

# **AMERICAN MILITARISM AND THE US POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT: THE REAL LESSONS OF THE INVASION OF IRAQ**

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The American invasion of Iraq has been a catastrophe of epic proportions for the Iraqi population – apart from the massive loss of Iraqi lives, the destruction of most of what was left of the country’s physical infrastructure, and the creation of more than five million refugees – one-fifth of the total population. But it has also been a significant disaster for Bush and American global power more generally. Today, in the wake of this set-back, and in anticipation of a new presidency, the question that looms is: what is the likely fallout of this debacle for American strategy? Since we cannot predict the future, the most reasonable course is to examine the logic of the invasion itself – the interests involved in it, the depth of elite commitment to its goals, and the larger strategic purpose that it served. This is the best guide we have for ascertaining which elements of the whole misadventure are likely to be jettisoned, which will be adjusted and which are likely to continue uninterrupted.

In the haze of popular memory, and even in intellectual circles, the most common explanation for the invasion is a simple one: that it was the brainchild of the neo-conservative cabal grouped around Bush II, and it was motivated in large measure to open the door for American oil majors to take control of the region. It would be hard to deny the surface plausibility of this assessment. The neo-con policy experts and their allied think tanks were never shy about claiming credit for pushing through the invasion. Further, it is hard to think of any administration in recent memory that had closer links to oil interests than that of Bush II. It is hardly an inferential leap to suggest that these interests might have been the prime movers behind invading one of the largest pools of untapped oil in the world.

The impression that the invasion was pushed through by this particular grouping is further heightened by the memory of the intense public debates

that preceded it. This was when stalwarts from the elder Bush's administration – Brent Scowcroft, James Baker, Lawrence Eagleburger and others – as well as prominent Democrats like Madeleine Albright, Richard Holbrooke and Bill Clinton himself, raised doubts about the wisdom of the younger Bush's strategy. It was widely held at the time that when experienced diplomats like Scowcroft or Baker issued public warnings to George W., they were in fact speaking for his father. The debate only seemed to confirm that the younger Bush was pursuing a strategy that would have been unthinkable under a different administration. Today, in the wake of the occupation's calamitous results, the memory of the outside criticism has taken on something of an iconic stature. The interventions made by Scowcroft and others are taken to have expressed the deep misgivings of, and opposition from, a policy establishment that knew better than to launch such a hazardous undertaking.

Among intellectuals and foreign policy experts this line has been taken further, to the effect that the heightened militarism embodied in the invasion reflected a watershed in foreign policy more generally, evident along several dimensions – from soft power to hard power, multilateralism to unilateralism, economic coercion to military coercion, etc. One of the most common descriptions of the Bush ascension is that it signalled the turn to a New Imperialism – in contrast to the policy orientation that preceded it, and reminiscent of the global hegemony established by England two centuries ago. To some, like Niall Ferguson, this was a development to be welcomed, a sign that America was finally accepting the responsibility that comes with power;<sup>1</sup> to more sober minds, of course, it was something to be deplored.

If these diagnoses were accurate, then the implication of the set-backs in Iraq would be simple – a return to the status quo ante, a turn away from unilateralism, the abandonment of aggressive militarism, and perhaps even an abatement of the imperial impulse. The task is to assess the extent to which they are in fact true. How much does the Bush interregnum represent a break from the recent past, and how much of his agenda can we expect to continue into the next administrations? We are thus obliged to turn to recent history in order to place his decisions in the longer flow of policy.

As it happens, the recent past serves us particularly well in assessing the distinctiveness of Bush's orientation – since his ascension was preceded by two consecutive terms of a Democratic presidency. Even more, the 1990s were indisputably a watershed period, as the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 meant that the Cold War finally came to an end. The 1990s were the first decade in which the US was without a true geopolitical rival in the global order. The expectations, it might be recalled, were for a truly revolutionary

shift in international affairs, away from militarism, and toward peace. If the younger Bush's turn to a new imperialism, his resort to unilateralism, etc., was as much of a break as has been claimed, it certainly should stand out against the backdrop of a Democratic presidency and the end of superpower rivalry.

#### FROM COLD WAR TO NEW WORLD ORDER

If the conventional account of the Cold War were accurate, then, in the 1990s, the United States ought to have embraced demilitarisation and a pacific foreign policy. The winding tentacles of American military power, embodied most of all in its hundreds of military and naval bases; the support of corrupt tyrannies; the clandestine operations around the global South – all of this had been justified in the decades of the Cold War as a necessary evil, in order to hold at bay an even greater evil. It had been presented as measures to which American presidents resorted in order to contain another power's aggression. The various elements of this strategy were subsumed under the umbrella concept of *containment*, a term that perfectly conveyed the essentially defensive posture that policy elites claimed for their actions. So after 1991, with the imperative to restrain Soviet global ambitions no longer obtaining, many observers waited for a corresponding diminution of the American imperium.

What happened, of course, was the very opposite. Far from scaling back its military spread, the US quickly moved to extend its presence into areas that had hitherto been out of reach. The elder Bush launched Operation Desert Storm in late 1991, which brought American bases back into Saudi Arabia after some decades. And Bill Clinton extended bases into Eastern Europe in two stages, each time in the wake of a military operation in the former Yugoslavia – in 1993, and then in 1999. Eastern Europe had, for obvious reasons, been inaccessible for decades as a military outpost; the Middle East had been the object of concerted expansion since the Carter Presidency, but the actual placement of bases so deep in the heartland had been out of the question till the Saudis gave their assent in 1991.

These were but two conspicuous instances of what has come to be known as 'power projection' during the first post-Cold War decade. The underlying strategy that they reflected was laid out fairly clearly by Bill Clinton's National Security Advisor, Anthony Lake, in the autumn of 1993. In a speech at Johns Hopkins University entitled 'From Containment to Enlargement', Lake announced a foreign policy vision for the new era that directly, and unmistakably, dissolved any expectations that the post-Soviet era would witness a drawing down of America's global reach. During the

Cold War, he maintained, American policy had been directed to mitigating the influence of the Soviets, and hence toward containing their influence. It had been essentially defensive in orientation. But now, Lake argued, the US had to embrace a more aggressive, more ambitious strategy. This was not the time to initiate an era of retreat for the US, but an enlargement of its sphere of influence.<sup>2</sup> Under the new dispensation, deterrence would give way to the open pursuit of primacy. In fairness, even though it was a Clinton appointee who enunciated this policy in the public arena, it had already been recognised by the administration that preceded his. In the waning months of the Bush presidency, Paul Wolfowitz, then the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, had leaked a confidential planning document which had laid out virtually the same agenda.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, there had been some hesitation – a momentary pause – under the elder Bush, before the new imperial vision was embraced. It took the first Iraq War to jar him from his lethargy. But by the time Clinton assumed office, the foreign policy establishment had firmly settled on its course of power projection.<sup>4</sup>

Although Lake did convey rather accurately what the core foreign policy aim was to be during the decade, there was one respect in which his presentation was misleading – containment had never been the centrepiece of US strategy during the Cold War. It had always been guided by a vigorous expansionism, both economically and politically. In fact, American foreign policy since the Spanish–American War should be seen as a punctuated pursuit of global power, the tempo of which has increased as constraints to its operation have been removed. During the inter-war period, the main such constraint was the zonal authority of European colonial powers, which over time chiselled their empires into economic blocs. The Second World War provided an opportunity to dismantle the barriers to US capital, and to incorporate new zones into the US sphere of political influence. It is in fact remarkable how early the Roosevelt administration realised this. Within weeks of the attacks on Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt put together a massive network of post-war planning agencies which immediately took to designing a strategy for breaking up the colonial blocs and prying open Asia and the Middle East to American influence.<sup>5</sup> These plans formed the blueprint for American strategy in the post-war period, which Truman pursued with firm diligence. The settlement that came out of the war did, for a while, preserve the formal apparatus of the colonial spheres, but only under the protection of American power. With their fortunes now tied to American patronage, France and the UK could do little to resist. What ensued was a massive American expansion into those areas that had been outside its sphere.<sup>6</sup>

The noteworthy point here is that the plans for post-war expansion were drawn up before the outcome of the war was certain, and, more to the point, before Hitler's reversals on the Eastern Front had begun to accumulate. The outward thrust of American policy was thus emphatically not a response to the Soviets' own expansionist designs after the war – it had been designed independently of any actions Stalin might have undertaken, and before his fate could even have been known. To be sure, once the Soviet Union emerged from the war as a military power, American policy had to adjust to its presence. But it was just that – an adjustment of a strategy already in place.

