

Interview of Bush Reveals Dangerous Assumptions Behind U.S. Foreign Policy

By Stephen Zunes | March 2004

A number of critiques have been written about President George W. Bush's responses to Tim Russert's questions in the February 8 edition of NBC's "Meet the Press," primarily regarding his shifting rationale for the invasion of Iraq. More problematic, however, was the fact that President Bush made a number of assertions that were patently false or—at the very least—misleading. The failure of Mr. Russert to challenge these statements and the ongoing repetition of such rationales by the administration and its supporters make it all the more imperative that such assertions not be allowed to go unquestioned. The implications of Bush's statements are quite disturbing, since they involve such fundamental issues as international terrorism, the United Nations, weapons of mass destruction, and the policy of preemption.

International Terrorism

A major Bush administration rationale for the 2003 Iraq War was Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's alleged links to the terrorist al Qaeda network and other active Iraqi involvement in international terrorism. Regarding the failure to find any evidence for such involvement, President Bush stated in his "Meet the Press" interview: "We knew the fact that he was paying for suicide bombers. We knew the fact that he was funding terrorist groups." This statement is a stretch. Saddam Hussein's support for Abu Nidal (a secular nationalist group composed primarily of Palestinian exiles) and other terrorists peaked during the 1980s—the very time period when the U.S. dropped Iraq from its list of countries backing terrorism in order to provide the Iraqi dictator with technical and military support. According to the U.S. State Department, the last direct involvement by the Iraqi government in an act of international terrorism was the alleged 1993 assassination attempt in Kuwait against former President George H.W. Bush.

More recently, Iraq has provided money to a tiny pro-Iraqi Palestinian faction, the Arab Liberation Front, which has passed it on to some Palestinian families of "martyrs" killed in the struggle against the Israeli occupation. Recipients have included families of suicide bombers who murdered Israeli civilians, but most of those helped have been families of militiamen killed in battles with Israeli occupation forces or families of civilians shot by the Israelis. And the amount given to families of terrorists was far less than the value of the families' homes, which are usually destroyed right after a terrorist attack as part of Israel's policy of collective punishment in the occupied territories. Thus, this minimal Iraqi assistance probably did not result in any additional terrorist attacks. Hamas, the Palestinian group responsible for the majority of suicide bombings against Israeli civilians, receives most of its funding from Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf countries.

Meanwhile, the U.S. occupation of Iraq is being justified in the name of the war on terrorism. President Bush claimed that Iraqis are fighting U.S. occupation forces, not because they resent being invaded and occupied by a foreign power, but because they "are people who desperately want to stop the advance of freedom and democracy." In the "Meet the Press" interview, President Bush reiterated the widely accepted belief that "freedom and democracy will be a powerful long-term deterrent to terrorist activities." Though this is undoubtedly true, the Bush administration continues to provide military, economic, and diplomatic support to Middle Eastern dictatorships and occupation armies that deny Arab and Muslim people their freedom and democratic rights. It is not surprising that the majority of the leadership, financial support, and membership in the mega-terrorist al Qaeda network stems from countries with U.S.-backed dictatorships, like Saudi Arabia.

UN Security Council Resolutions

Another unchallenged statement in Bush's "Meet the Press" interview was the president's assertion that the invasion of Iraq was fought in part to uphold UN Security Council resolutions violated by Iraq. Alluding to UN Security Council Resolution 1441, President Bush stated that Saddam Hussein "defied the world once again."

Though Baghdad had defied several UN Security Council resolutions prior to unanimous passage of Resolution 1441 in November 2003, Iraq appears to have been largely in compliance at the time of the U.S. invasion. Hussein's regime unconditionally allowed inspectors from the United Nations Monitoring and Verification Commission (UNMOVIC) unfettered access within Iraq shortly after the resolution was passed; released what evidence it had of its proscribed weapons, delivery systems, and weapons programs and their disassembly (which was initially greeted with skepticism but now appears to have been accurate); and

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arranged with UNMOVIC the modalities regarding interviews with Iraqi scientists, overflights of Iraqi airspace, and other UN activities. Remaining disputes were largely technical in nature and could not reasonably be considered cases of “material breach” of the UN resolution.

