist terrorism; promoted the expansion and Iranian power and influence in the region; encouraged Iran to accelerate its quest for nuclear weapons; enabled the probable establishment of a Shiite regime in Baghdad aligned with Tehran that could undermine Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states with significant Shiite

minorities, even provoking a regional civil war along sectarian lines; and increased the chances of a Iranian-American war that could prove catastrophic to the global economy.

Given these consequences, an autopsy is imperative. Within days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt directed a no-holds-barred inquiry into what went wrong. Such an inquiry into the Iraq War—both the decision to launch it and the way it was conducted—should now be convened. The aim would be to establish the lessons of the war and to identify the organizational, policy, and other changes necessary to ensure that such a war is never repeated. The model would be the bipartisan 9/11 Commission, which was established by the Congress and which achieved a remarkable consensus in both its assessment and recommendations. The White House, which initially opposed the creation of the 9/11 Commission, is likely to oppose formation of an Iraq War Commission. But that is all the more reason for an Iraq War Commission. Unless led by an extraordinary statesman like Roosevelt, the executive branch will resist formal inquiries into its own misjudgments and mistakes. Partisan considerations, however, should not be permitted to override the profound national interest in avoiding future Iraq-style wars. Disastrous foreign policy mistakes, like fatal accidents, mandate investigation. SSQ

Notes

1. George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 46.

2. John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 229.

3. Brent Scowcroft, "Don't Attack Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, 15 August 2002.

4. "President Bush, Colombia President Uribe Discuss Terrorism," The Oval Office, 25 September 2002, White House press release, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020925-1.html.

5. For a succinct analysis of the neoconservatives' influence on the post-9/11 Bush White House, see Jeffrey Record, *Dark Victory: America's Second War against Iraq* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004), 17–29.

6. In 1997 leading neoconservative intellectuals and their past and future allies in government, including Cheney, Wolfowitz, and Rumsfeld, founded the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) dedicated to the following goals: increased defense spending; strong action against regimes hostile to American values and interests; promotion of political and economic freedom abroad; and acceptance of responsibility for America's unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to US security, prosperity, and values. In its "Statement of Principles," the PNAC noted that "the United States stands as the world's preeminent power" but asked: "Does [it] have the vision to build upon the achievements of past decades? Does [it] have the resolve to shape a new century favorable to American principles and interests?" The statement bemoaned that "we seem to

have forgotten the essential elements of the Reagan Administration's success: a [strong] military . . . ; a foreign policy that boldly and purposefully promotes American principles abroad; and a national leadership that accepts the United States' global responsibilities." The statement concluded: "Such a Reaganite policy of military strength and moral clarity may not be fashionable today. But it is necessary if the United States is to build on the successes of this past century and to ensure our security and our greatness in the next." ("Statement of Principles," Project for the New American Century, 3 June 1997, http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm.) Of the 25 founding members of the PNAC, 10 entered the Bush administration in 2001: Dick Cheney (vice president), Donald Rumsfeld (secretary of defense), Paul Wolfowitz (deputy secretary of defense), Richard Perle (chairman of the Defense Policy Board), Paula Dobriansky (under secretary of state for global affairs), I. Lewis Libby (Vice President Cheney's chief of staff), Zalmay Khalilzad (special envoy to the Middle East), Elliott Abrams (NSC staffer responsible for the Middle East), and Eliot Cohen (member of the Defense Policy Board). (Tom Barry, "A Strategy Foretold," *Foreign Policy in Focus,* October 2002, 103.) Other neoconservatives who were not PNAC founders, such as Douglas Feith and John Bolton, also assumed prominent positions within the administration.

7. Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4, 206. Quotation from Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol, *The War over Iraq: Saddam's Tyranny and America's Mission* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003), vii–viii.

8. Stephen Holmes, *The Matador's Cape: America's Reckless Response to Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 108.

9. The neoconservatives' philosophy and the profound influence of neoconservative thinking and of key neoconservatives on George W. Bush and his foreign policy are detailed in Halper and Clarke, *America Alone*; Murray Friedman, *The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy (*New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Gary Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind: Politics, Culture, and the War of Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993) and *Imperial Designs: Neoconservativism and the New Pax Americana* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2004). For a comprehensive pre-9/11 declaration of the neoconservatives' foreign policy agenda and critique of the George H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations, see Robert Kagan and William Kristol, eds., *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000).

10. Richard N. Haass, *The Opportunity: America's Moment to Alter History's Course* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), 185.