If we recognise the actual nature of strategy in the Cold War years, it is clear that the years 1945 and 1991 each marked the eclipse of rival powers that had placed barriers to American expansion. In 1945, the US seized upon an opportunity provided by the weakened state of its rivals to dramatically increase its sphere of influence. And this is exactly what Anthony Lake was declaring to be the nucleus of policy after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The strategic orientation being urged by him was not by any means an innovation.

#### IRAQ BEFORE BUSH II: FROM CONTAINMENT TO REGIME CHANGE

The push toward a more aggressive imperialism was thus already taking root much before the Iraq invasion. As this pursuit of primacy congealed in the early 1990s, the choice of unilateralism or multilateralism did not issue from a doctrinal commitment one way or the other, but as a practical choice – multilateralism when possible, unilateralism and militarism when necessary. This strategy called for a continual assessment of the facts on the ground and the international political environment. There was some hesitation about upsetting established diplomatic practices, long established in political culture. But by the end of the decade the hesitancy of the early half was beginning to give way. This gradual shift, in the midst of some uncertainty, was reflected very sharply in the evolving policy toward Iraq. It exploded into relief after 9/11, of course; but a decisive shift toward military aggression against Hussein had begun earlier, in Clinton's later years.

##### *The conditions for containment*

In the wake of the Gulf War of 1991, once the elder Bush had decided to leave Saddam Hussein in power, the administration settled for a policy of containment, of holding Hussein at bay under a regime of international sanctions. Bush would have preferred to push through with regime change, but, as he famously observed in his memoirs, prudential considerations

induced him to settle for the fall-back option.<sup>7</sup> Two background conditions were critical to the containment strategy's viability. First, the US's European and Middle Eastern allies were willing to support the sanctions regime. In its initial years this was not politically burdensome to the actors involved, as there was considerable public disapproval of Hussein's attack on Kuwait, and the brutal character of his rule had become widely known. The only worrisome fallout of the sanctions was the expected decrease in oil shipments coming out of Iraq. But here, the second enabling condition became relevant, which was that world oil supplies in the early 1990s were in a very comfortable position. Furthermore, officials were optimistic that the rush of investments into the Caspian region would compensate for the shortfalls resulting from loss of Iraqi oil. It is doubtful that Bush anticipated the sanctions having to last more than a few years, for which the political and economic situation seemed manageable.

When Clinton came to power, he inherited this sanctions regime, which he then relied upon during his first administration. But the salient point here is that, while he was willing to use sanctions, this was never Clinton's preferred option. In fact, throughout his presidency, the US either organised, or indirectly encouraged, one ruse after another to depose Hussein – fomenting domestic opposition, sponsoring military uprisings, even giving support to assassination attempts.<sup>8</sup> The strategy came to be known, understandably enough, as 'containment plus regime change'. Of course, none of the various attempts came to anything, leading instead to a lively debate within the cabinet on the appropriate course of action. The staff charged with formulating Iraq policy congealed fairly rapidly into two broad camps, of doves and hawks, with the latter calling for a much more aggressive stance against Hussein, and hence for abandoning the containment strategy. But as long as other instruments were still available, the doves in the administration were able to hold their ground.<sup>9</sup>

During Clinton's second term, the balance within the administration started to shift. Iraq policy was now transferred to the hands of the more hawkish members of the cabinet, chief among whom were Sandy Berger and Madeleine Albright, but also included Martin Indyck and Leon Fuerth.<sup>10</sup> The consequence was a gradual but unmistakable increase in military actions against the Hussein regime. By the final two years of the Clinton Presidency, the policy orientation toward Iraq had changed dramatically from that of the early 1990s. The various schemes hatched to depose him had failed, leading to a great deal of frustration within both policy camps. One tangible consequence of this was that the more militant of the hawks, who had been

the smallest of the policy currents in the administration, now began to attract more converts to their side.

It bears noting that this shift in Iraq policy was part of a more general thrust toward militarism in Clinton's second administration, stemming, it appears, from a clearer commitment to primacy in world affairs. Between 1996 and 2000, the world witnessed several displays of naked American power, in which more subtle diplomatic channels were openly flouted in favour of open, and at times illegal, aggression. The United Nations, in particular, was sidelined and even humiliated quite openly in Clinton's final years. The 1998 bombing campaign against Iraq, known as Operation Desert Fox, was never submitted to the Security Council; in fact, Clinton pointedly timed the bombing to start on the very day that the Security Council was deliberating on its legality. The bombing of Serbia was carried out under NATO auspices, precisely in order to take the initiative away from the UN, where there was resistance to permitting it. More broadly, Clinton began the process of backing out of several key international treaties, like Kyoto and the landmines agreement, a retreat which Bush later completed. While Clinton did not openly and decisively disparage the UN, in the way Bush II would a few years later, his practice was already showing a rather cavalier attitude toward international law and diplomacy.

#### *The turn to regime change*

The attractiveness of the hawkish position did not issue from frustration alone. Just as important was the fact that by 1998-99 the background conditions that had made containment viable had become unstable. European and Middle Eastern support of the sanctions regime was fraying, mainly because of public revulsion at its horrendous consequences. While Albright could get away with declaring her acceptance of the more than half-million deaths caused by the sanctions, matters were not so easy for European governments, which had to deal with less supine media and more mobilised citizenry.<sup>11</sup> Their willingness to offer support to Clinton on this strategy was beginning to wane. Without European support, it would be impossible for sanctions to continue, and by 1999, Clinton was meeting with considerable resistance within the Security Council against their continuation.

Compounding this problem was the changed situation in oil supply. In the early 1990s, the main fact about the oil market had been plentiful supplies and plenty of excess capacity in the key producing regions. By 2000, this situation was reversed. While prices were still low, increases in supply were no longer keeping up with the rate at which demand was increasing.<sup>12</sup> One factor contributing to the shortfall was that actual supply from new wells in

the Caspian region had not met with expectations. But more important was that there had been very little addition to new capacity in the critical region for oil production, which was in the Gulf states. One high-level report estimated that spare capacity on a global scale was just 2 per cent below the level of demand, making for the tightest markets in recent memory.<sup>13</sup> This was a direct consequence of the sanctions imposed on Iran and Iraq, potentially the two most important sources of additional supplies after Saudi Arabia. So while the easy supply situation had allowed for a permissive attitude toward sanctions earlier in the decade, the situation now made a continuation of the policy seem perilous at best.

The change in these conditions cast grave doubt on the future viability of the multilateral sanctions regime. Already by the late 1990s, leading voices in policy circles had begun to question the wisdom, much less the possibility, of continuing with the strategy.<sup>14</sup> The natural solution to the fraying of international support for sanctions and the tight oil supply would have been to simply do away with sanctions and allow new investments to move in. The fact that this was *not* pursued, by either Clinton or Bush, is highly significant and warrants further discussion. If the ambition in official circles was simply to bring more oil on line by ushering international companies into the Gulf, all that would have been required was to lift the sanctions, which included a block on foreign investment. Saddam showed no intention of blocking the entrance of the oil majors, and in fact, he was clandestinely cutting deals with many of the non-American companies in his last years. Saddam was not the obstacle to boosting oil supplies – the sanctions were. This being the case, the simplest course of action would have been to see the writing on the wall, acknowledge that the whole framework of containment was falling apart, and to allow new investments to flow in while subduing Hussein with threats of imminent destruction. In fact, there were elements in the foreign policy establishment who pushed just this approach.<sup>15</sup> It was never given a serious audience.

