

As part of our occasional post-September 11 series on terrorism, contributing editor Michael Klare examines the motives behind America's decision to make Iraq a central objective in the war on terrorism. "If concerns about weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and the export of democracy do not explain the administration's determination to oust Saddam Hussein, what does? The answer [can be found in] the pursuit of oil and the preservation of America's status as the paramount world power."

For Oil and Empire? Rethinking War with Iraq

MICHAEL T. KLARE

The United States is about to go to war with Iraq. By early February, 100,000 United States troops had already been deployed near Iraq, and another 75,000 or so were on their way to the region. Although most European leaders express satisfaction with the UN weapons inspections process, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and other top administration officials have indicated that they will never be satisfied by inspections—only the voluntary disclosure by Iraq of prohibited weapons said to be in its possession by Washington will convince them and the president. War, it appears, is inevitable unless Saddam Hussein is overthrown by members of the Iraqi military or is persuaded to abdicate his position and flee Baghdad, leaving the country in the hands of people willing to do Washington's bidding.

It is impossible at this point to foresee the outcome of this war. Under the most optimistic scenarios—the ones advanced by proponents of the war—Iraqi forces will offer only token resistance and American forces will quickly capture Baghdad and remove Saddam Hussein from office (by killing him or placing him under arrest). This scenario further assumes that the Iraqis will decline to use their

weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or will be prevented from doing so by American military action; that civilian casualties will be minimal; that most Iraqis will welcome their "liberation" from Saddam; that a new, pro-American government will quickly

and easily be put into place; that fighting between competing ethnic factions will be limited and easily brought under control; that anti-American protests in other Muslim countries will not get out

of hand; and that American forces will be withdrawn after a relatively short occupation period of six months to a year.

It is not difficult to imagine less optimistic scenarios. The Iraqis could put up stiff resistance and conduct house-to-house fighting in Baghdad, producing significant American casualties and leading, in turn, to United States air and missile strikes on populated areas, which could result in a large civilian toll. The Iraqis could use their chemical and biological weapons in a final spasm of self-destruction, producing untold civilian and combatant casualties. The surviving Iraqis could turn against their American "liberators," carrying out constant sniping and acts of terrorism. The country's Kurds, Shiites, and Sunnis could fight over the spoils of war, producing widespread carnage and trapping United States forces in the middle. American troops could remain in Iraq for a generation or more, producing hatred and resistance throughout the Muslim world and increased levels of terrorism elsewhere.

Which scenario will prevail? No one can be certain. Those who favor war tend to believe that Iraqi

CONFRONTING TERRORISM

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resistance will be light and that the rest of the optimistic scenario will fall into place. But there are no guarantees that any of this will come to pass, and many experts believe that the possibility of events going awry is very great. In weighing the relative merits of going to war with Iraq, the focus should be on the worst possible outcome, not the best. The central question that needs to be asked is: Are the purported benefits of war so great that they outweigh all the possible negative repercussions? This leads to a fundamental question: Why are we going to war? What is motivating President George W. Bush and his senior advisers to incur these enormous risks?

In their public pronouncements, President Bush and his associates have advanced three reasons for going to war with Iraq and ousting Saddam Hussein: 1) to eliminate Saddam's WMD arsenals; 2) to diminish the threat of international terrorism; and 3) to promote democracy in Iraq and the surrounding areas.

These are powerful motives for war. But are they genuine? Are they what is actually driving the rush to war? To answer this, we need to examine each motive in turn. In doing so, it is necessary to keep in mind that the United States cannot erase all the world's threats. If the United States commits hundreds of thousands of American troops and tens or hundreds of billions of dollars to the conquest, occupation, and reconstruction of Iraq, it cannot easily do the same in other countries; the United States simply does not have the resources to invade and occupy every country that poses a hypothetical threat to the United States or deserves regime change. A decision to attack Iraq means a decision to refrain from other actions that

might also be important for American security or the good of the world.

