

## *The Coming War With Iraq: Deciphering the Bush Administration's Motives*

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The United States is about to go to war with Iraq. As of this writing, there are 60,000 U.S. troops already deployed in the area around Iraq, and another 75,000 or so are on their way to the combat zone. Weapons inspectors have found a dozen warheads, designed to carry chemical weapons. Even before this discovery, senior U.S. officials were insisting that Saddam was not cooperating with the United Nations and had to be removed by force. Hence, there does not seem to be any way to stop this war, unless Saddam Hussein is overthrown by members of the Iraqi military or is persuaded to abdicate his position and flee the country.

It is impossible at this point to foresee the outcome of this war. Under the most optimistic scenarios—the ones advanced by proponents of the war—Iraqi forces will put up only token resistance and American forces will quickly capture Baghdad and remove Saddam Hussein from office (by killing him or placing him under arrest). This scenario further assumes that the Iraqis will decline to use their weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or will be prevented from doing so by U.S. military action; that civilian casualties will be kept low and that most Iraqis will welcome their “liberation” from Saddam; that a new, pro-U.S. government will quickly and easily be put into place; that fighting between competing ethnic factions will be limited and easily brought under control; that anti-American protests in other Muslim countries will not get out of hand; and that American forces will be withdrawn after a relatively short occupation period of six months to a year.

It is not difficult, however, to imagine less optimistic scenarios. In these scenarios, the Iraqis could put up stiff resistance and conduct house-

to-house fighting in Baghdad, thereby producing significant U.S. casualties and leading, in turn, to heavy U.S. air and missile strikes on populated areas, resulting in high civilian casualties. Under these scenarios, the Iraqis will use their chemical and biological weapons in a final spasm of self-destruction, producing untold civilian and combatant casualties. The surviving Iraqis will turn against their American “liberators,” resulting in constant sniping and acts of terrorism. The Kurds and Shiites and Sunnis will fight over the spoils of war, producing widespread carnage and trapping U.S. forces in the middle. American troops will remain in Iraq for a generation, or more, producing hatred and resistance throughout the Muslim world and increased levels of terrorism elsewhere.

Which scenario will prevail? Nobody can be certain at this point. Those who favor a war with Iraq tend to believe that Iraqi resistance will be light and that the rest of the optimistic scenario will fall into place. But no one can guarantee that any of this will come to pass, and there are many experts who believe that the likelihood of things going awry are very great. For example, the CIA has indicated that Iraq is most likely to use its WMD in the event that Iraq is attacked and defeat appears likely. In weighing the relative merits of going to war with Iraq, therefore, one should reckon on the worst possible outcome, not the best. One must ask: are the purported benefits of war so great as to outweigh all of the possible negative repercussions?

And this leads to the most fundamental question of all: WHY are we going to war? What is really motivating President Bush and his senior advisers to incur these enormous risks?

In their public pronouncements, President Bush and his associates have advanced three reasons for going to war with Iraq and ousting Saddam Hussein: (1) to eliminate Saddam's WMD arsenals; (2) to diminish the threat of international terrorism; and (3) to promote democracy in Iraq and the surrounding areas.

These are, indeed, powerful motives for going to war. But are they genuine? Is this what is really driving the rush to war? To answer this, we need to examine each motive in turn. In doing so, moreover, it is necessary to keep in mind that the United States cannot do everything. If we commit hundreds of thousands of American troops and hundreds of billions of dollars to the conquest, occupation, and reconstruction of Iraq, we cannot easily do the same in other countries—we simply don't have the resources to invade and occupy every country that poses a hypothetical threat to the United States or is deserving of regime change. So a decision to attack Iraq means a decision to refrain from other actions that might also be important for U.S. security or the good of the world.

**(1) Eliminating weapons of mass destruction:** The reason most often given by the administration for going to war with Iraq is to reduce the risk of a WMD attack on the United States. To be sure, a significant WMD attack on the United States would be a terrible disaster, and it is appropriate for the President of the United States to take effective and vigorous action to prevent this from happening. If this is, in fact, Bush's primary concern, then one would imagine that he would pay the greatest attention to the greatest threat of WMD usage against the United States, and deploy available U.S. resources—troops, dollars, and diplomacy—

accordingly. But is this what Bush is actually doing? The answer is no. Anyone who takes the trouble to examine the global WMD proliferation threat closely and to gauge the relative likelihood of various WMD scenarios would have to conclude that the greatest threat of WMD usage against the United States at the present time comes from North Korea and Pakistan, not Iraq.