The reason that sanctions could not simply be dismantled was that this would entail a direct, and prohibitive, *political* cost – a steady decline in power and leverage for the US in the region. It would mean that Hussein had managed to survive a decade-long campaign of strangulation, of attempts at regime change, air-strikes, bombing, vilification – all by the most powerful nation in the world, which had openly called for his overthrow. In any other region, this might have been a tolerable *dénouement* to the conflict, one that the US could have lived with. But in the Middle East, its ramifications were too serious to ignore.



The problem was the oil. If Iraq had been just another developing nation, and Hussein just another tin-pot dictator, his surviving the sanctions regime may very well have been tolerable, and his chest-thumping little more than an annoyance. But of course Iraq was, as Paul Wolfowitz imprudently put it, floating on a sea of oil. Given the relative decline in supply described above, Hussein was poised to take over as the swing producer in the global market<sup>16</sup> – i.e. as the producer with greatest spare capacity – giving him the kind of position that the Saudis had occupied for decades. But unlike the Saudis, who were an American protectorate, Hussein would almost certainly position himself as a regional rival. This would entail a direct loss of power for the US, to be sure. It would also create political challenges for its regional allies, who relied on American backing for their own political stability.

The loss in leverage would also have ramifications for American alliances more broadly, because of the critical place of the Middle East in global geopolitics. Since almost every nation in the world had to arrange some kind of access to Gulf oil, the US's hegemonic position in the region's politics gave it indirect leverage over their policy choices – not only choices directly related to Middle East policy, but more widely, since favours in one domain could be granted in exchange for concessions in others. The major oil producers relied on American patronage and protection in one way or another; this placed the US in a position to be consulted by all sides in key diplomatic negotiations. A loss of power in the region would be the first step toward losing this privileged position.

#### *Clinton's dilemma*

This, then, was Clinton's dilemma toward the end of his second term. There were two choices left for the administration – to engineer some kind of new and revamped apparatus for containment, or to push aggressively for regime change. Each had its own problems. A new sanctions regime would most likely not be supported by European or even regional allies, which would mean that the US would have to enforce it unilaterally. But its enforcement measures would have to be directed at those very allies, which would only further isolate the US. Furthermore, every month that they failed to trigger an uprising in Iraq, the relevant players would be more and more inclined to hammer out their own settlements with Hussein, thus giving them a vested interest in his survival, and further marginalising the US.

The other option was an intensified militarism. Pollack reports that within the Clinton administration, this was the path that was finally chosen. There was already a significant shift in this direction by 1998, of which the bombardment carried out under Desert Fox was the clearest indication. In

1999, the president assigned Madeline Albright the task of designing a plan for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, a decision that most of his policy advisors supported.<sup>17</sup> Lurking in the background of all this was the fact that, if an ambitious military action were to be undertaken, its success in purely military terms was almost certain. Iraq was a broken state, almost incapable of defending itself. Had it been a real power, had Hussein's regime had a real mass base, and hence offered the prospect of real resistance, the lurch toward greater militarism would have been strongly resisted in American policy circles. But given that it was not, the military option loomed as an almost irresistible attraction. 'Containment plus regime change', the policy of the first Clinton term, had now been displaced by regime change pure and simple.

Now another dilemma presented itself. The most obvious instrument for effectuating regime change – a ground invasion – was fraught with too many imponderables, ranging from domestic public opinion to the risk of setting off regional political imbalances that would be hard to control. Most worrisome was the possibility of Iraq's break-up as a state, and, in such an eventuality, the boost that this would give to Iran as a regional power.<sup>18</sup> Clinton was caught in a bind – he had committed to an escalation of hostilities with Hussein, to use military force to overthrow him, but short of an invasion, just about every device had been tried, and had failed. But an invasion seemed not to be on the cards, given the two constraints just described.

#### INTO THE BREACH: THE NEO-CONS' WAR?

Bush had come into office with some kind of action against Iraq high on his agenda – that much we know. But in the first ten months of his presidency, there was little to suggest that he would actually pursue this course. Even with this desire to depose Hussein, Bush was hemmed in by the same constraints that had bound Clinton. There seemed little chance of justifying an unprovoked military invasion to depose Saddam. And then, in one stroke, Osama bin Laden removed the domestic constraint. It was the attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, that changed the landscape. The insider accounts that have surfaced in the past two years show that within days of the attacks, Bush had ordered his advisors to find some way to connect the terrorist threat to Iraq and Saddam. It was plain that the attacks had created a window of opportunity with regard to public opinion, which was now pliant enough to allow Bush to contemplate an ambitious plan for regime change.<sup>19</sup>

The attacks of 9/11 in fact allowed Bush to think about advancing along *two* fronts. The first was global in scope, made possible under the rubric of the ‘war on terror’. Within the political elite, the ‘war on terror’ was immediately perceived as an extraordinary opportunity to build upon the expansionist program of the 1990s.<sup>20</sup> Soon after the attacks, the United States launched a massive, unprecedented expansion of military and logistical institutions – bases, surveillance, prisons, training programs, etc. – around the world. Bush was riding the crest of a worldwide wave of sympathy, pushing through agreements in Central Asia, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East that even in the recent past would have been inconceivable.<sup>21</sup> What is more, there was an unimpeachable, multilateral face to the expansion, easily packaged for public consumption. For as long as it lasted – and no-one could yet predict how long the sympathy would last – American military projection could be presented as nothing other than self-defence. Building on it was natural, almost effortless.

The second front that Bush wanted to open up, that of Iraq, would not be so easy. The American public could probably be managed, but it would be another matter to sell it globally. And this latter problem was salient because of the second constraint that had bound Clinton – the worries about containing the fallout from regime change. To many in foreign policy circles, an invasion would be foolhardy if carried out without the support of European and regional allies. But this brought with it other, related problems. If the allies were to be relied upon, then their own domestic constraints would have to be respected and this in turn would require a highly adroit management of diplomacy and propaganda. The most dovish of the American policy elite were sceptical of the viability of this project. Still, the gains to be had from this operation made it attractive to circles beyond the Bush cabinet. In the Democratic Party elite, the basic ambition to remove Hussein was already well established, and they could not have missed the significance of 9/11 as an opening for such a campaign. Despite the risks involved, the fact that there was a window of opportunity was not lost on anyone.

What separated the administration from its interlocutors was not the issue of whether or not to invade Iraq. Only a very few of the political elite rejected the idea outright. There was not even much disagreement over whether or not the US would need allies, i.e. on the choice between unilateralism and multilateralism. Bush seems to have had every intention of forging the broadest alliance he could muster. The disagreement was over two issues. The first was whether or not to prioritise the ‘war on terror’ – i.e. the global alliance system and its military benefits – over an invasion,

at least in the immediate term. The dovish critics urged that Bush ought to concentrate on the former, because it would cement new alliances and give added strength to more venerable ones; over time, these strengthened alliances could then be put to use in a careful offensive against Saddam. The worry among these critics was that, by alienating the European and regional allies, a maladroit lurch toward war would undermine the campaign for regime change, as well as derailing the global thrust. The more hawkish critics were also worried about an invasion's potential for disrupting the wider expansionist agenda. Unlike the doves, however, they were more open to the idea of a simultaneous advance on both fronts. Nevertheless, like the doves, they insisted that the invasion be handled in a way that preserved the alliance system.

The second disagreement concerned the instruments with which to construct the coalition for the invasion. Most of the critics listed above, with the exception of Henry Kissinger, viewed the United Nations as the essential means to this. The Bush cabinet, however, seemed to regard the raw power of the United States – in all its dimensions, not just the military – as something of a gravitational force, which would enable them to attract a 'coalition of the willing' regardless of how the UN, or any other international agencies, reacted. Through much of 2002, the administration displayed a quite cavalier attitude to how the members of the Security Council were receiving their message – although by the end of the year they shifted to a more accommodating approach, in no small measure owing to the advice of their critics. It was not that they saw the members of the Council as irrelevant, they just believed that they could get the relevant members' cooperation outside the Council's bureaucratic procedures. This was also the view put forward by Kissinger, whose own views seem to be closest to the administration's. Whereas to the administration's critics, especially the doves, it seemed the height of folly. Through the summer and fall of 2002, therefore, both sets of critics launched a massive campaign to urge Bush back to the established instruments of international diplomacy.