11. Adam Cobb, "A Strategic Assessment of Iraq," *Civil Wars* 9, no. 1 (March 2007): 35. There were always powerful barriers to cooperation between al-Qaeda and Baathist Iraq. Al-Qaeda regards nationalism as an apostate threat, a divider of Muslims from one another. Osama bin Laden's goal is the reestablishment of the caliphate (i.e., a politically indivisible Muslim community), and he regarded Saddam and all other secular Arab leaders as infidels. For Saddam, who spent eight years waging war against the existential threat to his regime posed by the Ayatollah Khomeini, Osama bin Laden could never have been a trustworthy ally. Saddam—whose role models were Saladin and Stalin, not Mohammed—killed far more Islamic clerics than Americans. It is noteworthy that bin Laden remained silent during the first three weeks of OIF; only on 18 April 2003, as US forces entered Baghdad, did he issue a taped message calling on Muslims to mount suicide attacks on coalition forces. As two experts on Islamic terrorism observed of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden in the context of the National Security Council's examination of who was behind the 9/11 attacks:

> [Osama bin Laden] was deeply contemptuous of Saddam Hussein. For believers like bin Laden, Saddam was the second coming of Gamal Abdel Nasser, a secular pharaonic ruler who destroyed

> the religion and oppressed the umma [the community of Muslim believers]. There is little evidence that Saddam viewed bin Laden and his ilk any differently than Egypt's secular rulers viewed [Islamist activists] Sayyid Qutb, Shuqri Mustafa, and their successors—as religious extremists who would enjoy nothing more than to see secular rule toppled. However attractive their anti-Americanism, they could only be handled with caution. There was nothing in the record to sugggest that a central precept of the state sponsors had changed: never get into bed with a group you cannot control. Both the Iranians and the Iraqis appeared to be reluctant to cooperate with an organization that might commit some enormity that could be traced back to them. The NSC analysts found it difficult to believe that al Qaeda acted alone, but no other conclusion was warranted.

Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror* (New York: Random House, 2002), 264.

12. This compelled Saddam Hussein to readmit the UN inspection regime under threat of invasion was a triumph of coercive diplomacy for the Bush White House. One wonders how the course of events in the Middle East and the United States might have been different had the administration simply pocketed that victory and stood down the invasion force. At a minimum, the United States would have been spared a disastrous war, and al-Qaeda would have been denied a strategic windfall.

13. Chaim Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War," *International Security* 29, no. 1 (Summer 2004), 25 (text and n. 87).

14. Hans Blix, *Disarming Iraq* (New York: Pantheon, 2004), 3.

15. Ibid., 156.

16. See Graham Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books, 2004), 61–86.

17. Barton Gellman, "U.S. Has Not Inspected Iraqi Nuclear Facility," *Washington Post,* 25 April 2003. See also Gellman, "Seven Nuclear Sites Looted," *Washington Post,* 10 May 2003.

18. Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 78–83 and 503–4. See also Bob Woodward, *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 92–96 and 100–3.

19. Karen DeYoung, *Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 76.

20. Suicide bombing was a post-invasion phenomenon. Prior to April 2003, there had never been a suicide bombing in Iraq. See Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005), 245–6. The Baathist regime monopolized terrorism in Iraq, and Saddam Hussein, for all his brutality and paranoia, ran a stable, secular regime that formed a significant barrier against the expansion of Iranian power and influence in the Middle East.

21. A qualified victory, to be sure, given the survival of Taliban leader Mullah Omar and al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, and the subsequent Taliban resurgence in southern and eastern Afghanistan. The war never really ended in Afghanistan, and the writ of the Hamid Karzai's central government doesn't extend much beyond Kabul. No less depressing has been the country's resurgence as the world's leading supplier of heroin. Launching the Iraq War while leaving the war in Afghanistan militarily and politically unfinished was a strategic blunder of the first order.

22. See Record, *Dark Victory*, 64–89.

23. Robert Draper, *Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 178.

24. Ibid., 189.

25. Holmes, *Matador's Cape*, 125.

26. Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 116.

27. Draper, *Dead Certain*, 173.

28. Kaplan and Kristol, *War over Iraq*, 37.

29. Reuel Marc Gerecht, "A Cowering Superpower," *The Weekly Standard* 6, no. 43 (30 July 2001): 29.

30. Christian Alfonsi, *Circle in the Sand: Why We Went Back to Iraq* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 411.

31. William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Introduction: National Interest and Global Responsibility," in Kagan and Kristol, *Present Dangers, 4.*

32. David Frum and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2003), 17.

33. For an analysis of the impact of the Vietnam syndrome on US decision making in the 1990s on the Balkans, see Jeffrey Record, *Serbia and Vietnam: A Preliminary Comparison of U.S. Decisions to Use Force,* Occasional Paper no. 8 (Maxwell AFB, AL: Center for Strategy and Technology, Air War College, Air University, May 1999).