POINTING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION

Reducing the risk of a WMD attack on the United States is the reason most often given by the administration for going to war with Iraq. A significant WMD attack on the United States would be a terrible disaster, and it is appropriate for the president to take effective and vigorous action to prevent this from happening. If this is, in fact, Bush's primary concern, then he should pay the closest attention to the greatest threat of WMD usage against the United States, and deploy available United States resources—troops, dollars, and diplomacy—accordingly. But is this what Bush is actually doing? The answer is no. Anyone who takes the trouble to examine the global WMD proliferation threat closely and to gauge the relative likelihood of various WMD scenarios would have to conclude that the greatest threat of WMD usage against the United States at present comes from North Korea and Pakistan, not Iraq.

North Korea and Pakistan pose greater WMD threats for several reasons. Both possess much larger WMD arsenals than Iraq. Pakistan maintains several dozen nuclear warheads along with missiles and planes capable of delivering them hundreds of miles; it is also suspected of having developed chemical weapons. North Korea is thought to possess sufficient plutonium to produce one or two nuclear devices along with the capacity to manufacture several more; it also has a large chemical weapons stockpile and a formidable array of ballistic missiles. Iraq, by contrast, has no nuclear weapons today and is thought to be several years away from producing one, even under the best of circumstances. Iraq may have some chemical and biological weapons and a dozen or so Scud-type missiles that were hidden at the end of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, but it is not known whether any of these items are still in working order and available for military use.

Equally important is the question of intention: How likely are these countries to use their WMD munitions? Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has publicly stated that he was prepared to employ nuclear weapons against India in 2002 when New Delhi massed its forces on Pakistan's border and threatened to attack unless Pakistan curbed the activities of Islamic militants in Kashmir. This does not mean that Pakistan would use nuclear weapons against the United States, but it does indicate a

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readiness to employ such weapons as an instrument of war; it is also easy to imagine a scenario in which another leader comes to power who is far more anti-American than Musharraf (who was himself installed through a military coup).

Even more worrisome is North Korea's declaration that it would consider it to be an act of war if the United States and the UN imposed economic sanctions on North Korea as punishment for its pursuit of nuclear weapons—and that it would respond accordingly, turning the United States into a “sea of fire.” Again, this does not mean that North Korea would actually choose to use its nuclear weapons, but it is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which war breaks out and the North Koreans deploy their WMD in a desperate bid to stave off defeat.

And Iraq? The CIA has concluded that Saddam Hussein will not choose to use his country's WMD capabilities against the United States as long as his regime remains intact; only in the case of an imminent United States conquest of Baghdad might he be tempted to employ these weapons.

The Bush administration has also indicated that war with Iraq is justified to prevent Iraq from providing WMD to anti-American terrorists. The transfer of WMD technology to terrorist groups is a genuine concern—but Pakistan is where the greatest threat of a transfer exists, not Iraq. In Pakistan many senior military officers are known to harbor sympathy for Kashmiri militants and other extremist Islamic movements; with anti-Americanism intensifying throughout the region, it is possible that these officers could provide militants with some of Pakistan's WMD and technology. The current leadership in Iraq has no such ties with Islamic extremists; on the contrary, Saddam has been a life-long enemy of the militant Islamists and they generally view him in an equally hostile manner.

It follows from this that a policy aimed at protecting the United States from WMD attacks would identify Pakistan and North Korea as the leading concerns and put Iraq in a rather distant third place. But this is not, of course, what the administration is doing. Instead, it has minimized the threat from Pakistan and North Korea and focused almost exclusively on the threat from Iraq. Protecting the United States from WMD attack is not the primary justification for invading Iraq; if it were, the dis-

cussion would be centered on undertaking an assault on Pakistan or North Korea, not Iraq.

FUEL FOR THE FIRE

The administration has argued at great length that an invasion of Iraq and the ouster of Saddam Hussein would constitute the culmination of and the greatest success in the war against terrorism. Why this is so has never been made entirely clear, but it is said that Saddam's hostility toward the United States somehow sustains and invigorates the terrorist threat to this country. It follows, therefore, that the elimination of Saddam would result in a great defeat for international terrorism and decisively weaken its capacity to attack the United States.

Were any of this true, an invasion of Iraq might make sense from an antiterrorism point of view. But there simply is no evidence of this; if anything, the opposite is true. From what we know of Al Qaeda and similar organizations, the objective of Islamic extremists is to overthrow any government in the Muslim world that does not adhere to a fundamen-

talist version of Islam and replace it with one that does. Under Al Qaeda doctrine, the secular Baathist regime in Iraq must be swept

away, along with the equally deficient governments in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. A United States effort to oust Saddam Hussein and replace his regime with another secular government—this one kept in place by American military power—will not diminish the wrath of Islamic extremists, but fuel it.