North Korea and Pakistan pose a greater WMD threat to the United States than Iraq for several reasons. First of all, they both possess much bigger WMD arsenals. Pakistan is known to possess several dozen nuclear warheads along with missiles and planes capable of delivering them hundreds of miles away; it is also suspected of having developed chemical weapons. North Korea is thought to possess sufficient plutonium to produce one to two nuclear devices along with the capacity to manufacture several more; it also has a large chemical weapons stockpile and a formidable array of ballistic missiles. Iraq, by contrast, possesses no nuclear weapons today and is thought to be several years away from producing one, even under the best of circumstances. Iraq may possess some chemical and biological weapons and a dozen or so Scud-type missiles that were hidden at the end of the 1991 Gulf war, but it is not known whether any of these items are still in working order and available for military use. Equally important is the question of intention: how likely are these countries to actually use their WMD munitions? Nobody can answer this with any degree of certainty, of course. But there are a few things that can be said.

To begin with, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has publicly stated that he was prepared to employ

nuclear weapons against India last year when New Delhi massed its forces on Pakistan's border and threatened to attack unless Pakistan curbed the activities of Islamic militants in Kashmir. This does not mean that Pakistan would use nuclear weapons against the United States, but it does indicate a readiness to employ such weapons as an instrument of war; it is also easy to imagine a scenario in which someone else comes to power who is far more anti-American than Musharraf.

Just as worrisome is the fact that the North Koreans have declared that they would consider any move by the United States and the UN to impose economic sanctions on North Korea as punishment for its pursuit of nuclear weapons as an act of war, to which they would respond accordingly, turning the United States into a "sea of fire." Again, this does not mean that they would actually choose to use their nuclear weapons, but it is not hard to imagine a scenario in which war breaks out and the North Koreans use their WMD in a desperate bid to stave off defeat.

On the other hand, the CIA has concluded that Saddam Hussein will not choose to use his country's WMD capabilities against the United States so long as his regime remains intact; it is only in the case of imminent U.S. conquest of Baghdad that he might be tempted to use these weapons.

The Bush administration has also indicated that war with Iraq is justified in order to prevent Iraq from providing WMD to anti-American terrorists. The transfer of WMD technology to terrorist groups is a genuine concern—but it is in Pakistan where the greatest threat of such transference exists, not Iraq. In Pakistan, many senior military officers are known to harbor great sym-

pathy for Kashmiri militants and other extremist Islamic movements; with anti-Americanism intensifying throughout the region, it is not hard to imagine these officers providing the militants with some of Pakistan's WMD weapons and technology. On the other hand, the current leadership in Iraq has no such ties with Islamic extremists; on the contrary, Saddam has been a life-long enemy of the militant Islamists and they view him in an equally hostile manner.

It follows from all this that a policy aimed at protecting the United States from WMD attacks would identify Pakistan and North Korea as the leading perils, and put Iraq in a rather distant third place. But this is not, of course, what the administration is doing. Instead, it has minimized the threat from Pakistan and North Korea and focused almost exclusively on the threat from Iraq. It is clear, then, that protecting the United States from WMD attack is not the primary justification for invading Iraq; if it were, we would be talking about an assault on Pakistan and/or North Korea, not Iraq.

**(2) Combating terrorism:** The administration has argued at great length that an invasion of Iraq and the ouster of Saddam Hussein would constitute the culmination of and the greatest success in the war against terrorism. Why this is so has never been made entirely clear, but it is said that Saddam's hostility toward the United States somehow sustains and invigorates the terrorist threat to this country. It follows, therefore, that the elimination of Saddam would result in a great defeat for international terrorism and greatly weaken its capacity to attack the United States.

Were any of this true, an invasion of Iraq might make sense from an anti-terrorism point of view. But there

simply is no evidence that this is the case; if anything, the opposite is true. From what we know of Al Qaeda and other such organizations, the objective of Islamic extremists is to overthrow any government in the Islamic world that does not adhere to a fundamentalist version of Islam and replace it with one that does. The Baathist regime in Iraq does not qualify as such a regime; thus, under Al Qaeda doctrine, it must be swept away, along with the equally deficient governments in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. It follows from this that a U.S. effort to oust Saddam Hussein and replace his regime with another secular government—this one kept in place by American military power—will not diminish the wrath of Islamic extremists but rather fuel it.