In the public debate, prominent doves included Warren Christopher and Madeleine Albright, with Zbigniew Brzezinski occupying a position between the two groups. The hawks – who far outnumbered the doves – included James Baker, Lawrence Eagleburger, Brent Scowcroft (though Scowcroft was closer to the doves at one point) and most of the Clinton Democrats, including Clinton himself. Henry Kissinger could be included in this group too, though he was far enough on the hawkish end to be close to the Bush administration's position.

*The fictional rift*<sup>22</sup>

The bulk of the debate over invading Iraq was relatively short, lasting less than six months after the summer of 2002. Its famous first salvo was an op-ed piece by Brent Scowcroft, the elder Bush's National Security Advisor, on August 15; this was followed ten days later by an intervention by James Baker, who had been Secretary of State under the same administration. In the coming weeks, they were joined by Lawrence Eagleburger on the Republican side, and, on the Democratic side, by many members of Clinton's foreign policy team, including the ex-president himself. Adding their weight were veterans of administrations past, including Kissinger and Brzezinski.

From the cabinet members of the elder Bush, it was Scowcroft who expressed the gravest doubts about the invasion. But while the title of his piece was 'Don't Attack Saddam', its content was far less categorical. Scowcroft never made a case for abandoning the idea of an invasion; instead, he maintained that since Saddam was not an imminent threat, it would be hard to build a coalition against him at this point. On the other hand, there was already international support for the 'war on terror' – i.e. the larger project of expansion – and it was prudent to pursue this to a fuller extent, and revisit the idea of invasion later: 'the more progress we make in the war on terrorism... the greater will be the international support for going after Saddam', he concluded.<sup>23</sup> This was not a warning against invading – it was advice on how best to approach it.

James Baker's intervention was openly encouraging, as reflected accurately in its title, 'The Right Way to Change a Regime'.<sup>24</sup> He immediately pointed out that regime change was not Bush II's idea, but was a continuation of 'the policy of [his] predecessor'. Further, given that other means had failed, 'the only realistic way to effect regime change is through the application of military force, including significant ground troops to occupy the country... Anyone who thinks we can effect regime change in Iraq with anything less than this is simply not realistic'. But this commitment involved serious risks, chief among which is that 'unless we do it the right way, there will be costs to other American foreign policy interests, including our relationships with practically all other Arab countries'. The best way to minimise this risk was to avoid having 'to go it alone'. Again, like Scowcroft, the call was not to abandon the idea of regime change, but to recognise that it would have to be done with the help of allies. Virtually the same position was taken by Lawrence Eagleburger, also from the first Bush administration. In an interview just days after Baker's editorial, he expressed his agreement with the need for regime change, but warned that it would be 'very wrong for us, without allies, to go in'.<sup>25</sup> The invasion could not work without

allied support, and for that, Bush had to carry a coalition along with him, especially Iraq's neighbours.

On the Democratic side, the reasoning was very similar, beginning with Richard Holbrooke, who endorsed the commitment to topple Saddam: 'The administration has rightly called for regime change'. But he warned that 'few other nations in the world, and especially in the region, will *openly* subscribe to such a goal'.<sup>26</sup> The only way to make it possible for allies to sell the agenda to their publics was to acquire a resolution from the UN Security Council, allowing the use of force if Hussein refused the entrance of weapons inspectors. In the coming weeks, Sandy Berger and former Assistant Secretary of State Jamie Rubin both went on the air, declaring their support for regime change – but with the proviso that it be handled in a fashion that carried the allies along, preferably through the UN.<sup>27</sup> But most significant was the support of Clinton himself in several appearances during the fall and winter of that year. He never, on any occasion, declared his opposition to an invasion. He observed instead that 'I think there is the right way and the best way to do it', which was to seek a Security Council resolution authorising the US to use force.<sup>28</sup>

If the need was to go to the Security Council, then, regardless of whatever back-room manoeuvring Bush and Powell relied upon, they also had to help any state supporting the US there to win over their domestic constituencies. For this, the advice was simple – Bush had to 'make his case' before the public, present enough evidence of Hussein's military threat, to pass muster in the public eye. This is what worried both groups of critics, the doves and the hawks, the most. Unless Bush handled this part of the campaign skilfully, potential allies would not be able to line up with him, because they would be too embattled at home. As Madeline Albright explained, the 'challenge... is to *frame a choice* for Europe that most of Europe can embrace with dignity'.<sup>29</sup> Clinton also made the same point: 'Here's what's going on', he told the NBC, '[America's allies] don't want it to look like they're being railroaded into going by [i.e. around] the UN... So we have to look like we're determined, but not eager, to go to war'.<sup>30</sup>

The critics were not engaging Bush on the actual facts of the matter, or to derail the plans for an invasion. Had they wanted to, they could have made their stand on the weapons issue. Because of its absolute centrality to Bush's public relations effort, the claim about Hussein's weapons programme was open to devastating attack – especially by members of the Clinton administration – if they were interested in scuttling Bush's attack plans. But, instead, Clinton backed the general authenticity of Bush's accusations, while urging him to make a credible *public* case. Thus, he declared during

an interview in September that ‘I think that Saddam Hussein clearly has chemical and biological weapons’ and that, however many he may have had in 1998, ‘he’s doubtless developed more’.<sup>31</sup> The task for Bush was to package a propaganda campaign that would create the political space to act on this. ‘I think we should try to get a – a United Nations resolution through calling for free, clear, and unfettered inspection, because that will give us a chance to build a much broader international coalition if we do actually attack Iraq’ – inspections were thus called for, not to discover if biological and chemical weapons existed, but to help cobble together the needed coalition. Once it was in place, Bush not only could go in, but should: ‘then we *have to attack*, to get rid of this vast store of biological and chemical weapons *that I believe he has*’.<sup>32</sup>

#### *A spurious multilateralism*

On the basic matter of regime change, then, there was no objection from either wing of the foreign policy establishment. The debate was over how Bush should organise the campaign to depose Hussein, and what the appropriate timing ought to be. As to the first issue, the advice coming from the critics seemed to be warning Bush away from a unilateral approach. Certainly, this is how the argument has come to be remembered in many quarters – a struggle between Bush’s unilateralism and the critics’ call for multilateralism. But if we examine the critics’ statements, their interpretation of multilateralism drained it of any real content.

For Bush, there were two dangers involved in going to the UN. The first was that the Security Council might not play along. On this, Bush’s critics were very careful not to suggest that the invasion should be *conditional* on the Council’s permission. Again, there was complete agreement between the Republicans and Democrats on this. ‘We should’, Baker advised, ‘*try our best* to not have to go it alone’. Eagleburger advised that ‘I would *do what I could to try* and build an international consensus’.<sup>33</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, in an op-ed in December, pointed to the dangers of rebuffing the UN – yet concluded not with a demand that the UN be respected, but only that ‘if [rebuffing the UN] can be avoided, every effort should be exerted to make that happen’.<sup>34</sup>

No-one expressed the cynicism of this tactic more openly than Henry Kissinger.<sup>35</sup> In his television appearance in mid-August, Kissinger agreed that, no doubt, it was important to bring the allies along. But the really critical issue was ‘whether one should give them a veto’ over any decision Bush might want to make’, i.e. whether he should predicate the invasion on international consensus.<sup>36</sup> And the answer to this was categorically negative.