In addressing this matter, moreover, it is necessary to keep the Israeli–Palestinian struggle in mind. For most Arab Muslims, whatever their views of Saddam Hussein, the United States is a hypocritical power because it tolerates (or even supports) the use of state terror by Israel against the Palestinians while it makes war against Baghdad for carrying out brutal acts against the Iraqi people. This perception fuels the anti-American current that runs through the Muslim world. An American invasion of Iraq will not quiet that current, but excite it. It is exceedingly difficult to see how a United States invasion of Iraq will produce a stunning victory in the war against terrorism; if anything, it will trigger a new round of anti-American violence. This makes it difficult to conclude that the administration is motivated by antiterrorism in seeking to topple Hussein.

Do these objectives—access to and control over critical oil supplies—justify a war on Iraq?

MAKING IRAQ SAFE FOR DEMOCRACY

The removal of Saddam Hussein, it is claimed, will also clear a space for the Iraqi people (under American guidance, of course) to establish a truly democratic government and serve as a beacon and inspiration for the spread of democracy throughout the Islamic world. Certainly, the spread of democracy to the Islamic world would be a good thing, and should be encouraged. But is there any reason to believe that the administration is motivated by a desire to spread democracy in its rush to war with Iraq?

History sows doubt. Many of the top leaders of the current administration, particularly Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney, embraced Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in the 1980s when Iraq was the "enemy of our enemy" (that is, Iran) and was thus considered a *de facto* friend. Under its "tilt" toward Iraq, the Reagan administration decided to assist Iraq in its war against Iran during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. As part of this policy, President Ronald Reagan removed Iraq from the list of countries that supported terrorism, thus permitting the provision of billions of dollars' worth of agricultural credits and other forms of assistance to Hussein. The bearer of this good news was none other than Donald Rumsfeld, who traveled to Baghdad and met with Hussein in December 1983 as a special representative of President Reagan.

At the same time, the Department of Defense, then headed by Caspar Weinberger, provided Iraq with secret satellite data on Iranian military positions. This information was provided to Saddam even though United States leaders were informed by a senior State Department official on November 1, 1983 that the Iraqis were using chemical weapons against the Iranians "almost daily"; they were also aware that United States satellite data could be used by Baghdad to pinpoint chemical weapons attacks on Iranian positions. Cheney, who succeeded Weinberger as secretary of defense in 1989, continued the practice of supplying Iraq with secret intelligence data. Not once did Rumsfeld or Cheney speak out against Iraqi chemical warfare use or suggest that the United States discontinue its support of the Hussein dictatorship during this period. The current leadership cannot claim a principled objection to dictatorial rule in Iraq: it is only when Saddam is threatening the United States instead of America's enemies that it cares about his tyrannical behavior.

Reason for skepticism about the current Bush administration's commitment to democracy in the

Middle East also stems from the administration's close relationships with a number of other dictatorial or authoritarian regimes in region. Most notably, the United States has developed ties with the post-Soviet dictatorships in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan since the war in Afghanistan. Each of these countries is ruled by a Stalinist dictator who once served as a loyal agent of the Soviet empire: Heydar Aliyev in Azerbaijan, Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, and Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan. Only slightly less odious than Saddam Hussein, these tyrants have been welcomed to the White House and showered with American aid and support. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, two of America's other close regional allies, are also not even remotely democratic. It is difficult to accept the argument that the Bush administration is motivated by a love of democracy in wanting to oust Saddam when it has been so quick to embrace patently undemocratic regimes that have agreed to do its bidding.

OIL AND EMPIRE

If concerns about weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and the export of democracy do not explain the administration's determination to oust Saddam Hussein, what does? The answer is a combination of three factors, all related to the pursuit of oil and the preservation of America's status as the paramount world power.

Since the end of the cold war, policymakers in the United States (whether Democratic or Republican) have sought to preserve America's sole superpower status and prevent the rise of a "peer competitor" that could challenge its paramount position. At the same time, American leaders have become increasingly concerned about the country's growing dependence on imported oil—especially oil from the Persian Gulf. The United States now relies on foreign oil for 55 percent of its energy requirements, and this is expected to rise to 65 percent in 2020 and continue to grow thereafter. This dependency is the Achilles' heel of American power: unless Persian Gulf oil is kept under American control, the ability of the United States to remain the dominant world power would be put into question.