34. Kaplan and Kristol, *War over Iraq*, 112.

35. Quoted in James Gerstenzang, "Bush Says Iraq Exit Would Bolster Iran," *Los Angeles Times,* 4 October 2007.

36. Though the administration used the term *preemption* in referring to the need for preventive war, there are key legal and policy differences between preemptive military action and preventive war. Preemption is an attack initiated on the basis of incontrovertible evidence that an enemy attack is imminent. As such, it is an extension of the right of self-defense and therefore permissible under international law. In contrast, preventive war is a war initiated in the belief that military conflict, while not imminent, is inevitable, and that to delay would involve greater risk. The logic of preventive war runs something like this: I'm going to have a war with you sooner or later, and right now I'm a lot stronger than you, so I'm going to have a war with you right now. Preventive war is thus indistinguishable from outright aggression.

37. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, September 2002), 15.

38. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "President Bush Delivers Graduation Speech at West Point" (speech, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, 1 June 2002), www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html.

39. See Record, *Dark Victory,* 33–34.

40. White House, "President Bush Delivers Graduation Speech."

41. See Jeffrey Record, "Threat Confusion and Its Penalties," *Survival* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 51–72.

42. Scott Sagan, "The Perils of Proliferation: Organization Theory, Deterrence Theory, and the Spread of Nuclear Weapons," *International Security* 18, no. 4 (Spring 1994): 78.

43. *National Security Strategy,* 27, 30.

44. *Frum and Perle, End to Evil,* 33.

45. See Jeffrey Record, "Back to the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine?" *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 79–95.

46. Glenn Kessler, *The Confidante: Condoleezza Rice and the Creation of the Bush Legacy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), 91.

47. Ibid., 98.

48. See Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 15.

49. "Bush's Speech on Iraq: 'Saddam Hussein and His Sons Must Leave,' " *New York Times,* 18 March 2003, A.14.

50. "Bush: 'We Will Do What Is Necessary,' " transcript of Pres. George W. Bush's address to the nation, 7 September 2003, *Washington Post,* 8 September 2003, A.16.

51. See Frum and Perle, *End to Evil,* 129–42.

52. See Robert Baer, "The Fall of the House of Saud," *Atlantic Monthly* 291, no. 4 (May 2003): 53–62.

53. Kaplan and Kristol, *War over Iraq*, 99–100.

54. See Halper and Clarke, *America Alone*, 104–8; and Dorrien, *Imperial Designs,* 195–8.

55. Dorrien, *Imperial Designs*, 203–4.

56. Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 102.

57. Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II,* 53.

58. Ibid., 503.

59. See Record, *Dark Victory,* 85–89. In September 2002, novelist and former secretary of the Navy (and now US senator from Virginia) James Webb summarized the dangers of faulty reasoning implicit in the Japan analogy:

> The connotations of "a MacArthurian regency in Baghdad" show how inapt the comparison [with the situation in Iraq] is. Our occupation forces never set foot inside Japan until the emperor had formally surrendered and prepared Japanese citizens for our arrival. Nor did MacArthur destroy the Japanese governement when he took over as proconsul after World War II. Instead, he was careful to work his changes through it, and took pains to preserve the integrity of the imperial family. Nor is Japanese culture in any way similar to Iraq's. The Japanese are a homogeneous people who place a high premium on respect, and they fully cooperated with MacArthur's forces after having been ordered to do so by the emperor. The Iraqis are a multiethnic people filled with competing factions who in many cases would view a U.S. occupation as infidels invading the cradle of Islam. Indeed, this very bitterness provided Osama bin Laden the grist for his recruitment efforts in Saudi Arabia when the United States kept bases on Saudi soil after the Gulf War.

James Webb, "Heading for Trouble: Do We Really want to Occupy Iraq for the Next 30 Years?" *Washington Post*, 4 September 2002, A.21.

60. The literature on the Bush administration's deliberate inflation of the Iraqi threat is voluminous. See Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation," 5–48; James P. Pfiffner, "Did President Bush Mislead the Country in His Arguments for War with Iraq?" *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (March 2004): 25–46; Paul R. Pillar, "Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 2 (March/April 2006): 15–27; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "An Unnecessary War," *Foreign Policy*, no. 134 (January/February 2003): 51–59; Joseph Cirincione, Jessica T. Mathews, and George Perkovich, with Alexis Orton, *WMD in Iraq: Evidence and Implications* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004); Craig R. Whitney, ed., *The WMD Mirage: Iraq's Decade of Deception and America's False Premise for War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005); Michael Isikoff and David Corn, *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006); and John Prados, *Hoodwinked: The Documents That Reveal How Bush Sold Us a War* (New York: New Press, 2004).

61. Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation," 6.

62. Al-Qaeda benefits via the seeming vindication of its story line of a predatory United States seeking to subdue a Muslim heartland and via the transformation of Iraq into a recruiting and training ground; Iran benefits via the removal of a hostile regime in Baghdad and the likely establishment of a friendly Shiite state that will facilitate the expansion of Iranian power and influence in the Persian Gulf; and China benefits via America's strategic preoccupation with Iraq and the Iraq War's retardation of the recapitalization of America's naval and air power.