Citing the resolution’s warning of “serious consequences” to Iraqi noncompliance, President Bush argued: “if there isn’t serious consequences, it creates adverse consequences. People look at us and say, they don’t mean what they say, they are not willing to follow through.” Even if one were to accept the assertion that Iraq was in material breach of 1441, the resolution states that the Security Council “remains seized of the matter,” essentially reiterating the UN Charter’s stipulation that only the Security Council as a whole—not any single member—has the right to authorize the use of military action to enforce the resolution.

In any case, at the time Iraq was attacked, there were more than 100 UN Security Council resolutions being violated by governments other than Iraq. The Bush administration has opposed enforcing these resolutions by military or any other means, however, since the majority of violating governments are considered U.S. allies. As a result, the administration’s claim that invading Iraq was somehow an effort to uphold the integrity of the United Nations and its resolutions is disingenuous at best.

In the February 8 interview, President Bush rejected the idea that he rushed into war by claiming that he acted militarily only after he went “to the international community ... [to] ... see if we could not disarm Saddam Hussein peacefully through international pressure.” However, as is now apparent, the international community did disarm Saddam Hussein peacefully through international pressure. So, why did the United States have to invade?

Weapons of Mass Destruction

In response to Mr. Russert’s questions regarding the failure to find Iraq’s purported weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), President Bush defended the decision to invade the oil-rich country by observing: “We remembered the fact that he had used weapons, which meant he had had weapons.” No one disputes that Saddam Hussein had possessed and used chemical weapons, both against Iranian soldiers and Kurdish civilians. These war crimes took place over 15 years ago, however, at a time when the U.S.—supportive of the Baghdad regime—was downplaying and covering up Iraq’s use of such weapons. The Bush administration has failed to provide evidence that Iraq still had chemical weapons or any other WMDs during the five years prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion.

President Bush’s claim that, in the months leading up to the invasion, “the international community thought he

had weapons” is patently false. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had determined back in 1998, after years of inspections, that Iraq no longer had a nuclear program, and after four months of rigorous inspections just prior to the invasion, the agency gave no indication that anything had changed. UNMOVIC—though frustrated at Iraq’s failure to fully account for all the proscribed materials—similarly determined that there was no evidence of Iraqi chemical or biological weapons. Rolf Ekeus, former head of UNMOVIC’s predecessor agency, the UN Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM), declared that Iraq was “fundamentally disarmed” as early as 1996. At the United Nations and other forums, representatives of many of the world’s governments questioned U.S. and British accusations that Iraq still had WMDs.

In his interview with Russert, President Bush said: “I don’t think America can stand by and hope for the best from a madman, and I believe it is essential ... that when we see a threat, we deal with those threats before they become imminent.” And top administration officials claimed on several occasions prior to the war that Iraq’s threat was already “imminent.” Now that we know this was not the case, President Bush is claiming: “It’s too late if they become imminent.” The president also argued that although Saddam Hussein may not actually have possessed weapons of mass destruction, “he could have developed a nuclear weapon over time—I’m not saying immediately, but over time.” But given the IAEA’s findings that Iraq’s nuclear program had been completely dismantled and with a strict embargo against military and dual-use technology and raw materials, it is doubtful that Baghdad could ever have produced a nuclear weapon.

Of greater concern to world peace is that, through this interview and related comments, President Bush’s doctrine of preemption has been expanded to include the right to invade a country if a U.S. president determines that the government of that country poses even a hypothetical threat some time in the future. As President Bush put it: “There was no doubt in my mind that Saddam Hussein was a danger to America,” not because he actually had weapons of mass destruction at the time of the U.S. invasion, but because “he had the capacity to make a weapon.” The president went on to claim that Washington’s chief post-invasion weapons inspector, David Kay, reported that “Saddam Hussein was dangerous with the ability to make weapons.”

