

The Case for Caution in Iraq
Perspectives from the First Bush Administration
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Background: The U.S. invasion began on March 19, 2003 and lasted until May. The US put 148,000 troops into Iraq, UK put 45,000. Other allies put in smaller numbers (South Korea, Italy, Poland, Australia, Georgia, Ukraine, Netherlands, Spain). A study of media coverage before the war showed that 71% of those featured on news programs supported the war, 3% opposed the war, and 26% were neutral. At the time of this forum, the UN was still discussing whether to send in more inspectors to find Weapons of Mass Destruction but in retrospect the Bush administration had already made up its mind. The last U.S. troops were removed in December, 2011. At that point, the coalition had lost 4,805 personnel, the Iraqi army had lost 17,690, and 1,554 contractors had died. Total allied deaths were 25,286. Those on the resistance side had lost 34,000 to 37,000.

We now face an unusual situation regarding Iraq. The United Nations is organizing a new regimen of strict sanctions. International weapons inspectors are ready to re-enter Iraq with enhanced Security Council authorization. The Iraqi government, whether out of deceit or fear of the consequences of non-compliance, has said it will cooperate. The world community is moving towards the coerced dismantling of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction even as the United States prepares for war. On September 11 when the Vice President was interviewed and asked whether we would support a new wave of ultra-strict sanctions and inspections, he said bluntly and without smiling, "The policy of the administration is regime change." There is no reason to believe this is different today.

Throughout the 1990s I spoke on several occasions to US officials in the Middle East and elsewhere about our policy towards Iraq. At that time our policy resembled a three-legged stool: first, contain the Iraqi army to prevent future attacks on its neighbors; second, maintain strict sanctions and inspections; and third, encourage someone to assassinate Saddam Hussein. I once asked a US ambassador if we really thought that killing Saddam would make a difference since the Baath party regime was very ideologically homogeneous and was dominated by Saddam's al Tikriti clan. I said Saddam would probably be replaced with his cousin so how could it make a difference? "We think it would," was the reply.

Today the US policy of regime change is quite different. We do not want sanctions or inspections, which we do not believe could ever be effective. We do not want to remove just Saddam

but to dismantle the whole Baath regime. The position of administration officials is that Iraq has a level of literacy and sophistication that, freed from Baath authoritarianism, could make it a true democracy, a model for the Islamic world. If Iraq is freed, its example would produce a domino effect throughout the region with Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia quickly following into a new democratic mode. Because the United States is now in a unique position of world power, so the argument continues, there is a short window of opportunity when we can force leftover authoritarian regimes to change even if they do not want to. The democratization of the Islamic world, the last bastion of non-democratic politics, would be one of America's greatest contributions to World Civilization. They would thank us, in time.

This was the argument¹

It is worthy of note that among the critics of these policies are key officials from the first Bush administration, including National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, Secretary of State James Baker, and Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger. Secretary of State Colin Powell is there also, as are retired military personnel such as Admiral Zinni. In 1991, with the Kurds of northern Iraq in full rebellion against Saddam and with the Shia of southern Iraq also in full rebellion--both encouraged by the Americans--we decided to pull back and leave them to their fate. This decision—and the parallel issue--Why didn't we go into Baghdad?—are among the most controversial of the Bush administration. One answer is obvious. A "longer war" said Secretary Baker in his memoirs, "even one lasting only a day or two more--could result in needless American casualties" (p. 436). But there was more at work than a commitment to American lives. There were concerns about long-term strategic issues that even now should cause thoughtful people to hesitate before sending 50,000-200,000 American soldiers into Iraq. Let me read some excerpts from the revealing memoirs of Secretary of State James Baker. Baker's observations show how complex and multi-layered this situation is.

The Baker Memoirs

At a certain point in that pre-war period known as Desert Shield, there were rumors that Saddam might actually pull out of Kuwait unilaterally. Ted Koppel described a day of panic in Washington when that city was in the grips of what he called ironically the "Great Peace Scare." Secretary Baker repeated the point:

¹ See comments at end of text.

Among our coalition allies, the Saudis and Kuwaitis in particular were very concerned, fearful that talks might lead to the nightmare scenario of Saddam leaving Kuwait with his full military might intact (p. 352).

