

THE SECOND WAR IN IRAQ:
VARIATION ON A COMMON THEME

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The history of America's involvement in Iraq in the first decade of the 21st century typifies the history of American foreign interventions throughout the 20th century. American foreign interventions have consistently been based on either preserving perceived US interests or promoting American ideals in a foreign nation. In Iraq erroneous assumptions and flawed strategy led from the former to the latter. The Administration decided to identify Iraq as a threat to the United States and embarked on a short decisive military venture to replace the Iraqi government. Flawed policies led to a prolonged occupation and effort at reconstruction. Two fundamental errors caused this. First, American leaders refused to accept views contrary to their ideological principles. Second, the Administration believed Iraqis would gratefully accept American defined solutions and American selected leaders. The goals of this paper are to briefly identify fundamental American ideals, the background that led to the intervention in Iraq, and examine the errors are found in the Iraqi intervention and compare them with other interventions. Last the paper suggests whether actual American policies and actions agree with American ideals.

The United States is a nation of immigrants built by individuals seeking relief from some form of injustice or oppression. They came here seeking religious freedom, personal liberty, and/or the opportunity for economic improvement. They held these goals, these *truths, to be self-evident*. Hence it was *self-evident* that all mankind would seek these goals and that these goals would also be *self-evident* to other nations. Americans would like to believe that their mission is to altruistically foster the American way of life throughout the world, that part of America's destiny is to build nations.

American involvement in Iraq dated from the Eisenhower Doctrine that stated that United States would come to the assistance of any nation in the Middle East threatened by outside aggression. In the 1980's the US supported Saddam Hussein and Iraq in their war against Iran. After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, President George H. W. Bush, reversing US policy, engaged in a brief, decisive military action for the limited purpose of compelling Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. A group of neo-conservatives in the administration including Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz felt that the war should have included the removal of Saddam Hussein from power.¹ These officials were all key parts of the administration of George W. Bush. In the aftermath of 9/11 they seized the opportunity to associate Saddam Hussein with Al Qaeda in order to create an issue to justify the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Hussein. Advice from experts such as Marc Gariasco, a senior Iraq analyst from 1997 to 2003 that no such relationship existed was ignored.²

When George W. Bush became President he had not served in the military and had little foreign policy experience.³ He had a messianic vision of America's mission based on a major religious transformation that occurred when he was around forty years old.⁴ When asked if he consulted his father, George H. W. Bush, about policy matters his response was that he consulted a 'higher father.'⁵ George W. Bush readily concurred with the advice of Rumsfeld and Cheney. This led to the Bush Doctrine. It defined Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as terrorist allies. It embodied a doctrine of pre-emptive defense including the use of nuclear weapons, a presumption of US hegemony with no need for the support of any other nation though allowing for the formation of specific ad hoc

alliances.⁶ 9/11 gave the administration the opportunity to tell the public that Saddam Hussein was associated with Al Qaeda and must be removed.

Administration expectations for Iraq were enhanced by the initial success of the war in Afghanistan. To avoid the mistakes which led to Soviet defeat in Afghanistan the concept of a 'light footprint' was adopted. The essence of this concept was the use of massive airpower supported by limited ground forces and the attraction of support from the local population.⁷ At the time of the invasion of Iraq, this policy appeared to be successful. Subsequent events proved it wrong.

The administration ignored the concerns expressed by the Secretary of State, Colin Powell and the rest of the State Department. Apparent success in Afghanistan and ideological bias made objection to Administrative thinking inconceivable. One of the major early errors was George Bush's decision (NPSC 24) in January 2003 to give responsibility for the reconstruction of Iraq entirely to the Department of Defense.⁸ No real working relationship existed or was established with the State Department.⁹ The State Department had prepared a twelve-volume plan for the reconstruction of Iraq. It was not consulted.¹⁰ The Administration decided to back Achmed Chalabi, an exiled Iraqi leader, as head of the new Iraqi government. The plan was to stay three or four months and install a government backed by Chalabi.¹¹ Iraqi opinion was not considered.

Little advance thought was given to reconstruction. Planning for the reconstruction of Germany began two years before it was needed.¹² Planning for the reconstruction of Iraq began two months before the invasion when Jay Garner was asked to take charge.¹³ While Garner initially supported the plan for an Iraqi government headed by Chalabi and including exiles, he changed his mind when he met with local

Iraqi's in Baghdad who explicitly wanted exiles excluded. The Pentagon and office of the Vice-President refused.¹⁴ Consistently Washington ignored information that did not fit their conceptions.

While George Bush's decision to turn reconstruction over to the Pentagon may have been one major strategic error, the greatest cause for American failure in Iraq was the reaction to widespread unanticipated looting which broke out immediately. Requests to the military to stop it were ignored.¹⁵ Pleas for the protection of museums and libraries were unheeded. These were the repositories of thousands of years of the Iraqi heritage. Looters destroyed them. The only thing protected by the American military was the Oil Ministry. Queried about this in a press conference, Donald Rumsfeld's response was "Stuff happens." Barbara Bodine, representing the State Department in Baghdad asserted that this was the moment the US lost the Iraqi people.¹⁶ Despite the looting, on May 1, 2003 President Bush declared "Mission Accomplished." Subsequently Iraq fell into chaos with the Shiite majority and Sunni minority essentially at war.