In addressing this matter, moreover, it is necessary to keep the Israeli-Palestinian struggle in mind. For most Arab Muslims, whatever their views of Saddam Hussein, the United States is a hypocritical power because it tolerates (or even supports) the use of state terror by Israel against the Palestinians while making war against Baghdad for the same sort of behavior. It is this perception that is fueling the anti-American current now running through the Muslim world. An American invasion of Iraq will not quiet that current, but excite it. It is thus exceedingly difficult to see how a U.S. invasion of Iraq will produce a stunning victory in the war against terrorism; if anything, it will trigger a new round of anti-American violence. Hence, it is very difficult to conclude that the administration is motivated by anti-terrorism in seeking to topple Hussein.

**(3) The promotion of democracy:** The ouster of Saddam Hussein, it is claimed, will clear the space for the Iraqi people (under American guid-

ance, of course) to establish a truly democratic government and serve as a beacon and inspiration for the spread of democracy throughout the Islamic world, which is said to be sadly deficient in this respect. Certainly, the spread of democracy to the Islamic world would be a good thing, and should be encouraged. But is there any reason to believe that the administration is motivated by a desire to spread democracy in its rush to war with Iraq?

There are several reasons to doubt this. First of all, many of the top leaders of the current administration, particularly Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, were completely happy to embrace the Saddam Hussein dictatorship in the 1980s when Iraq was the enemy of our enemy (that is, Iran) and thus considered our *de facto* friend. Under the so-called "tilt" toward Iraq, the Reagan-Bush administration decided to assist Iraq in its war against Iran during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88. As part of this policy, Reagan removed Iraq from the list of countries that support terrorism, thus permitting the provision of billions of dollars' worth of agricultural credits and other forms of assistance to Hussein. The bearer of this good news was none other than Donald Rumsfeld, who traveled to Baghdad and met with Hussein in December 1983 as a special representative of President Reagan. At the same time, the Department of Defense, provided Iraq with secret satellite data on Iranian military positions. This information was provided to Saddam even though U.S. leaders were informed by a senior State Department official on November 1, 1983 that the Iraqis were using chemical weapons against the Iranians "almost daily," and were aware that U.S. satellite data could be used by Baghdad to pinpoint CW attacks on Iranian positions. Dick

Cheney, who took over as Secretary of Defense in 1989, continued the practice of supplying Iraq with secret intelligence data. Not once did Mssrs. Rumsfeld and Cheney speak out against Iraqi CW use or suggest that the United States discontinue its support of the Hussein dictatorship during this period. So there is no reason whatsoever to believe that the current leadership has a principled objection to dictatorial rule in Iraq—it is only when Saddam is threatening us instead of our enemies that they care about his tyrannical behavior.

There is another reason to be skeptical about the Bush administration's commitment to democracy in this part of the world, and that is the fact that the administration has developed close relationships with a number of other dictatorial or authoritarian regimes in the area. Most notably, the United States had developed close ties with the post-Soviet dictatorships in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. Each of these countries is ruled by a Stalinist dictator who once served as a loyal agent of the Soviet empire: Heydar Aliyev in Azerbaijan, Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan, and Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan. Only slightly less odious than Saddam Hussein, these tyrants have been welcomed to the White House and showered with American aid and support. And there certainly is nothing even remotely democratic about Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, two of America's other close allies in the region. So it is hard to believe that the Bush administration is motivated by a love of democracy, when it has been so quick to embrace patently undemocratic regimes that have agreed to do its bidding.

So, if concern over WMD proliferation, or the reduction of terrorism, or a love of democracy do not explain

the administration's determination to oust Saddam Hussein, what does?

I believe that the answer is a combination of three factors, all related to the pursuit of oil and the preservation of America's status as the paramount world power. Ever since the end of the cold war, American policymakers (whether Democratic or Republican) have sought to preserve America's "sole superpower" status and to prevent the rise of a "peer competitor" that could challenge U.S. paramountcy on anything approaching equal terms. At the same time, American leaders have become increasingly concerned over the country's growing dependence on imported oil, especially oil from the Persian Gulf. The United States now relies on imported oil for 55% of its requirements, and this percentage is expected to rise to 65% in 2020 and keep growing thereafter. This dependency is the "Achilles heel" for American power: unless Persian Gulf oil can be kept under American control, our ability to remain the dominant world power would be put into question.