The “nightmare scenario” of a non-war. Clearly, our goal was not merely the liberation of Kuwait, peacefully if possible--the goal our leaders had articulated to the public--but the destruction or at least disabling of the Iraqi military.

Just before the war began, James Baker and Iraqi Vice President Tarik Aziz met in Geneva for a round of face-to-face talks. The ostensible purpose of this meeting was to negotiate a way out of war, but there was never the slightest chance of that. The memoirs reveal a far different focus, specifically, how the war would be fought. Would Iraq use its chemical and biological weapons? Would the US use its nuclear capabilities? Baker made Aziz an offer: If you do A we will do B; if you do *not* do A we will *not* do B.

I then made a point 'on the dark side of this issue' that Colin Powell had specifically asked me to deliver in the bluntest possible terms. 'If the conflict involves your use of chemical or biological weapons against our forces,' I warned, 'the American people will demand vengeance. We have the means to exact it. With regard to this part of my presentation, this is not a threat, it is a promise. If there is any use of weapons like that, our objective won't just be the liberation of Kuwait, but the elimination of the current Iraqi regime, and anyone responsible for using those weapons would be held accountable (p. 359).

Read the words. Baker was telling Aziz that our goal was **not** regime change. In the aftermath of the war and the collapse of the Kurdish and Shia rebellions, the administration was criticized for not following through and “finishing the job.” But they had a different perspective. Secretary of State Dean Acheson once said that the secret of successful diplomacy was to know your own mind, and to make sure that the other fellow did also. This was a model case in which the Americans knew exactly what they were doing, and what they were **not** doing, and so did the Iraqis. Secretary Baker:

Our detractors accused us of inciting the Kurdish and Shiite rebellions against Saddam in the days immediately following the end of the war, then dooming them by refusing to come to their aid, either through US military action or covert assistance....We never embraced as a war aim or a political aim the replacement of the Iraqi regime. We did, however, hope and believe that Saddam Hussein would not survive in power after such a crushing defeat. Ironically, the uprisings in the north and south, instead of lessening his grip on power as we felt they would, contributed to it, as he skillfully argued to his army that these events required his continued leadership in order to preserve Iraq. When he managed to consolidate his power, Saddam scrambled our strategic calculations. The result was a sobering reminder that the consequences of success are often far more intricate and unpredictable than anticipated (p. 435).

Regarding the decision to end the American land invasion after four days, well short of Baghdad, Baker offered the following observation, following the same logic:

[P]ressing on to Baghdad would have caused not just a rift but an earthquake within the coalition... as much as Saddam's neighbors wanted to see him gone, they feared that Iraq might fragment in unpredictable ways that would play into the hands of the mullahs in Iran, who could export their brand of Islamic fundamentalism with the help of Iraq's Shiites and quickly transform themselves into the dominant regional power. This was also a genuine concern of the Bush administration and many of our allies as well. Just as fears of Iranian expansionism helped shape US prewar policy toward Iraq [during the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-88], this same phobia was a significant factor in our postwar decision making" (p. 436-37).

Regarding the uprisings themselves, Baker explained the reason for our pullback, especially the fear that their success would have created what he called a "geopolitical nightmare" (p. 435). His reasoning illustrates the reality that in politics the choice is seldom between good and bad but is often between bad and god-awful. A prudent person may well choose bad to head off god-awful.

We did not assist the insurrections militarily, primarily out of fear of hastening the fragmentation of Iraq and plunging the region into a new cycle of instability. The Shia were quite naturally perceived as being aligned with Iran, and the Kurds, who had demanded an independent state of Kurdistan for decades, were very fragmented in their leadership and were a constant source of concern to Turkey. For those geopolitical reasons, we were wary of supporting either group. We believed it was essential that Iraq remain intact, with or without a more reasonable new leadership. The Lebanonization of Iraq was viewed adversely by all of us. We believed these rebellions would inevitably increase unwelcome pressures within Iraq and the entire region. Our caution in this regard was further reinforced when the Iranians injected themselves into the fray. Seeking to capitalize on the regional power vacuum created by the war to challenge its arch-rival, Iran quickly moved to support the dissidents (P. 439).

Near the end of the memoir, Baker noted an ironic development :involving the hoped-for departure of Saddam Hussein.