These concerns undergird the three real motives for a United States invasion of Iraq. The first derives from America's dependence on Gulf oil and from the principle, formally enshrined in the Carter Doctrine, that the United States will not permit a hostile state to achieve a position that allows it to threaten America's access to the Gulf. The second is the pivotal role played by the Persian Gulf in sup-

plying oil to the rest of the world: whoever controls the Gulf automatically maintains a stranglehold on the global economy; the Bush administration wants that power to be the United States. The third factor is anxiety about the future availability of oil: the United States has become increasingly dependent on Saudi Arabia, and Washington is desperate to find an alternative to the Saudis if access to that country is curtailed. The only nation in the world with reserves to compensate for the loss of Saudi Arabia is Iraq.

Since World War II, when American policymakers first acknowledged that the United States would someday become dependent on Middle Eastern oil, it has been American policy to ensure that the United States will always have unrestrained access to the Persian Gulf. At first, the United States relied on Britain to protect American access to the Gulf, and then, when Britain pulled out of the area in 1971, the United States chose to rely on the Shah of Iran. But when, in 1979, the shah was overthrown by Islamic militants loyal to the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the administration of President Jimmy Carter decided that the United States would have to assume responsibility to protect the flow of oil. The result was the policy now known as the Carter Doctrine. Unrestricted access to the Persian Gulf is a vital interest of the United States, Carter affirmed in his 1980 State of the Union address; in protection of that interest, the United States would employ “any means necessary, including military force.”

This principle was first invoked by President Reagan in 1987, during the Iran–Iraq War, when Iranian gunboats fired on Kuwaiti oil tankers and the United States navy began escorting Kuwaiti tankers through the Gulf. President George H. W. Bush invoked it again in August 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait and posed an implied threat to Saudi Arabia. Bush the elder responded to that threat by driving the Iraqis out of Kuwait in Operation Desert Storm; he did not, however, continue the war and remove Saddam Hussein. Instead, the United States engaged in the “containment” of Iraq, which entailed the maintenance of an air and sea blockade of that country.

President Bush the younger now wants to abandon containment and “finish” Operation Desert

Storm. The underlying principle for military action is still the Carter Doctrine. Iraq under Saddam is an implied threat to United States access to Persian Gulf oil, and so the Iraqi leader must be removed. Vice President Cheney noted as much in his August 26, 2002 speech before an audience of the Veterans of Foreign Wars: “Armed with an arsenal of these weapons of terror and seated atop 10 percent of the world’s oil reserves, Saddam Hussein could then be expected to seek domination of the entire Middle East, take control of a great portion of the world’s energy supplies, directly threaten America’s friends throughout the region, and subject the United States or any other nation to nuclear blackmail.” This is, in essence, a direct invocation of the Carter Doctrine.

Cheney’s VFW speech echoes comments he made 12 years earlier before the Senate Armed Services Committee after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait: “Iraq controlled 10 percent of the world’s reserves prior to the invasion of Kuwait. Once Saddam Hussein took Kuwait, he doubled

that to approximately 20 percent of the world’s known oil reserves. . . . Once he acquired Kuwait and deployed an army as large as the one he possesses [on the border of Saudi Arabia], he was clearly in a position to dictate the future of worldwide energy policy, and that gave him a stranglehold on our economy and on that of most of the other nations of the world as well.”

The language of Cheney’s 1990 testimony also drives the second administration objective in overthrowing Hussein: whoever controls the flow of

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Persian Gulf oil has a “stranglehold” not only on the American economy but also on the economies of “the other nations of the world as well.” This is a powerful image, and captures perfectly the administration’s thinking about the Gulf, except in reverse: by serving as the region’s dominant power, the United States maintains a “stranglehold” over the economies of other nations. This gives the United States extraordinary leverage in world affairs, and explains to some degree why countries like Japan, Britain, France, and Germany—which are even more dependent on Persian Gulf oil than the United States—ultimately defer to Washington on major international issues (such as Iraq) even when they disagree with it.

