

CHAPTER 4

The Iraqi Quagmire

THE MOTIVES

The true motives for the Bush administration's determination to overthrow Saddam Hussein remain shrouded in mystery. It is possible to conjecture what these motives were, but it is impossible to identify them with certainty, because they have never been discussed. Nevertheless, it is worth looking back in order to better understand the roots of today's quagmire in Iraq.

One motive may have been the assertion of American supremacy—a demonstration that the United States sets the agenda. Iraq may have been chosen as a demonstration project for the simple reason that it was doable. Bob Woodward summarizes Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz's comments at a key September 15, 2001, strategy session:

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Attacking Afghanistan would be uncertain. He worried about 100,000 American troops bogged down in mountain fighting in Afghanistan six months from then. In contrast, Iraq was a brittle, oppressive regime that might break easily, it was doable. He estimated that there was a 10 to 50 percent chance Saddam was involved in the September 11 terrorist attacks. The US would have to go after Saddam at some time if the war on terrorism was to be taken seriously.*

In an interview in May 2003, Wolfowitz said that while several factors lay behind the administration's policy, "for bureaucratic reasons we settled on one issue, weapons of mass destruction, because it was the one reason everyone could agree on."†

Taken on its own this would be hubris of the worst kind. But there are more realistic geopolitical considerations that can be adduced in favor of toppling Saddam. Perhaps the single most important impediment to America's control of its own destiny is its reliance on foreign oil. Saudi Arabia has proven itself a treacherous ally: It had maintained political stability at home by supporting Islamic extremism abroad. In the aftermath of September 11, this balancing act was no longer possible and the Saudi regime

*Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 83.

†Paul Wolfowitz, quoted in Sam Tanenhaus, "Bush's Brain Trust," *Vanity Fair*, July 2003, 169.

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was in danger of becoming as unstable as the Shah's Iran had been. Iraq is strategically located, and its oil reserves are second only to those of Saudi Arabia. By occupying Iraq and moving American military bases from Saudi Arabia to Iraq, the United States could establish a secure alternative to Saudi oil. There was another factor to be taken into account. Global oil supplies were becoming increasingly tight, and the spigot on Iraqi oil had to be reopened sooner or later. But to lift the embargo with Saddam Hussein still in power might have made him too dangerous; therefore, he had to be removed from power.

The other important consideration was Israel. A large number of religious fanatics in the United States believe that the rebirth of Israel presages the apocalypse and the second coming of the Messiah. Hence, in addition to the traditional pro-Israel lobby, Israel also has strong support from the evangelical right—and that is the core of the president's constituency. Since the apocalypse involves the destruction of Israel, Israel might be better off without friends like this. President Bush, however, felt obliged to pay attention to his constituency. Establishing a strong military presence in Iraq would help to transform the political complexion of the entire region. This would reassure Israel and weaken the Palestinian extremists sufficiently to allow some progress toward a settlement on terms acceptable to Israel and its U.S. supporters. All of Europe, including Britain's Tony Blair, considered the issue of Palestine the

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top priority, but President Bush wanted to deal with Iraq first. This was a major source of conflict between the United States and Europe and led to an American commitment, which has not been kept, to give high priority to a Middle East peace settlement after the war.*

Oil and Israel likely loomed large in the administration's policy deliberations, but these were not the reasons publicly offered by Bush and his advisers for the invasion of Iraq. A person could not even raise these issues without being called unpatriotic. President Bush received a mandate for waging war against terrorism. Only by skillfully weaving the themes of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction together and raising the specter of terrorists gaining access to weapons of mass destruction could the president justify going to war with Iraq. Whatever the case for invading Iraq, the American public has every reason to feel deceived.

THE PREPARATIONS

Internally, the Bush administration had been divided on the issue of invading Iraq. The hawks, concentrated in the Department of Defense, were unconditionally com-

*The conflict between Europe and the United States was sharpened by the fact that the far right in Europe is anti-Israel whereas the far right in America is pro-Israel—and the far right is in power in the United States.