Kissinger then issued a remonstrance to Scowcroft. When asked whether Bush II ought not to follow the advice of Scowcroft and try to first build an international consensus around the need for war, Kissinger simply rejected the premise. 'I disagree with his analogies', he announced. The first Bush had never allowed himself to be dictated to by his allies:

In the first Gulf campaign, President Bush solved the problem [of potential resistance from allies] by deploying a massive American force in the region *well before* he had a coalition. And so if countries wanted any influence over our action, they were almost obliged to join the coalition. And I think if one looks at the record, one will find that most of the allies joined the coalition after... 'Bush 41' had made clear that he would defend the independence of Kuwait, *if necessary, alone*.<sup>37</sup>

The basic principle of Kissinger's position was that a Great Power does not allow itself to be bound by the demands of lesser nations – and on this, there was agreement across a spectrum of critics. In the event that the Security Council slapped down Bush's requests, all of them, from dove to hawk, agreed: having made a 'best-faith effort', as Holbrook called it, Bush could then turn to his allies and launch an invasion – with allies, but, if need be, without the UN's backing.<sup>38</sup> The term 'international consensus' thus referred, not to the actual body of opinion in the world, but the opinion of those powers that agreed with the US.

Still, this did not settle the matter, for there was a second danger. It might turn out that even if a resolution was passed making new demands on Hussein, he might very well agree to them. This would then derail the plans for regime change. For this, Clinton and Holbrook had a practical suggestion: make the demands of the resolution so stringent that Iraq could not possibly accept them. The resolutions, Clinton advised, 'have to be totally intrusive. They have to be non-limited... And the resolution should also say that if he doesn't allow or if, later, he stops them [the inspectors], then the United Nations is authorized to use force'.<sup>39</sup> Holbrooke also called for 'air-tight, no-notice, anywhere, anytime inspections', as did Brzezinski.<sup>40</sup> The attractiveness of this, Holbrooke observed, was that, 'it is highly unlikely that Saddam will agree if... it's an air-tight, no-notice, any-time, anywhere inspection regime'. The likelihood of Saddam's refusal was thus being built into the resolution. Holbrooke concluded that the beauty of the plan was that 'he will sooner or later violate it if the inspectors go in, and we'll have the cause for war if we need to proceed'.<sup>41</sup> Here too, there was complete



agreement, across the spectrum. The point of the whole exercise was not to discover if his weapons existed; it was, instead, to acquire the diplomatic cover needed to *justify* the invasion to the public.

Two points seem to emerge fairly clearly from the preceding discussion. First, there was no real dissent from the plans for regime change, or even of its taking the form of an invasion. The concern was about its timing. This was best expressed by Albright, who was perhaps the most sceptical about Bush's course of action. But while she continued in her public appearances to express doubts about Bush's strategy, in closed settings she was more forthcoming about her motives. She saw very well the need for regime change, but she was worried that Bush simply did not have either the alliances or the post-invasion logistics set up for the operation to work. In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee she observed that the basic rationale for going to the UN was to 'buy time' to set up the needed support structure for a successful action – not just logistical, but the needed political alliances and, just as importantly, post-invasion plans.<sup>42</sup> This meant, in practical terms, putting off the invasion for some time and using the political capital, and the breathing space, from the 'war on terror', to work toward preparing for the eventual invasion. The call to focus on the anti-terror campaign was thus not intended to displace the commitment to regime change in Iraq, but to make it more effective.<sup>43</sup>

The second point to emerge is that the purported urging of a multilateral approach by Bush's critics is something of a red herring. Bush never denied his need for allies; his critics, on the other hand, never intended that he should actually defer to his allies in any meaningful sense. The disagreement was over the instrument, or the strategy, with which to secure the alliance, on the United States' terms. While Bush did threaten to undertake the invasion alone, by the late summer of 2002 his administration had committed itself to seeking allies – both for material reasons, and for public relations. It was just that, to achieve this end, the Bush strategists took the UN as something of a nuisance. If the point was to put together a coalition, why not just forge ahead, in the manner recommended by Kissinger, and then wait for the flock to gather? Bush's declarations of his willingness to go it alone were designed to convince allies of the seriousness of his resolve – they were not meant to deter alliances.

To the critics, this just ignored the basic political realities. Allies could not simply line up behind him with an indifference to public opinion. Bush seemed to be operating under a false assumption that he could just follow the path his father had taken, as described by Kissinger. But there was a fundamental difference between the situation in 1991, and that which

obtained in 2002. While Hussein was clearly an aggressor in the earlier instance, and a threat to neighbouring countries, there was no clear sign of impending danger from him in the latter instance. Such a case would have to be constructed – and until it was, allies would find it much harder to slide in behind him than they had ten years prior. Bush was urged to go to the UN because, in this context, making a case to invade Iraq would be impossible without its cover and its sanction. The UN endowed the alliance with a level of legitimacy essential to the whole enterprise. The critics were perfectly clear that if the ruse did not work, if the Security Council did not relent, then he was free to gather up his allies and move in – so why not try? If this was multilateralism, then it was, as Robert Kagan wryly observed, ‘multilateralism American style’.<sup>44</sup>

Against the backdrop of all the portentous claims that have been made about the revolt of the elders, the deep rifts, the lurch to unilateralism, etc., the actual difference between the administration and its critics may appear almost trivial. But to suppose this would be a mistake. There was a real, and serious, tactical issue involved. The problem with Bush’s approach was that he failed to appreciate the reality of his allies’ predicament. Every time he announced that he intended to remove Hussein regardless of what the UN recommended, he inflamed public opinion in Europe and the Middle East, making it that much harder for potential allies to line up behind him. When members of the Bush administration encountered resistance, their reaction was to pour scorn on their counterparts, again arousing nationalist resentment, and further isolating themselves. There was a system in place for engineering allies’ consent, which Bush was ignoring: the usual combination of bribes, threats, and inducements, all of which were usually carried out behind the scenes, while a script was to be carefully followed in public, allowing allies to come into the fold. Bush’s folly was that he was pulling the rug from under his allies’ feet.

There was an even bigger stake involved. Bush had decided to advance on two fronts at once, the global expansion under the ‘war on terror’, and regime change in Iraq. But if the latter was mishandled, the lead-up to it could create rifts and fissures where they had not existed before. And this could, in turn, undermine not only the possibility of a successful regime change in Iraq, but also the global strategy. Hence, even though it was a debate over tactics, the stakes involved were significant. Bush was gambling that he could not only advance on both fronts, but also that he could parlay success in Iraq into a large advance in his broader global agenda; his critics were worried that, through his mis-steps, he could squander the opening that 9/11 had presented, and undermine the advance on both fronts.

*The dénouement*

Since the critics' ire was directed primarily at Bush's tactics, it should not be surprising that, as Bush softened his stance over time, the attacks began to dissipate. Starting in September 2002, Bush did in fact launch something of a rapprochement with the United Nations. His address to the General Assembly on September 12 initiated a six-month campaign to 'play out the UN string', as Albright pithily advised.<sup>45</sup> In November he secured a new resolution, UN 1441, which provided for the intrusive inspections that Clinton, Brzezinski, Holbrooke, and others had called for. And then, as a crowning act, Powell delivered his largely fictional presentation to the Security Council on February 5, 2003. As this campaign progressed, the critics responded by offering kudos to Bush for finally seeing the light, prodding him to stay the course and continue to make his case with public opinion.

In early September, after it became known that Bush was about to address the UN General Assembly, Brent Scowcroft resurfaced, in his first public appearance after the August op-ed. When asked if he was still critical of the administration, he maintained the media representation of his opposition had been exaggerated. He added that he 'ha[d] no problem with regime change', but was worried that an invasion of Iraq might conflict with the 'war on terror'. He continued, 'I am not saying don't go after him. I'm saying let's put all this in perspective and remember that when we go after him, we need to have the support of the world community behind us because we need that support for the war on terrorism'. So, three weeks after his intervention, he admitted that he was feeling 'much better now, because I think that the direction the president is taking is exactly the right direction, to reach out to our friends, to get the UN involved. *That's exactly what I was trying to get across*'.<sup>46</sup>

Having signalled that he was willing to 'play out the UN string', Bush now went to Congress to seek a broad-ranging mandate to enforce the UN inspections on Hussein, with force if need be. Among rank-and-file liberal democrats, there was considerable resistance to the idea, especially the open-ended character of the power Bush was seeking. There was an effort among these forces, and even centrists like Joseph Biden, to block the resolution, or at least to significantly curtail the authority it would grant Bush. But as word of this got out, in September, it was the Democratic Party leadership that moved swiftly to squelch the opposition. Richard Holbrooke, Madeline Albright, Dennis Ross, Kenneth Pollock, and weapons expert David Kay organised a series of secret meetings with Democratic congressmen, in which they were told in no uncertain terms to vote for Bush's resolution. The party

leadership made the case that military force was the only viable option for dealing with Hussein. When, as a last ditch effort, Joe Biden tried to water down the resolution's provisions, Richard Gephardt added his weight to the other side, derailing the effort to craft an alternative resolution.<sup>47</sup> Bush was granted his wish.