Even this assertion is questionable. Kay had actually stated that Iraq’s entire infrastructure for nuclear and chemical weapons was virtually destroyed. Though Kay did believe that Iraq might have been able to produce dangerous biological agents, he felt they were far more difficult to

weaponize “in a usable way.” In a February 17 story, the Boston Globe quoted former CIA counterterrorism chief and former National Security Council Intelligence Director Vincent Cannistraro as saying that the Iraqis had the “capability” of developing WMDs only in the sense that they had the knowledge of how to do so, but they did not have many of the basic components to actually produce such weapons. Only by importing technology and raw materials in the 1980s from Russia, Germany, France, Britain, and the U.S. was Iraq able to develop its biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons programs in the first place. Thus, the administration has never been able to make a credible case for Iraq reconstituting such programs, as long as sanctions curtailed the necessary inputs.

In addition to the eight or nine nations that currently have nuclear weapons, there are more than 40 other countries that are theoretically capable of developing such weapons. At least twice that many could develop chemical and biological weapons, and a couple of dozen already have. The Bush administration has failed to make a compelling case as to why Iraq—which, unlike the other nations, allowed inspectors unfettered access to the entire country to look for such weapons, weapon components, and delivery systems—was a greater threat than all the others.

The Doctrine of Preemption

A cornerstone of Bush’s doctrine of preemptive military intervention is the notion that deterrence cannot work. In response to those who stressed containment of Iraq as an alternative to offensive war, President Bush replied: “We can’t say, ‘Let’s don’t deal with Saddam Hussein. Let’s hope he changes his stripes, or let’s trust in the goodwill of Saddam Hussein. Let’s let us, kind of, try to contain him.’”

Despite assertions to the contrary, the doctrine of containment has never assumed goodwill on the part of the other party. If there was an assumption of goodwill from the Iraqi regime, intrusive inspections and strictly enforced sanctions would not have been necessary. Besides, who was suggesting that the world not “deal with” Saddam Hussein? For a dozen years prior to the U.S. invasion, the United Nations put more time, money, and effort into successfully insuring that Saddam Hussein could no longer threaten its neighbors or its Kurdish minority than it expended on any other issue.

Secretary of State Colin Powell, appearing before “Meet the Press” in 2001, confidently stated that “we have been able to keep weapons from going into Iraq” and that the sanctions on military and dual-use items had been “quite a success for ten years.” In a meeting with the German foreign minister in February 2001, Powell spoke of how the United Nations, the U.S., and its allies “have succeeded in

containing Saddam Hussein and his ambitions” with the result that “they don’t really possess the capability to attack their neighbors the way they did ten years ago.” Iraq, continued Powell, was “not threatening America. Containment has been a successful policy, and I think we should make sure that we continue it,” he added. Instead, given that a dictator in possession of WMDs and an offensive delivery system during the 1980s was defanged by a UN-led disarmament program in the 1990s, it appears that containment did work.

One argument that Bush and his supporters have put forward is that if Saddam Hussein had developed nuclear weapons, “we would have been in a position of blackmail.” Such reasoning makes no sense. During the cold war, the Soviet Union had thousands of nuclear weapons on Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and other delivery systems pointed at the U.S., and Washington had no defense against them, yet there were no attempts at blackmail. This was because the U.S. could have blackmailed the Soviets as well. Such a stalemate is known as deterrence and was the backbone of U.S. defense policy for decades. If it could work against a powerful totalitarian state like the Soviet Union, why wouldn’t it work against a weak third world country like Iraq?

The only response the administration has been able to offer is that Saddam Hussein was a “madman.” This label was used by President Bush a half dozen times in his “Meet the Press” interview alone: “You can’t rely upon a madman, and he was a madman. You can’t rely upon him making rational decisions when it comes to war and peace, and it’s too late, in my judgment, when a madman who has got terrorist connections is able to act... Containment doesn’t work with a man who is a madman.”

Although Saddam Hussein certainly has a record of making poor political and strategic judgments, that does not make him a “madman.” Other heads of government have made poor decisions on issues of war and peace, including President Bush. Such behavior does not imply that the Iraqi dictator would have launched a suicidal first strike against the U.S. with a nuclear weapon.