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mitted. They had their own timetable and did not want to get bogged down in a UN process that might have interfered with their timetable. In any case, as American supremacists, they were ideologically opposed to depending on the United Nations. By contrast, the State Department was anxious to ensure the legitimacy of military intervention. The hawks had the upper hand because they enjoyed the allegiance of the vice president and the ear of the president. A resolution authorizing the president to take whatever action he considered appropriate was rammed through Congress with the complicity of some Democrats, notably Congressman Richard Gephardt and Senator Joseph Lieberman, preempting a more measured and restrictive resolution in preparation by the leaders of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, Senators Joseph Biden and Richard Lugar.

At the United Nations, the other permanent members of the UN Security Council, particularly France, were eager for the Security Council to play an active role. As the drumbeat of war grew louder, the Security Council managed to agree on Resolution 1441 in November 2002. The resolution was carefully crafted so that the question of whether the United States had to return to the United Nations for authorization before engaging in military action was left open. The French managed to convince the Americans that the United States had something to gain and nothing to lose from agreeing to this formula. If Sad-

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dam Hussein violated the resolution, there would be no problem in passing a second resolution; indeed, the French would join the United States in military action. If Saddam complied with the resolution, yet the United States remained determined to go to war, it could still do so; the moment when the United States bypassed the United Nations would be merely postponed.

The resolution itself imposed a tough inspection regime and put the burden on Iraq to prove that it did not possess weapons of mass destruction. The good-cop/bad-cop routine between the two factions in the Bush administration had served a useful purpose: It showed how effective the Security Council could be with strong U.S. leadership. If the objective of American policy had truly been to control Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, that could have been achieved by continued inspections. But that is not what the Bush administration was interested in; it was determined to remove Saddam.

The UN inspectors found no evidence of any weapons of mass destruction, and as Hans Blix (executive chairman of the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission) put it, Saddam was cooperative in the process but not on the substance. Saddam failed to provide an accounting of the destruction of the material that he was known to have possessed. Nevertheless, when Blix ruled that certain missiles exceeded the legal limit imposed on their range, the Iraqis started to comply with the order to

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destroy them. The United States, however, was set to go ahead with the invasion. When he was told about it, President Chirac of France took umbrage. He sent his foreign minister to the Security Council and threatened to veto a second resolution. Secretary of State Colin Powell took this as a betrayal of trust and joined forces with the hard-liners within the administration. Using questionable evidence, he accused Iraq of violating UN Resolution 1441. France then actively lobbied against a new resolution, and the United States had to go ahead with the invasion without UN authorization.

THE INVASION

The invasion itself was a resounding military success. It was accomplished faster and with fewer casualties than planned, even in the absence of Turkish participation. Moreover, after the military victory, the Security Council passed a second resolution (1483), which recognized the occupation of Iraq and provided a legal basis for it. Neither France, where President Chirac was under fire for hurting French commercial interests, nor Germany, which was eager to mend fences, dared to raise any objections. Indeed, Resolution 1483 went further than any previous UN resolution in retroactively legalizing unauthorized military action. In effect, the resolution conferred most of

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the attributes of Iraqi sovereignty upon the occupying powers for an indefinite period. It can be argued that this goes beyond the limits of existing international law, but the resolution cannot be deemed illegal because under international law, the UN Security Council has legislative powers. The ideologues of American supremacy have been arguing that international relations are relations of power and that international law merely legitimizes what power has wrought; with regard to Iraq, they were proven right.

In other respects, however, they were wrong. The arguments they used to justify the invasion—Saddam's possession of weapons of mass destruction and his connection to al Qaeda—turned out to be unsubstantiated or downright false. When the weapons of mass destruction could not be found, President Bush fell back on the justification of liberating Iraq from a heinous dictator and introducing democracy. That is indeed a noble cause, which could have justified the invasion if the president had made a case for it. But that was not the case that President Bush had presented to Congress, and presumably, Congress would not have endorsed it.