Maintaining control over the flow of Persian Gulf oil is also consistent with the administration’s declared goal of attaining permanent military superiority over all other nations. A single theme stands out in administration statements on United States national security policy: the United States must prevent any potential rival from ever reaching the point where it could compete with the United States on equal standing. As presented in *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (released

by the administration in September 2002), this principle holds that American forces must be “strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”

One way to accomplish this, of course, is to pursue advances in technology that allow the United States to remain ahead of all potential rivals in military systems—which is what the administration hopes to accomplish by adding hundreds of billions of dollars to the Department of Defense budget over the next five years. Another way to do this is to maintain an oil stranglehold on the economies of potential rivals so that they will refrain from challenging the United States out of fear of being choked to death through the denial of vital energy supplies. Japan and the European countries are already in this vulnerable position, and will remain so for the foreseeable future; but now China is also moving in this direction as it becomes increasingly dependent on oil from the Persian Gulf. Like the United States, China is running out of oil, and like the United States, it has nowhere to go to make up the difference except the Gulf. But since the United States controls access to the Gulf, and China lacks

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the power to break that grip, the United States can keep China in a vulnerable position indefinitely. The removal of Saddam Hussein and his replacement by someone beholden to the United States is a key part of a broader United States strategy aimed at assuring permanent American global dominance. Or, as Harvard's Michael Ignatieff put it in his seminal January 5, 2003 *New York Times Magazine* essay on America's emerging empire, the concentration of so much oil in the Gulf "makes it what a military strategist would call the empire's center of gravity."

Finally, there is the issue of America's long-term energy dilemma. The United States uses oil to supply about 40 percent of its energy needs. At one time it relied almost entirely on domestic oil, but the demand for oil has continued to grow and America's domestic fields—among the oldest in the world—are gradually being exhausted. The need for imported oil will thus grow with each passing year. Most of the world's untapped oil—at least two-thirds of it—is located in the Persian Gulf. The United States can rip up Alaska and extract every drop of oil in the state, but that would reduce its dependence on imported oil by only about 2 to 3 percent—an insignificant amount. It could also rely for a share of its oil needs on non-Gulf suppliers such as Russia, Venezuela, the Caspian Sea states, and the nations of Africa, but their oil reserves are smaller than those of the Persian Gulf countries and are being extracted at a much quicker rate. The further you look into the future, the greater America's dependence on the Gulf becomes.

At present America's reliance on Persian Gulf oil means dependence on Saudi Arabia, which has more oil than any other country—about 250 billion barrels, or one-fourth of world reserves. This gives Saudi Arabia considerable indirect influence over the United States economy and the American way of life. Saudi Arabia is also a major power in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and can control the global price and supply of oil. This

makes American officials nervous, especially when the Saudis can use their power to put pressure on the United States to alter its policies in other areas, such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

American leaders would thus like to reduce the country's dependence on Saudi Arabia. But there is only one way to permanently reduce America's reliance on Saudi Arabia: by taking over Iraq and using it as an alternative oil supplier. Iraq possesses 112 billion barrels in proven oil reserves, and as much as 200 billion to 300 billion barrels of potential reserves. By occupying Iraq and installing a government friendly to it, the United States will solve its long-term oil-dependency dilemma for a decade or more. And that is a major consideration in the administration's policy choices regarding Iraq.

This set of factors explains the Bush administration's determination to go to war with Iraq—not concern over WMD, not terrorism, not the spread of democracy. But do these objectives—access to and control over critical oil supplies—justify a war on Iraq? Some Americans may think so. There are, indeed, advantages to being positioned to control the world's second-largest source of untapped petroleum. American motorists will be able to afford the gas to fuel their SUVs, vans, and pickup trucks for another decade, and maybe longer. There will also be many more jobs in the military and in the military-industrial complex, or as representatives of American multinational corporations (although, with respect to the latter, I would not advise traveling in most of the rest of the world unless accompanied by a small army of bodyguards).

But there will also be a price to pay. Empires tend to require the militarization of society, and that will mean increased spending on war and reduced spending on education and other domestic needs. It will also entail more secrecy and government intrusion into the private lives of American citizens. All this has to be entered into the equation. And the answer to the question has to be no: the construction and maintenance of empire are not worth the price. ■