In the end, it is remarkable how far Bush did move towards adopting the recommendations of the political establishment. He even went beyond them in seeking a second resolution from the UN Security Council, something the Democrats and the Bush I advisors explicitly warned him against.<sup>48</sup> But Blair prevailed upon him, seeing it as crucial for his own political survival. The problem was, in part, that this was too little too late. When the Security Council met right before the invasion, it did not give an explicit assent. The months of chest-thumping, vilification, name-calling, etc. seemed to have been counterproductive. But the Security Council's recalcitrance was fundamentally due to the fact that the invasion of Iraq was, when stripped to its essentials, an unprovoked attack on a devastated, defenceless nation, which posed no imminent danger to anyone, and which had already suffered grievous losses over the past decade. Even if Bush had gone to the UN right at the outset, even if he had managed his public relations more effectively, it should not be assumed that he would have successfully brought the European allies into the fold. Bush's strategy of using American power as a gravitational force, independently of the UN, did not just fail because of its intrinsic flaws. It failed also because the cause that it was trying to sell, to package, was, to public opinion outside the US, blatantly false.

#### RETHINKING THE OIL CONNECTION

The absence of any deep division within the political class on the Iraq issue has some important implications. The first and most obvious is that it requires scaling down the attribution of responsibility to the Bush strategists for pushing through the invasion. The argument that the attack on Iraq was the work of a neo-con cabal, or that it was pushed through over the objections of the wider establishment, cannot be sustained. There was in fact a quite deep elite consensus on the desirability of military action. The neo-cons were still absolutely central to the actual push for war – it did not issue from sheer momentum or from a collective mobilisation of the entire political class. But it is important for the moment to move on to a further implication of the discovery that the push toward Iraqi regime change was strongly bipartisan. And this has to do with oil.

Here, though, the obsession that journalists and intellectuals have had with the role of Cheney's oil connections seems misplaced. It is sometimes

argued that Cheney's commitment to the invasion reflected the outlook of the oil majors, who were eager to move into the region and establish their dominance. Cheney's ascension to office created an opening for the pursuit of this agenda. Dilip Hiro, for example, concludes that 'gaining privileged access to Iraqi oil for American companies was a primary objective of the Pentagon's invasion of Iraq'.<sup>49</sup> If the desire to open up Iraq for new investment had been a primary motivation, then simply lifting the sanctions would have sufficed. It did not require an invasion. The retort to this, as expressed by Hiro, is that that oil majors did not just want access to the fields, but wanted to dictate the terms on which access was secured – better guaranteed returns, more upstream investments, and even a chance at grabbing the region for themselves, to the exclusion of majors from other countries.

Even if that motivation had been present among the majors, and even if it had been what drove Cheney, the preceding analysis demotes it as a main interest behind the invasion. It has acquired its status as a prime cause of the invasion because of the assumption, widespread among commentators, that the broader elite was deeply sceptical about regime change. If most of the political establishment was hesitant about the war, then it elevates the motives of the war's proponents as its primary cause – if it was only the oil interests who really wanted the war, then it is their narrow interests that explain the war's occurrence. But in light of the preceding analysis, the most that can be said about oil interests is that they were but one in a much wider constellation of interests committed to regime change. Oil contracts may have been one goal for attacking Iraq, but they cannot, without further evidence, be elevated to the primary interest. To find the motives for the war, it then becomes important to uncover the source of the wider consensus, which bound the coalition together.

The wider consensus was linked to oil, but more broadly. It is highly unlikely that the policy establishment would have been so easily recruited to the project of regime change – with all its risks, all its regional and international ramifications for the global expansionist project – if its main function was to swell the oil companies' profits. The concern was a broader one. It was that with Iraq's ascension to the top of the oil market, the prospect of its independence from American domination carried intolerable political consequences. If sanctions were to be lifted, and if Hussein remained in power, it would mean a loss in power for the US and its regional allies, and an increase in power for not only Hussein, but also for other rival powers. So if the sanctions had to go, so did Hussein. Had the stakes in the invasion been less portentous, the conflict within the political elite during the run-up to the invasion would no doubt have been a great deal more intense.<sup>50</sup>

## WHAT THE NEO-CONS' ROLE WAS – AND WAS NOT

I have tried to show that, in fact, there were doubts within the foreign policy establishment about Bush's approach to the Iraq problem. But they were about the actual capacity to carry out the invasion, not about the need for it, or to its morality. And they were not inconsiderable. But two factors intervened to keep the misgivings within limits. The first was that, in the changed situation of the post Cold War era, there had not really been a test of what actual American capabilities were. It had been thirty years since the US had been involved in a major neocolonial occupation, and it was the first time since its rise to global status that it did not face any serious rival. This made it a more open question than it had been for some decades what American geopolitical and military capabilities actually were. No doubt, there was a keen awareness of the potential dangers involved in toppling a state. But there was also room for considerable optimism about the defence and diplomatic corps' abilities to impose their will on the subject populations.

This is where the second factor made its impression. The grandiose claims being made by the neo-conservative ideologues about American prowess, in both the diplomatic and the military realm, were able to attract adherents. For almost a decade, talk of a 'revolution in military affairs', which was ideal for the new world order, and which would catapult the military to new heights, had been gathering momentum in defence circles.<sup>51</sup> Added to this were the predictions about the welcome that American troops would receive in Iraq, the natural alliance waiting to be forged with the Shias, their antipathy toward Iran, etc. In political as well as military matters, the neo-cons and policy wonks were predicting easy success.<sup>52</sup> In normal circumstances, these claims would have not acquired an audience. But in the context of post-9/11 America, they served as a palliative, to paper over the lingering doubts that elites harboured. Since the capacity of the empire in this new world was something of an unknown, since the target regime was broken and powerless, the promises coming from neo-conservative intellectuals had a surface plausibility. What to many outside elite circles seemed an outrageous and irrational plan, did not elicit the same reaction within the halls of power. It seemed, instead, like an audacious leap – risky, yes, but with enough chance of success to make it a gamble worth taking. Critics, while sceptical, were willing to give the scheme a chance.

Only in this limited sense was the war a creature of the neo-cons. They provided a concrete plan of action, and political prognosis, which made a venture that once seemed prohibitively dangerous, now appear realizable. But the background commitments – to a new imperialism, the turn away from

containment, the preference for regime change, the shift to a military focus, and the cynical approach to the UN – all this was accepted by Democrats and internalised by virtually all of the wider establishment.

This does not by any means imply that the contribution of the ideologues and strategists around Bush was trivial. In a period where doubts about the practicalities of an invasion coexisted with genuine confidence in American capabilities, the contributions of neo-cons and the militarists was critical to swinging the balance toward war. It certainly cannot be predicted with any confidence that, had Gore been president, he would have invaded just as Bush did. The Democrats did not *call* for war – they gave it their assent and their support *after* Bush placed it on the agenda. They were willing to be persuaded, just as were the older policy experts. Had they been in the White House, it is not clear that, lacking the ideologues' clarity of purpose, they would have overcome their doubts and moved ahead. But given their background assumptions, and the opening provided by 9/11 to break out of the impasse on Iraq, it is certainly a distinct possibility that they would have.