Democracy and open society are very difficult to establish, even if people have the best of intentions. With all the experience I have gained in various parts of the world, I would consider Iraq the last place to chose for a demonstration project. Iraq has no experience of democracy, and it

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is rife with latent ethnic and religious conflicts. Like many states of the Middle East, Iraq was artificially created by the Western powers after the disintegration of the Ottoman empire so as to allow the greatest possible scope for Western influence. Three *vilayets* of the Ottoman empire were combined to form Iraq. The Kurds, who constituted a majority in the north, were divided between Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. A Sunni majority around Baghdad was combined with a Shiite majority around Basra and the marshlands. A number of other ethnic and religious minorities were dispersed throughout Iraq. A Sunni-Hashemite king, brother of the king of Transjordan, was imposed on this concoction. When the monarchy was overthrown in 1958, the subsequent regimes maintained the political domination of the Sunni minority with ever-more repressive methods.

In light of the ethnic and religious divisions, the introduction of democracy could easily lead to the disintegration of the country. It was this consideration, reinforced by pressure from the neighboring Arab rulers, that stopped the first President Bush short of unseating Saddam in the first Gulf War. That was the hornet's nest that the second President Bush stirred up when he invaded Iraq. Introducing democracy was clearly not uppermost in his mind. As mentioned before, the real motives remain shrouded in mystery but nation building could not have ranked high among them. After all, circumstances were

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much more favorable in Afghanistan, but the Bush administration failed to take advantage of them. One of the reasons I was so opposed to the invasion of Iraq was that the action was liable to give nation building a bad name.

THE AFTERMATH

As I mentioned earlier, it is difficult to understand how President Bush could have embarked on the second Gulf War with so little forethought about, and preparation for, the aftermath. There had been plenty of warnings both from those responsible for the first Gulf War and from our European allies.* But the customary caution of geopolitical realists yielded to the arrogance of the American supremacists ensconced in the Defense Department. They cooked up their plans in secret and did not expose them to the sunlight of public discussion. As brilliant as the military part of the plan was, the aftermath has been a dismal failure. Apparently, the planners had expected the Iraqi army to stay out of the fray and hoped to preserve it so that it could provide the mainstay for security afterward. A rather shady Iraqi émigré, Ahmed Chalabi, was groomed to become

*Brent Scowcroft, "Don't Attack Saddam," *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2002; Chris Patten, "Jawjaw, Not War-War: Military Success in Afghanistan Has Encouraged the US to Ignore European Doubts About Confronting the 'Axis of Evil'," *Financial Times*, February 15, 2002; James A. Baker III, "The Right Way to Change a Regime," *New York Times*, August 25, 2002.

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the head of an Iraqi interim authority, and the émigré son of a prominent Shiite cleric, Abdul Majid Al-Khoei, was supposed to assume leadership of the Shiite community.

That is not what happened. During the invasion, some Fedayeen Saddam put up resistance, but the rest of the armed forces, including the elite Republican Guards, melted away under the onslaught. Military occupation was followed by uncontrolled looting, and the victory turned into shambles. Upon returning, Al-Khoei was promptly murdered in the mosque in Najaf. The Iraqi population—far from greeting the Americans as liberators—became increasingly resentful.

Saddam Hussein appears to have planned on waging a guerrilla war. He may have had that in mind as early as October 2002, when he released all the prisoners from Iraqi jails. The guerrilla tactics forced the invaders to behave like occupying powers, suspicious of the civilian population and inflicting insults and injuries that turned the population against them. Iraq also acted as a magnet, attracting terrorists trained by al Qaeda in Afghanistan. With the Saudi authorities cracking down on them, sleeper cells in Saudi Arabia woke up and moved to Iraq, escalating the violence. Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with September 11, but President Bush has a point when he says that Iraq has become the central front in the war on terror—although killing soldiers qualifies as guerrilla warfare, not terrorism.