These concerns undergird the three motives for a U.S. invasion of Iraq. The first derives from America's own dependence on Persian Gulf oil and from the principle, formally enshrined in the Carter Doctrine, that the United States will not permit a hostile state from ever coming into a position where it can threaten America's access to the Gulf. The second is the pivotal role played by the Persian Gulf in supplying oil to the rest of the world: whoever controls the Gulf automatically maintains a stranglehold on the global economy, and the Bush administration wants that to be the United States and no one else. And the third is anxiety about the future availability of oil: the United States is becoming increasing-

ly dependent on Saudi Arabia to supply its imported petroleum, and Washington is desperate to find an alternative to Saudi Arabia should it ever be the case that access to that country is curtailed—and the only country in the world with large enough reserves to compensate for the loss of Saudi Arabia is Iraq. Let us examine each of these three factors in turn.

First, on U.S. dependence on Persian Gulf oil and the Carter Doctrine. Ever since World War II, when American policymakers first acknowledged that the United States would someday become dependent on Middle Eastern petroleum, it has been American policy to ensure that the United States would always have unrestrained access to Persian Gulf oil. At first, the United States relied on Great Britain to protect American access to the Gulf, and then, when Britain pulled out of the area in 1971, the U.S. chose to rely on the Shah of Iran. But when, in 1979, the Shah was overthrown by Islamic militants loyal to the Ayatollah Khomeini, Washington decided that it would have to assume responsibility on its own to protect the oil flow. The result was the Carter Doctrine of January 23, 1980, which states that unrestricted access to Persian Gulf is a vital interest of the United States and that, in protection of that interest, the United States will employ "any means necessary, including military force."

This principle was first invoked in 1987, during the Iran-Iraq War, when Iranian gunboats fired on Kuwaiti oil tankers and the U.S. Navy began escorting Kuwaiti tankers through the Gulf. It was next invoked in August 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait and posed an implied threat to Saudi Arabia. President Bush the elder responded to that threat by dri-

ving the Iraqis out of Kuwait, in Operation Desert Storm; he did not, however, continue the war into Iraq proper and remove Saddam Hussein himself. Instead, the U.S. engaged in the “containment” of Iraq, entailing an air and sea blockade.

Now, President Bush the younger seeks to abandon containment and pick up Operation Desert Storm where it left off in 1991. The reason being given for this is that Saddam is making more progress in the development of WMD, but the underlying principle is still the Carter Doctrine: Iraq under Saddam poses an implied threat to U.S. access to Persian Gulf oil, and so must be removed. As noted by Vice President Dick Cheney on August 26, 2002, in his important speech before the Veterans of Foreign Wars, “Armed with these weapons of terror and a seat at the top of 10% of the world’s oil reserves, Saddam Hussein could then be expected to seek domination of the entire Middle East, take control of a great portion of the world’s energy supplies, directly threaten America’s friends throughout the region, and subject the United States or any other nation to nuclear blackmail.” Stripped to its essence, this is a direct invocation of the Carter Doctrine.

To underscore this, it is useful to compare Cheney’s VFW speech to his comments 12 years earlier, following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, before the Senate Armed Services Committee: “Iraq controlled 10% of the world’s reserves prior to the invasion of Kuwait. Once Saddam Hussein took Kuwait, he doubled that to approximately 20% of the world’s known oil reserves.... Once he acquired Kuwait and deployed an army as large as the one he possesses [on the border of Saudi Arabia], he was clearly in a position to dictate the

future of worldwide energy policy, and that gave him a stranglehold on our economy and on that of most of the other nations of the world as well.” The atmospheric may have changed since 1990, but we are still dealing with the Carter Doctrine: Saddam must be removed because of the potential threat he poses to the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf to the U.S. and its allies.

The second administration objective springs from the language employed by Cheney in his 1990 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee: whoever controls the flow of Persian Gulf oil has a “stranglehold” not only on our economy but also “on that of most of that of the other nations of the world as well.” This is a powerful image, and perfectly describes the administration’s thinking about the Gulf area, except in reverse: by serving as the dominant power in the Gulf, WE maintain a “stranglehold” over the economies of other nations. This gives us extraordinary leverage in world affairs, and explains to some degree why states like Japan, Britain, France, and Germany—states that are even more dependent on Persian Gulf oil than we are—defer to Washington on major international issues (like Iraq) even when they disagree with us.

Maintenance of a stranglehold over Persian Gulf oil is also consistent with the administration’s declared goal of attaining permanent military superiority over all other nations. If you read administration statements on U.S. national security policy, you will find that one theme stands out above all others: the United States must prevent any potential rival from ever reaching the point where it could compete with the United States on something resembling equal standing. As articulated in “The National

Security Strategy of the United States of America” (released by President Bush in September 2002), this principle holds that American forces must 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.”