Saddam Hussein demonstrated repeatedly while in power that he cared first and foremost about his own survival. He apparently recognized that any attempt to use WMDs against the U.S. or any of its allies would inevitably have led to his own destruction. This is why he did not use them during the 1991 Gulf War, even when attacked by the largest coalition of international forces ever amassed against a single nation and even though he still had chemical weapons and long-range missiles. (In contrast, prior to the Gulf War, Saddam was quite willing

to utilize his arsenal of chemical weapons against Iranian forces, because he knew that the revolutionary Islamist regime was isolated internationally. He was similarly willing to use them against Kurdish civilians, because he knew that they could not fight back.)

President Bush still raises the idea that if Saddam Hussein had one day developed a nuclear weapon or other weapon of mass destruction, he would have “then let that weapon fall into the hands of a shadowy terrorist network.” There is no evidence that the Iraqi government ever considered such a dangerous move, even when its contacts with terrorist groups and its WMD programs were at their peaks during the 1980s. Saddam Hussein’s leadership style has always been that of direct control; his distrust of subordinates (bordering on paranoia) was one of the ways he was able to hold on to power for so long. He would never have gone to the risk and expense of developing weapons of mass destruction only to pass them on to some group of terrorists, particularly radical Islamists who could easily turn on him. When he had such weapons at his disposal, their use was clearly at his discretion alone.

At the time of the U.S. invasion last year, Iraq’s armed forces were barely one-third of their pre-Gulf War size. Iraq’s Navy was virtually nonexistent, and its Air Force was unable to even get off the ground to challenge U.S. forces. Pre-invasion military spending by Iraq has been estimated at barely one-tenth of 1980 levels. The Bush administration has been unable to explain why in 2003, when Saddam enjoyed only a tiny percentage of his once-formidable military capability, Iraq was considered so massive a threat that it was necessary to invade the country and replace its leader—the same leader Washington had quietly supported during the peak of Iraq’s military capability.

In his interview, President Bush claimed that his policy of preemption—demonstrated in Iraq—has had positive repercussions elsewhere, citing Libya’s decision to end its nascent WMD programs and open up to international inspections. However, Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi surely must have observed that Iraq was invaded only *after* it had given up its WMD programs, while North Korea,

choosing to reconstitute its nuclear weapons program, was not invaded. The Libyan decision, the result of a year-long series of diplomatic initiatives, seems to have come *in spite* of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, not because of it.

Ironically, in his interview President Bush claimed that “we had run the diplomatic string in Iraq” at the time of the invasion but that “we’re making good progress in North Korea.” The reality, of course, is that UN-led diplomatic efforts had successfully eliminated Iraq’s WMD threat prior to the U.S. invasion but that North Korea has broken its treaty commitments and is apparently now developing nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the Bush administration refused to engage in any direct negotiations with Iraq prior to war, raising questions as to how the U.S. could have “run the diplomatic string.”

As his trump card in the NBC interview, President Bush tried to claim that the U.S., through its invasion and occupation of Iraq, was bringing democracy to that country and would thereby make the world safer, since “free societies are societies that don’t develop weapons of mass terror.” This, unfortunately, is not true. The U.S. was the first society to develop nuclear weapons and is the only country to have actually used them. Great Britain, France, Israel, and India are also considered free societies, yet they have developed nuclear weapons as well.

These last claims simply reflect a broader pattern in the interview as a whole. The interview was an opportunity for President Bush to present an honest and clear representation of U.S. policy in Iraq to the American people. Instead, his presentation was a defensive effort littered with untruthful assertions and misleading statements to justify a policy which is losing support among Americans as a whole. The American people deserved better.

*Stephen Zunes is an associate professor of politics and chair of the peace & justice studies program at the University of San Francisco. He serves as Middle East editor for the Foreign Policy in Focus project <www.fpif.org> and is the author of *Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism* (Common Courage Press, 2003).*

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2004. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

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Recommended citation:

Stephen Zunes, “Interview of Bush Reveals Dangerous Assumptions Behind U.S. Foreign Policy,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, March 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/papers/2004bushint.html>

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