

## **Bush's War**

**By Zia Mian | April 20, 2006**

It is now just over three years since the United States attacked and occupied Iraq. The war came despite determined resistance from public opinion around the world. People took to the streets in a massive popular mobilization that was arguably the largest political protest since the anti-nuclear movement of the early 1980s. The *New York Times* described it as a struggle between “two super-powers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion.” United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan told a BBC interviewer that he considered the war in Iraq to be “illegal.” But neither public opinion nor international law was organized enough yet to stop the United States when it had chosen war.

The path to war was a long one. A convenient place to start might be in late 2001, when President Bush's speech writers were asked to make a case for war against Iraq for his January 2002 State of the Union address. In the speech, Bush declared that the United States confronted an “axis of evil,” naming North Korea, Iran, and Iraq, but focused his charge on Iraq and its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and ties to al-Qaida.

In the subsequent months, America's leaders hammered home these themes. To coordinate this drive to war, in August 2002, White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card set up the White House Iraq Group. The members included Karl Rove (senior political adviser to Bush), national security adviser Condoleezza Rice and her deputy Stephen Hadley, Lewis Libby (chief of staff to Dick Cheney), and communications strategist Karen Hughes, among others. Its mission was to organize U.S. strategy on Iraq, and, according to one participant, to “educate the public” about the danger posed by the Saddam Hussein regime.

There was little mention of what American interests were at stake, and how weapons of mass destruction were a threat in Iraq, but not say from

India or Pakistan or Israel. But one needed to look no further than the 2001 U.S. Department of Defense report, *Proliferation: Threat and Response*. It described the U.S. interests in West Asia as “maintaining a steadfast commitment to Israel's security and well-being; building and maintaining security arrangements that assure the stability of the Gulf region and unimpeded commercial access to its petroleum reserves.” It explained that “the proliferation of NBC [nuclear, biological, chemical] weapons and the means of delivering them poses a significant challenge to the ability of the United States to achieve these goals.”

It was about oil. But that would not do as a way to market the war. The public needed more. And so it became the nature of the regime and its weapons of mass destruction. How this came about was explained by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz (now president of the World Bank) when he revealed that “The truth is that for reasons that have a lot to do with the U.S. government bureaucracy we settled on the one issue that everyone could agree on which was weapons of mass destruction as the core reason.”



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Iraq's use of chemical weapons against Iran in the Iran-Iraq War, and against the Kurds in the late 1980s, was referred to repeatedly by President Bush and other U.S. policy-makers. But there was some inconvenient history that had to be set aside. The advocates of war could not mention, as a *Washington Post* investigation revealed, that during the 1980s "The administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush authorized the sale to Iraq of numerous items that had both military and civilian applications, including poisonous chemicals and deadly biological viruses, such as anthrax and bubonic plague."

They did not explain in the *New York Times* report that during the Iran-Iraq War, as Iraq used chemical weapons almost daily on the battlefield, "President Reagan, Vice President George Bush, and senior national security aides never withdrew their support for the highly classified program in which more than 60 officers of the [U.S.] Defense Intelligence Agency were secretly providing detailed information on Iranian deployments, tactical planning for battles, plans for air strikes, and bomb-damage assessments for Iraq," while at the same time "the CIA provided Iraq with satellite photography of the war front."

Nor was there any reflection on the fact that Iraq's use of chemical weapons against the Kurds, most notoriously in 1988 against the town of Halabjah, was met with increased U.S. military assistance.

But that was then, and who cares about history anyway? In any case, the real danger was the threat from nuclear weapons. A key moment came in early September 2002. The *New York Times* ran a story under the headline "United States Says Hussein Intensifies Quest for A-Bomb Parts." It reported that "More than a decade after Saddam Hussein agreed to give up weapons of mass

destruction, Iraq has stepped up its quest for nuclear weapons and has embarked on a worldwide hunt for materials to make an atomic bomb, Bush administration officials said." The report went on that "hard-liners" in the administration were afraid that "the first sign of a 'smoking gun' ... may be a mushroom cloud."