One way to accomplish this, of course, is to pursue advances in technology that allow the United States to remain ahead of all potential rivals in military systems—which is what the administration hopes to accomplish by adding tens of billions of dollars to the Department of Defense budget. Another way to do this is maintain a stranglehold on the economy of potential rivals, so that they will refrain from challenging us out of fear of being choked to death through the denial of vital energy supplies. Japan and the European countries are already in this vulnerable position, and will remain so for the foreseeable future; but now China is also moving into this position, as it becomes increasingly dependent on oil from the Persian Gulf. Like the U.S., China is running out of oil, and, like us, it has nowhere to go to make up the difference except the Gulf. But since WE control access to the Gulf, and China lacks the power to break our stranglehold, we can keep China in a vulnerable, subordinate position indefinitely. As I see it, then, the removal of Saddam Hussein and his replacement by someone beholden to the United States is a key part of a broader U.S. strategy aimed at assuring permanent American global dominance. Or, as Michael Ignatieff put it in his seminal essay on America’s emerging empire, the concentration of so much oil in the Gulf “makes it what a military strategist would call the empire’s center of gravity” (“The

Burden,” *The New York Times Magazine*, January 5, 2003).

And finally, there is the issue of America’s long-term energy dilemma. The problem is as follows: The United States relies on oil to supply about 40% of its energy requirements, more than any other source. At one time, this country relied almost entirely on domestic oil to supply its needs; but our need for oil is growing all the time and our domestic fields—among the oldest in the world—are rapidly being exhausted. So our need for imported oil will grow with each passing year. And the more we turn to foreign sources for our oil, the more we will have to turn to the Persian Gulf, because most of the world’s untapped oil—at least two-thirds of it—is located in the Gulf area. We can of course rip up Alaska and extract every drop of oil there, but that would reduce our dependence on imported oil by only about 1-2 percentage points—an insignificant amount. We could also rely for a share of our oil on non-Gulf suppliers like Russia, Venezuela, the Caspian Sea states, and Africa, but they have much less oil than the Persian Gulf countries and they are using it up faster. So, the more you look into the future, the greater will become our dependence on the Gulf.

Now, at the current time, U.S. dependence on Persian Gulf oil means, in all practical terms, American dependence on Saudi Arabia, because Saudi Arabia has more oil than everyone else—about 250 billion barrels, or

one-fourth of world reserves. That gives Saudi Arabia a lot of indirect influence over our economy and our way of life. And, as you know, there are many people in this country who are resentful of the Saudis because of their financial ties to charities linked to Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. More to the point, Saudi Arabia is a major backer of OPEC and tends to control the global availability of oil—something that makes American officials very nervous, especially when the Saudis use their power to put pressure on the United States to alter some of its policies, for example with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

For all of these reasons, American leaders would like to reduce America’s dependence on Saudi Arabia. But there is only ONE way to permanently reduce America’s reliance on Saudi Arabia: by taking over Iraq and using it as an alternative source of petroleum. Iraq is the ONLY country in the world with sufficient reserves to balance Saudi Arabia: at least 112 billion barrels in proven reserves, and as much as 200-300 billion barrels of potential reserves. By occupying Iraq and controlling its government, the United States will solve its long-term oil-dependency dilemma for a decade or more. And this, I believe, is a major consideration in the administration’s decisionmaking about Iraq.

It is this set of factors, I believe, that explain the Bush administration’s determination to go to war with Iraq—not concern over WMD, terrorism, or the spread of democracy. But having said this, we need to ask:

do these objectives, assuming they’re the correct ones, still justify a war on Iraq? Some Americans may think so. There are, indeed, advantages to being positioned on the inside of a powerful empire with control over the world’s second-largest supply of untapped petroleum. If nothing else, American motorists will be able to afford the gas for their SUVs, vans, and pick-up trucks for another decade, and maybe longer. There will also be lots of jobs in the military and in the military-industrial complex, or as representatives of American multinational corporations (although, with respect to the latter, I would not advise traveling in most of the rest of the world unless accompanied by a small army of bodyguards). But there will also be a price to pay. Empires tend to require the militarization of society, and that will entail putting more people into uniform, one way or another. It will also mean increased spending on war, and reduced spending on education and other domestic needs. It will entail more secrecy and intrusion into our private lives. All of this has to be entered into the equation. And if you ask me, empire is not worth the price.

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