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It is hard to imagine how the plans of the Defense Department could have gone more awry. I had been prepared for unintended adverse consequences, but reality has far exceeded my imagination. We find ourselves in a quagmire that is in some ways reminiscent of Vietnam. Having invaded Iraq, we cannot extricate ourselves. Domestic pressure for withdrawing is likely to build, just as it did in the Vietnam War, but withdrawing would inflict irreparable damage on our standing in the world. In this respect, Iraq is worse than Vietnam because of our dependence on Middle Eastern oil.

It could have been avoided. Nobody forced us into it; on the contrary, everyone warned us against it. We did not need to do it to fight terrorism or to protect ourselves from weapons of mass destruction. We had succeeded in getting a very strong resolution out of the Security Council, and as long as the inspectors were on the ground, Saddam Hussein could not do anything that would hurt us. It was our choice to remove him; we set the agenda.

Admittedly, Saddam was a heinous tyrant and it was a good thing to get rid of him. But at what cost? The occupying powers in Iraq serve as a focal point for attracting terrorists and radicalizing Islam. Our soldiers are forced to do police work in full combat gear. They have not been trained for it. They serve as a ready target for all those who want to take potshots at Americans.

The cost of occupation is estimated at a staggering \$160

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billion for fiscal years 2003–2004, \$73 billion for FY 2003 and \$87 billion in a supplemental request for 2004 submitted at the last minute in September 2003. But even that is an understatement. Of the \$87 billion, only \$20 billion is for reconstruction, but the total cost of reconstruction is estimated at \$60 billion. For comparison, our entire foreign aid budget for 2002 was \$10 billion. Moreover, while it is normal for the United States to put up one-third of the total cost of an international aid project, in this case we will be lucky if a donors' conference will produce more than a few billion dollars from the rest of the world. That will leave the United States holding the bag.*

There are many other tyrants in the world who also need to be removed; this is one of the major unsolved problems of the current world order. Why should we devote all these resources to Iraq? What we have done in Iraq does not solve the problem; on the contrary, it renders a solution more difficult. The American public is liable to turn against military intervention on political grounds just as President Clinton's intervention in Somalia on humanitarian grounds has rendered humanitarian intervention unpopular. Already the United States has been reluctant to get engaged in Liberia, causing unnecessary suffering.

*The donors' conference in Madrid in October 2003 produced pledges of \$13 billion from donors other than the United States. This was achieved by smoke and mirrors. For instance, it included \$500 million from Iran for financing pilgrimages. More than two-thirds of the pledges were in the form of credits.

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We are bogged down in Iraq. Not only are our soldiers' lives in danger, but our military might has also been compromised. Our armed forces have been programmed to bring overwhelming power to bear, as indicated by the code name for the Iraqi invasion: Shock and Awe. They are not trained to perform occupation duties.* Our presence in Iraq was intended to pacify the Middle East; we have achieved the opposite result. Using the invasion of Iraq as a frightening example and Iraq as a military base, we were going to put pressure on neighboring countries; now that we are overextended in Iraq, our ability to project power elsewhere has been greatly reduced.

There is no easy way out. The Bush administration is eager to get the United Nations more involved but is unwilling to make the necessary concessions. President Bush addressed the Security Council in September 2003, but his unrepentant speech was not well received. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan made it clear that the role of the United Nations had to be clearly defined before he could put his personnel at risk. Resolution 1511 unanimously passed on October 16 did not allay these concerns. In practice the military responsibilities of the occupying powers have to stay with the Coalition, and there will be little support forthcoming from other countries or the United Nations itself. The outlook is grim, but we have

*Wesley Clark, *Winning Modern Wars: Iraq, Terrorism, and the American Empire* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003).

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no alternative to sticking it out and paying the price for our mistake. Eventually a different president with a different attitude toward international cooperation may be more successful in extricating us.

My particular concern is that the debacle in Iraq will prevent future efforts at nation building. I find it unconscionable that the Bush administration is seeking to justify the invasion of Iraq by invoking Saddam's atrocities now that the original grounds cannot be substantiated. We had tolerated Saddam's abuses for many years without doing anything about them. We must find a way to get rid of the likes of Saddam, but the Bush administration's behavior in Iraq renders the task more difficult.