### Lies and Deceit

The hard-liners went on all the major television channels to reinforce what is perhaps the most fearful image of the 20th century and pressed its imminent danger. Condoleezza Rice went on CNN and talked of "the smoking gun" and "a mushroom cloud." Donald Rumsfeld asked viewers to "imagine a September 11 with weapons of mass destruction." President Bush declared during a televised speech that Saddam Hussein had "horrible poisons and diseases and gases and atomic weapons ... America must not ignore the threat gathering against us ... we cannot wait for the final proof—the smoking gun—that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud."

American public opinion responded to this determined effort to portray an imminent nuclear threat from Iraq to the United States. A poll at the end of September 2002 showed 80% of Americans thought that Iraq had the capability to use some kind of weapon of mass destruction against the United States.

There was some dissent from within government but it failed to make the major media. An October 8, 2002 news story claimed, "A growing number of military officers, intelligence professionals, and diplomats ... have deep misgivings about the administration's double-time march toward war [and] charge that administration hawks have exaggerated evidence of the threat that Iraqi leader

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Saddam Hussein poses.” But none of them were willing to come out and say so openly and confront the Bush administration directly.

A few days later, the U.S. Congress passed a resolution which cited “Iraq’s demonstrated capability and willingness to use weapons of mass destruction, the risk that the Iraqi regime will either employ those weapons to launch a surprise attack on the United States or its armed forces, or provide them to international terrorists to do so,” and authorized Bush to “use the armed forces of the United States as he determines to be necessary ... to defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat from Iraq.”

The process of educating the public about the threat from weapons of mass destruction, and especially nuclear weapons from Iraq and the need to pre-empt any possible threat or use, culminated in the March 17, 2003 address to the nation by President Bush, announcing the war on Iraq. He said, “The Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised ... it has aided, trained and harbored terrorists, including operatives of al-Qaida ... using chemical, biological or, one day, nuclear weapons, obtained with the help of Iraq, the terrorists could fulfill their stated ambitions and kill thousands or hundreds of thousands of innocent people in our country, or any other ... With these capabilities, Saddam Hussein and his terrorist allies could choose the moment of deadly conflict when they are strongest. We choose to meet that threat now, where it arises, before it can appear suddenly in our skies and cities.”

The truth does come out though. Subsequent investigative reporting by the *Washington Post* looked at the arguments made for war and found “a pattern in which President Bush, Vice President

Cheney, and their subordinates—in public and behind the scenes—made allegations depicting Iraq’s nuclear weapons program as more active, more certain, and more imminent in its threat than the data they had would support.” There was the sin of omission too. The *Post* found that “On occasion administration advocates withheld evidence that did not conform to their views.”

The lies and deceit were revealed for all to see when the efforts of 1,400 experts from the defense department, the department of energy, national weapons laboratories, and intelligence agencies failed to turn up weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

The Iraq war should not be seen as a shocking departure from the norm of American policy. It cannot all be blamed on George Bush and the neocons, or a new American empire either. The United States has a long history, going back to its founding, of intervening, often violently and with appalling effect, in other countries. The familiar examples include the overthrow of the governments of Guatemala and Iran, its efforts to overthrow the government of Cuba, the war against Vietnam, the bombing of Cambodia and Laos, and the covert wars in Central America. These were not just symptoms of the Cold War. The end of the Cold War brought less change than many had hoped. If anything, freed from the fear of small wars escalating into a superpower conflict, American policy-makers have resorted more freely to threats and the use of force, and occupation.

In Iraq, since the war started in 2003, about 30,000 Iraqis have been killed, according to President Bush; estimates in 2004 by independent medical researchers are that at least 100,000 Iraqis may have died in the violence and they say the number could be “much higher.” Over 2,300

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American soldiers have been killed. The war has cost the United States over \$250 billion. The harsh realities of war have slowly started to affect ordinary Americans. At the end of 2003, almost 60% of Americans said the war was worth the cost. Polls now show that nearly 60% think the war was not worth fighting. When the war started about 70% of Americans said the United States was “certain” to win in Iraq; and another 25% said they thought victory was likely. Now 40% believe the United States is likely or certain to lose. Over half

now believe the United States should withdraw its troops. All that President Bush can say is, “We will not lose our nerve.”

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