Perhaps we should have remembered that Saddam had always been a wily survivor, somehow finding a way to confound his enemies. To this day he remains in control of his country, while the administration that defeated him in a textbook case of diplomatic and military skill is no longer in power. In occasionally reflecting on this perverse twist of history, I'm reminded of something Tariq Aziz said to me in Geneva: 'We will be here long after you're gone.' It was one of the few things he said that proved to be true (p. 442).

Some Observations

Let me finish with an observation and an anecdote: Iraq has one of the oldest and greatest civilizations in the Arab world. Its potential is enormous. But modern Iraq is handicapped by the fact that it is a state with artificial boundaries, made up of three very different provinces cobbled together after World War I by the British for their own reasons. 55% of Iraqis are Shia Arabs, marginalized, politically oppressed, and historically linked to Iran. They suffered terribly after the 1991 uprising, and before. 20% are Sunni Arabs from the center of the country. The regime is drawn heavily from this population, including over 80% of military officers. They see themselves as the true Iraqi patriots and will fight to preserve their country. The third element are 20% Kurds, a people with their own non-Arab identity whose population spills over into Turkey and Iran. They have long wanted their own state, and have been treated with exceptional brutality by the regime. Considering that they have both oil and water, an independent Kurdistan would be a uniquely rich land, critically positioned between Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. Its Declaration of Independence would also spark a one hundred year war, beginning with a probable Turkish invasion.

After thirty years of Baathist authoritarianism, the political fabric of Iraqi society has been severely damaged. A post-Baath era would be fraught with dangers of fragmentation and vulnerability to outside manipulation. Powerful regional enemies—especially Iran and Israel—are surely waiting for whatever opportunities arise. Our president has stated that we would commit to the long-term reconstruction of Iraq. I doubt it, which leads to the anecdote I mentioned.

It comes from the memoir of President Reagan and involves the US intervention in Lebanon in 1983. The Syrian army had gone into that country in 1976 to stabilize a deteriorating situation. Officially they were there on the invitation of the Lebanese government and the Arab League but in fact they had their own long-term designs. In 1982 the Israeli government of Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon invaded Lebanon and wreaked havoc on the land. They too had their reasons and long-term designs. The massacre of 850 Palestinians in the Sabra and Chatilla refugee camps came to symbolize the brutality of the situation, and its potential to escalate. The President decided that the only way to get the Syrian and Israeli armies out of Lebanon was to send in US marines to support the nearly defunct Lebanese government. Reagan tells what happened next.

When the foreign minister of Lebanon visited Washington that spring, I told him I was more determined than ever that the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Lebanon would resume soon, and that until that happened, our marines would remain in Lebanon. He said that it had been his experience with American presidents that they at first seemed willing to tackle the problems of

Lebanon, but that they ‘advanced so far and then retreated.’ I told him I didn’t have a reverse gear (p. 442).

Some of us remember all too well that terrible day in October, 1983 when we woke up on a beautiful fall Sunday only to learn that 241 Marines had been blown away as they slept. Two minutes later in another camp within earshot, 58 French soldiers were also killed. The President’s memoir tells how he reacted to these events:

As we were learning, the situation in Beirut was much more difficult and complex than we initially believed. The central government of Lebanon that we were trying to help had all but wasted away...Muslim and Christian believers [were] splintered into many competing sects...Our policy was based on the expectation that the Lebanese army would subdue the militias of these rival groups and reestablish the central government’s control over the country while the multinational force [that’s us] helped maintain order...[But our officers] hadn’t counted on the depravity of a suicide bomber...the irrationality of Middle Eastern politics forced us to rethink our policy there. How do you deal with a people driven by such a religious zeal that they are willing to sacrifice their lives in order to kill an enemy simply because he doesn’t worship the same God they do? ...We had to pull out...there was no question about it (pp. 461-465).

As we think of a US invasion of Iraq, we should ask a host of questions, few of which have been answered. Three are obvious: What is the mission? How do we define success? How do we get out? Two others are unanswerable, but should be prominent in our thinking. First, is it even possible in that troubled, suffering land—after three decades of Stalinist non-politics—for anything resembling a normal political system to emerge out of war, much less a peaceful, vibrant democracy that would be a model for the region? Would the fears and factions of the society, and the pathology that has emerged in the political system, take on a destructive dynamic that would undermine any effort at normalization? Wishful thinking and happy face scenarios are not adequate answers to this question.