## CONCLUSION

The concern during the lead-up to the war had been that, if mishandled, the invasion and its fallout could not only backfire regionally, but also undermine the wider global agenda that the US was pursuing. Five years later, this is precisely where the US finds itself. The diplomatic cover that 9/11 had provided has not only dissipated, but has been turned into its opposite by the disaster in Iraq. In global perceptions, American standing is at the lowest ebb it has ever been in recent history. The military capabilities of its empire are stretched to their limits as Iraq has become a sinkhole for its forces. And politically, it has become marginalised in global and regional developments to an extent unimaginable a decade ago. In Asia, Latin America, and even the Middle East, alliances and agreements are being forged which not only ignore the US, but which explicitly contravene its dictat.

Nowhere are these predicaments more deeply felt than in the Middle East, the epicentre of Bush's debacle. The question that confronts the next administration – and the political elite more generally – is how to prevent a further erosion of power in the region, and, even more, how to restore it. The most common conclusion drawn is that the setbacks in Iraq spell the end of the neo-conservative experiment. This may be true, but the issue is to gauge what the distinctive components of this experiment were, which set it apart from the status quo, and which of those will be rejected.

It is virtually certain that the commitment to global expansion, to the consolidation of American military and economic primacy, will not be open to question, whoever leads the next administration. The adjustment will certainly be of the means, and not the ends, of foreign policy. On the question of the means, the most common projection among commentators is that Bush's departure will signal a return to multilateralism. Is that not, after all, what Bush's critics were urging in late 2002? They were certainly calling for a multilateral approach, but this was to be 'multilateralism, American style' – and it is certain to be the kind that is practised in the future. And a return to *this* status quo does not mean a turn away from militarism, or a greater appreciation for international law. Bush's critics were not motivated by either of these concerns. Their worry was a practical one, that unless the invasion was carried out carefully, with the logistical and political supports in place, the subsequent occupation could very well spin out of control. This carries two central, and worrisome, implications.

The first is that, in a return to traditional statecraft toward the Middle East, the commitment to American primacy and 'multilateralism, American style', most likely means a strategy that relies to a great extent on the use, or the threat, of force. In other words, the central problem with a return to the status quo, is that the status quo itself rested to a large measure on the use of force. But now, with American credibility having been dealt a serious blow by the debacle in Iraq, the most pressing problem will be to restore this credibility – through a demonstration of American power and resolve. Thus, a return to the status quo cannot be taken to mean a retreat from the use of violence and militarism. If the Iraq occupation's setbacks are to trigger a new, less bellicose US policy in the region, it will have to be based on a fundamental rethinking of America's role in the region, and of the region's place in its global strategy. This hardly seems likely.

This brings us to the second implication of the concern expressed by the political elite. Since it was a practical concern, a concern about the *management* of the occupation, the lessons they draw may very well relate to this narrow issue, and not to the broader problem of an occupation itself. Hence, the lesson that they draw may not be that occupations in this day and age are a political impossibility – but rather that, next time, they will get it right. Though this seems unlikely, it is hard to ignore the fact that the dominant framing of the occupation's implosion is not that it was doomed to failure from the start, but rather that the Bush administration *mishandled* it. In many of the most widely discussed books and documentaries since 2004, this has emerged as the most common criticism – a focus on what they did wrong.<sup>53</sup> It is only the rare exception that hazards the view that, given Iraqi



political realities, there was almost no chance of a smooth transition to a new regime that would be stable and cohesive without a long occupation.<sup>54</sup> And so long as there was going to be an occupation of some duration, it would meet with deep and unyielding resistance.

The upshot is that while there will no doubt be a great deal of hand-wringing about what went wrong in Iraq, there is no reason to assume that it will lead to a turn away from militarism and aggression. To do so would require a deep shift in the overall US strategy in the Middle East. Certainly, the most recent developments in Iraq, and in the American political debate around the occupation, offer little grounds for optimism. Bush has been negotiating a permanent presence of US troops in Iraq, located in at least four massive military bases, and as many as 58 – a goal that McCain has endorsed.<sup>55</sup> While Obama has been cagey on the issue of troops,<sup>56</sup> his rhetoric on more general matters in the region has been extraordinarily bellicose, from the notorious threat to attack Pakistan, to the sabre-rattling against Iran, and, most recently, the astonishing promise to hand over an undivided Jerusalem to Israel – a promise that, according to Israeli commentator Uri Avnery, goes beyond anything promised by a presidential candidate in recent memory.<sup>57</sup> Hence, the impulse to continue with traditional patterns of coercive diplomacy is unmistakably strong.

But pulling in the other direction is the fact that the two basic constraints that have tempered American aggression – domestic public opinion and the state's practical capabilities – are now more binding than ever. With its military over-stretched, and an economic recession – or worse – well in train, the domestic resource base for militarism is thinner than at any time during the past century; while its regional allies – especially Israel – may want to support a display of force in the region, it is now infinitely harder to sell to their populations than it was five years ago. With regard to domestic public opinion in the US, the sentiment against the occupation is so strong that, even before news of a potential recession started to appear, Bush's popularity was the lowest of any president in recent history. A new military venture, or continued brinksmanship by the next administration, will only exacerbate the fatigue and further erode political legitimacy.

The political elite is thus in a bind – and it is doubtful that there is any real sense among the key protagonists as to what is the best course of action. For progressives, however, this should heighten the sense of urgency. The stakes involved for American global power are such that, to break out of the impasse, the political elite could very well settle on a high-risk, high-returns gamble. This has almost certainly been Cheney's motivation for his unceasing efforts to manage a confrontation with Iran – and during the Democratic

primaries, the candidates' participation in the threats and intimidation are a sign that they are willing to keep that option on the table.

On the other hand, the impasse also provides an opening for mobilisation. There are elements within the political establishment who are calling for a thorough re-evaluation of American foreign policy – within both the Democratic and Republican parties. While it is out of reach to push for a turn away from the basic imperial agenda, there is nevertheless room, even with the current level of political organisation, to call for a more modest programme – for the United States to follow international law, respect national sovereignty, and withdraw immediately and unconditionally from Iraq. This would be the first step to changing the basis for American diplomacy in the Middle East, and potentially, beyond. It will have to come from the weight of popular pressure, for as we have seen, the commitment to traditional, coercive diplomacy runs very deep in the US political establishment.

## NOTES

This paper has benefited greatly from the advice and comments of Bashir Abu-Manneh, Gilbert Achcar, Robert Brenner, Thomas Ferguson, Jeff Goodwin, Nivedita Majumdar, and Michael Schwartz.

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- 3 See the report in Patrick E. Tyler, 'US Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop', *New York Times*, 8 March 1992.
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- 5 The fullest study of this process is Patrick J. Hearden, *Architects of Globalism: Building a New World Order During World War II*, Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002.
- 6 The process of expansion has been studied extensively, but the best general analysis, even forty years after its publication, remains Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy*,

- 1943-1945, New York: Random House, 1968, and his successor volume, *The Limits To Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945-1954*, New York: Harper & Row, 1972.
- 7 George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, New York: Knopf, 1998.
  - 8 See the account in Andrew and Patrick Cockburn, *Saddam Hussein: An American Obsession*, Second Edition, London, Verso, 2002.
  - 9 The indispensable source for understanding alignments within the Clinton administration on this issue is Kenneth Pollock, *The Gathering Storm*, New York: Random House, 2002.
  - 10 Ibid., pp. 85-90, 98-99.
  - 11 The reference is to Albright's infamous 1996 interview on the news show, *60 Minutes*, in which, when queried if she thought the half-million Iraqi deaths under the sanctions regime could be defended, she replied, 'we think the price is worth it'.
  - 12 A central document on matters of oil, sanctions, and the choices open to the Bush administration is *Strategic Energy Policy: Challenges for the 21st Century*, a joint report by the James Baker Institute for Public Policy at Rice University and the Council on Foreign Relations, edited by Edward L. Morse and Amy Myers Jaffe, published in 2001. For the changed oil situation between 1990 and 2000, see pp. 13-20.
  - 13 Ibid., p. 19.
  - 14 Worries about the sustainability of sanctions had been expressed by Zbigniew Brzezinski, Brent Scowcroft and Richard Murphy in 1997, in 'Differentiated Containment', *Foreign Affairs*, May/June, 1997. See especially, pp. 20, 29.
  - 15 Former National Security Advisor General William Odom advocated this line publicly and, we may assume, in closed policy circles.
  - 16 See *Strategic Energy Policy*, p. 40.
  - 17 Pollock, *The Gathering Storm*, pp. 94-95.
  - 18 Ibid. For worries about regional consequences, see pp. 48, 70.
  - 19 See also Gilbert Achcar, *The Eastern Cauldron: Islam, Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq in a Marxist Mirror*, New York, Monthly Review: 2004, 'Introduction', esp. pp. 34-41. The introductory chapter to this book is an indispensable analysis of US Middle East policy in the 1990s and beyond. In addition, he locates the role of the second Intifada for the larger Middle East strategy after 2000, which I cannot do here.
  - 20 For a revealing account of just how low terrorism actually was on the list of Bush's priorities after 9/11, see Noam Chomsky, *Failed States: The*

*Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006, pp. 30–37.