As it became obvious that a new Iraqi government could not immediately be installed, Washington decided to create a Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) headed by someone who was the 'right sort of Republican' and would support the neo-conservative agenda. Ultimately, George Bush approved the selection of veteran diplomat L. Paul Bremer.¹⁷ Bremer was well intentioned but believed in crisis management and had a vision that the situation required bold action.¹⁸ The combination of Washington's thinking and Bremer's boldness quickly led to three things that triggered the insurgency in Iraq. First, the radical purge of all members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party from official positions, eliminated key personnel needed for reconstruction

and at the same time created unemployment and resentment.¹⁹ Chalabi supervised the process and used it as an opportunity to purge rivals.²⁰ Second, the entire military, police, and security establishments were disbanded leaving the country without fundamental security and creating an unemployed armed and angry force of over ½ million.²¹ Last, it was decided there would be no provisional government. Instead there was to be a council of 25 advisors to Bremer. A key, highly respected Shiite religious leader, Ayatollah Al-sistani was ignored.²² Ultimately lack of support from Al-sistani made it impossible to create an Iraqi constitution resulting in the formation of a provisional government selected by UN special representative Lakdhar Brahimi. Power was transferred from the CPA to this government in June 2004.²³

From the time of the invasion American administrators operated from within a compound on the grounds of Saddam Hussein's Imperial Palace. It was an isolated 'oasis of calm' called the Green Zone.²⁴ American's rarely ventured outside the Green Zone. Contact with the local populace was discouraged. As one result, American reconstruction efforts bore little relation to the immediate needs for physical security, electricity, water, and sanitation. Grand American style solutions were proposed that went far beyond the immediate needs. As an example John Agresto was hired to rebuild the Iraqi university system. Prior to his arrival he formulated bold plans promoting liberal arts education and academic freedom. He encountered the reality that the Iraqi universities first needed desks and chairs plus books and blackboards. Knowing that \$25 million had been approved to support rebuilding the universities he requested funds for these immediate needs. He was told the funds had already been allocated.²⁵ Typical of approved projects proposed by American universities was one allocating \$4 million to "modernize curricula

in archaeology” at four Iraqi universities lacking desks and chairs.²⁶ In the field of health care American administrators were intent on promoting anti-smoking campaigns when simple steps were needed to prevent diarrhea in children.²⁷ Americans determined that Iraq required a new, American style, fully computerized stock exchange. The old hand methods would not do. Among another things, the fact that electricity was not consistently available was not considered.²⁸

Based on the evidence at hand, responsibility for the failure of American policy in Iraq during the Bush administration must be borne almost entirely by Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz. All key decisions and policies were either fostered or supported by them. The primary reason for the failure was their inability to accept realities that were contrary to their ideological principles.

What comparisons might be made between American involvement in Iraq and other foreign interventions? Viet Nam immediately comes to mind. Foremost, in Iraq as in Viet Nam lack of consultation and support from the local power bases led to insurgency. In both situations unwelcome views from qualified experts in Washington as well as from the field were dismissed by the Administration. The selection of Chalabi to head the Iraqi government parallels the support of Diem. Both were exiles who had no power base within the country. Immediate local needs were ignored in favor of large unrealistic American style projects. There are also differences. In Viet Nam the original goal was to build a government favorable to the US. In Iraq the goal was to overthrow an existing government disliked by the Administration. At this time, the ultimate result of American efforts in Iraq is unknown.

The Bush Doctrine portrayed the Iraqis as terrorist allies in a group that included Iran and North Korea. In other instances the US had defined the enemy in terms of race, religion or ethnicity. In many instances more than one applied. Iranians and Iraqis were Islamic Arabs as were the Saudis. North Koreans differed from the Iranians and the Iraqis on all three criteria. The term 'terrorist allies' worked. Previously Asians and Buddhists had been portrayed as weak and effeminate. Such aspersions were clearly inappropriate in portraying Iraqis and were not a factor.

From the time of McKinley to this date, George W. Bush was a typical President in having little experience in foreign relations and no substantial military experience. No President in this period had both. Only Hoover had experience in foreign relations. Eisenhower was the sole military professional. Like his predecessors George W. Bush lacked experience and expertise to discern the relative merit of differing positions. This is a significant factor that has led to failed foreign relations and military interventions. Iraq was typical.

Through the course of the last century US actions have often failed to match an American notion that we are a nation devoted to building free and democratic societies throughout the world? To cite a few of numerous examples: Despite promises of support, the US refused to support the Hungarian rebellion in 1956 and the Iraqi rebellion of 1991. Lack of public support led Bill Clinton to restrict US efforts at nation building in Bosnia and Kosovo. Both Presidents Bush explicitly rejected nation building as an American objective. The rule of logic dictates only one exception is needed to disprove a rule. Hence to this question the answer is clearly no

Notes

¹ Documentary, No End in Sight

² Documentary, No End in Sight

³ Thomas Paterson, J Garry Clifford, et. al. *American Foreign Relations A History Since 1895 Seventh Edition* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2010), 483.

⁴ Paterson, Clifford, et. al. *American Foreign Relations A History Since 1895 Seventh Edition*, 486.

⁵ Paterson, Clifford, et. al. *American Foreign Relations A History Since 1895 Seventh Edition*, 482.

⁶ Paterson, Clifford, et. al. *American Foreign Relations A History Since 1895 Seventh Edition*, 486,489.

⁷ Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires America's War in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 115.

⁸ Documentary, No End in Sight

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Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2007), 36.

¹⁰ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, 40.

¹¹ Documentary, No End in Sight

¹² Documentary, No End in Sight

¹³ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, 33.

¹⁴ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, 60-61.

¹⁵ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, 40.

¹⁶ Documentary, No End in Sight

¹⁷ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, 60-61.

¹⁸ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, 75,78.

¹⁹ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, 78-80.

²⁰ Documentary, No End in Sight

²¹ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, 84-87.

²² Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, 89-91.

²³ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, 234.

²⁴ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, 3.

²⁵ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, 317.

²⁶ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, 318.

²⁷ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, 242.

²⁸ Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, 259.