Second, does the United States have the staying power to deliver on its promises or would we bail out after the first few hundred American soldiers were blown up in an unexpected attack? I once had dinner with former presidential candidate George McGovern and remember well his comment that “Americans are always up for a three-month war.” But are we up for a ten-year, hundred billion dollar post-war commitment? Leaving a shattered, fragmented state with a non-functioning government and rival warring armies would recreate the situation to which we contributed when we abandoned Afghanistan in 1992. This outcome could well be worse than Saddam Hussein and could set the stage for disastrous consequences for decades to come.

Perhaps this is an overly pessimistic scenario. Perhaps after a dramatic military victory, we will follow through on our commitments and Iraq will have the just, democratic political system it deserves, but don't bet on it. And don't forget the sad, pathetic, irresponsible words of that joyful and optimistic man without a reverse gear: "the situation was much more difficult and complex than we initially believed."

Comments on Page Two

Among those advocating the Iraqi democracy thesis are Professor Bernard Lewis and former CIA Director James Woolsey. Woolsey is close to Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, one of the most influential members of the administration and one of the most articulate advocates of the Arab democracy thesis. Wolfowitz: "I don't think it's unreasonable to think that Iraq, properly managed--and it's going to take a lot of attention, and the stakes are enormous, much higher than Afghanistan--that it really could turn out to be, I hesitate to say it, the first Arab democracy, or at least the first one except for Lebanon's brief history. And even if it makes it only Romanian style, that's still such an advance over anywhere else in the Arab world... You hear people mock it by saying that Iraq isn't ready for Jeffersonian democracy. Well, Japan isn't Jeffersonian democracy, either. I think the more we are committed to influencing the outcome, the more chance there could that it would be something quite significant for Iraq. And I think if it's significant for Iraq, it's going to cast a very large shadow, starting with Syria and Iran, but across the whole Arab world, I think." Quoted in Bill Keller, "The Sunshine Warrior," *New York Times Magazine*, September 22, 2002. Kenneth Adelman is another advocate of this thesis. Adelman was a member of the Reagan administration and is an advisor to the current administration. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Adelman was asked what advice he would give the President. Adelman: "This is a historic moment. You have a mission. It is almost a divine mission. You have one task in life. That is to wage a global campaign against terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Unlike any of your predecessors, including Harry Truman at the beginning of the Cold War, you have no public opposition, no congressional opposition, and meaningless foreign opposition. It is a noble, wonderful mission. Our children's lives will be better for it. You are given the opportunity by tragedy to solve the large problem. It is virtually impossible to wipe out terrorist groups, but, by God, you can wipe out countries that support terrorism. There are two countries that are not easy picking, but not tough--Afghanistan and Iraq. I have no evidence that Iraq was involved in nine-eleven, but I feel it. There is no reason you can't use these ideal conditions to help fulfill your mission." Quoted in Nicholas Lemann, "What Terrorists Want," *The New Yorker*, October 29, 2001.

President Bush on why we did not Overthrow Saddam

George Bush, *A World Transformed*, (1998): "I firmly believed that we should not march into Baghdad. Our stated mission, as codified in UN resolutions, was a simple one--end the aggression, knock Iraq's forces out of Kuwait, and restore Kuwait's leaders. To occupy Iraq would instantly shatter our coalition, turning the whole Arab world against us, and make a broken tyrant into a later-day Arab hero. It would have taken us way beyond the imprimatur of international law bestowed by the resolutions of the Security Council, assigning young soldiers to a fruitless hunt for a securely entrenched dictator and condemning them to fight in what would be an unwinnable urban guerrilla war. It could only plunge that part of the world into even greater instability and destroy the credibility we were working so hard to reestablish." P. 464.

Dealing with the Israelis

February 6: "Our meeting with Arens was difficult and unpleasant. Even though we were on the same side, we were still butting heads over how to respond to the Scud attacks. He was quite emotional, even angry, and made some claims about the damage that most of us thought were exaggerated, demanding that we coordinate retaliation. I was annoyed when he said Israel could do things we could not to destroy the Scuds in western Iraq, and irritated that the Israelis, or at least their hard-liners, seemed to offer so little thanks for what we were trying to accomplish for them. P. 468.