- 21 For some material on how the US was able to parlay worldwide sympathy into longer-term concessions around the world, see Phyllis Bennis, *Before & After: US Foreign Policy and The September 11th Crisis*, New York: Olive Branch Press, 2003.
- 22 This was the title of an op-ed by Charles Krauthammer, which rejected the notion that there was a deep split within the Republican Party. See ‘Fictional Rift’, *Washington Post*, 13 September 2002.
- 23 Brent Scowcroft, ‘Don’t Attack Saddam’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 August 2002.
- 24 *New York Times*, 25 August 2002.
- 25 Lawrence Eagleburger, Interview with Tim Russert, *Meet the Press*, NBC, 1 September 2002.
- 26 Richard Holbrooke, ‘Do We Declare War? International Support will only come through International Means’, *Contra Costa Times*, 1 September 2002. Emphasis added.
- 27 See James P. Rubin, Interview on *After Hours with Maria Bartiromo*, CNBC, 9 September 2002; for Berger, see his interview on *The News with Brian Williams*, CNBC, 15 November 2002.
- 28 Bill Clinton, Interview with Katie Couric, *NBC Today Show*, 11 February 2003.
- 29 Madeline Albright, ‘Bridges, Bombs, or Bluster?’, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October, 2003, p. 9. Emphasis added.
- 30 Bill Clinton, Interview with Katie Couric, *NBC Today Show*, February 11, 2003.
- 31 Bill Clinton, Interview with Katie Couric, *NBC Today Show*, 27 September 2002.
- 32 ‘Former President Bill Clinton and Charles Stewart discuss Clinton’s induction into Arkansas Black Hall of Fame’, *NBC News Transcripts*, 20 October 2002. Emphasis added.
- 33 Eagleburger, Interview with Tim Russert.
- 34 Zbigniew Brzezinski, ‘The End Game’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 December 2002.
- 35 Henry Kissinger, Interview, *Meet the Press*, NBC, 18 August 2002.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 This was not just a slip, or off-the-cuff remark. Five weeks later, in testimony before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee on September 25th, Kissinger used almost identical language to describe the First Gulf

- War, and the basic logic of how displays of power could bring allies on board.
- 38 Holbrooke, 'Do We Declare War?' See also his comments in an interview with Brit Hume, *Fox News*, 1 September 2002, where he again clarified that, if the UN declines to pass the needed resolution, the US can move ahead with its allies and invade anyway.
- 39 Bill Clinton, Interview with Katie Couric, *NBC Today Show*, 27 September 2002.
- 40 Holbrooke, interview with Brit Hume; Zbigniew Brzezinski, interview with George Stephanopoulos, *This Week with Sam Donaldson and Cokie Roberts*, ABC, 1 September 2002. Brzezinski recommended the establishment of a 'very intrusive unilateral inspection' regime.
- 41 Holbrooke, interview with Brit Hume.
- 42 US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Next Steps in Iraq: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 107th Congress, 26 September 2002. Berger, during these same weeks, made almost identical points in the public media: that Bush needed to make his case to the public, pull together a coalition, and then present a plan for post-invasion Iraq. Like Albright, he urged that the great utility of going to the UN was that it would buy time to complete the preparations for the invasion. See especially his interview on *CNN American Morning With Paula Zahn*, CNN, 14 November 2002, and his comments on *The News with Brian Williams*, CNBC, 15 November 2002.
- 43 In the same hearings, Henry Kissinger also presented testimony, in which he was more supportive of an invasion in the short term. When Albright was pressed whether she was rejecting outright the justification for an invasion, or even wanting to put it off for some years, she denied it, adding that 'we are probably not as far apart as it might seem. It is a matter of timing and, our favorite diplomatic word, nuance in terms of when we do things'.
- 44 Kagan, 'Multilateralism American Style', *Washington Post*, 13 September 2002.
- 45 US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Next Steps in Iraq* (Albright testimony).
- 46 Brent Scowcroft, Interview with Judy Woodruff, CNN, 9 September 2002. Emphasis added.
- 47 Michael Isikoff and David Corn, *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006, pp. 125-28. It might very well be that the decision to support Bush's resolution was motivated by electoral worries. But it should be noted

that it was, for the most part, the elected officials in the party who were willing to take the fight to Bush – the very people who were most vulnerable to electoral worries; and it was non-elected leaders (with the exception of Gephardt) who pushed them to back Bush’s resolution.

- 48 Clinton, in his February 11 interview with Katie Couric, advised: ‘I don’t think the President needs another Security Council resolution’. Holbrooke was even more categorical in September: ‘There’s got to be one resolution and one only. And if the Russians or the French or somebody try to water it down, then we’ll pull out of the Security Council and go to our allies...’. Holbrooke, Interview with Brit Hume.
- 49 Dilip Hiro, ‘How the Bush Administration’s Iraqi Oil Grab Went Awry: Greenspan’s Oil Claim in Context’, 25 September 2007, available at <http://www.tomdispatch.com>.
- 50 Space precludes a fuller engagement with the ‘oil grab’ argument – but its flaws run deeper than I have been able to show here. For some recent analyses that are in line with the one I have offered see the excellent articles by Tom O’Donnell on Iran: ‘The Political Economy of the US–Iran Crisis: Oil, Not Nukes, is the Issue’, *Z Magazine*, 19(6), 2006, and ‘Understanding the Washington–Tehran Deals’, *Z Magazine Online*, April, 2008, available at <http://www.zcommunications.org/zmag>.
- 51 Andrew Bacevich, *American Empire*, Chapter 5.
- 52 On this, see Gilbert Achcar, ‘Bush’s Cakewalk into the Iraq Quagmire’, *Counterpunch*, 5 May 2004, available at <http://www.counterpunch.org>. Achcar also emphasises, rightly, the role of Iraqi émigré intellectuals and politicians in propagating fantasies about a cakewalk.
- 53 This is the theme, inter alia, of Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, New York: Penguin Press, 2006; David L. Phillips, *Losing Iraq: Inside the Postwar Reconstruction Fiasco*, Boulder: Westview, 2005; Charles H. Ferguson, *No End in Sight: Iraq’s Descent into Chaos*, New York: Public Affairs, 2008.
- 54 One such exception is Jonathan Steele, *Defeat: Why America and Britain Lost Iraq*, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008.
- 55 For the early plans, see Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt, ‘A Nation at War: Strategic Shift; Pentagon Expects Long-Term Access to Key Iraq Bases’, *New York Times*, 20 April 2003. Its most recent incarnation was revealed by Patrick Cockburn. See ‘Revealed: Secret Plan to Keep Iraq Under US Control’, *The Independent*, 5 June 2008.
- 56 He has shifted from declaring a total withdrawal, to a withdrawal of ‘combat troops’, to more vague declarations of a need for flexibility. See

the revealing retrospective in Edward Luce, 'Obama Under Fire over Iraq Troop Pledge', *Financial Times*, 24 June 2008.

57 Ury Avnery, 'No, Obama Can't!', 10 June 2008, available at <http://www.antiwar.com>.