



Iraq Is the Central Front

By Thomas Donnelly

On the evening of September 7, President George W. Bush declared the struggle to establish a more decent political order in Iraq “the central front” in the global war on terror. This was not merely a rhetorical flourish in the president’s speech. Rather, it represents a further clarification of the Bush Doctrine and of U.S. national security strategy for the twenty-first century. What is at stake in Iraq extends beyond the borders of Mesopotamia. It defines what sort of world the American superpower wants—and what sort of sacrifices it is willing to make to create it.

The Bush Doctrine is incomplete—a vision for a future still in the making. While the September 2002 National Security Strategy defined clearly, even elegantly, the purposes of American power, the document is far less clear about how its stated goals—“political and economic freedom, peaceful relations with other states, and respect for human dignity”—are to be achieved.¹ The methodology of the Bush Doctrine is thus being drafted a posteriori through our military operations in Iraq and the continuing American commitment to rebuild that battered country.

Even as defined by the actions of the administration, the Bush Doctrine still contains several layers of strategic choice. The first is that the anti-democratic and anti-American violence that stems from the greater Middle East is the most pressing danger to the international liberal order. A second is that, within the region—the “Islamic world” that stretches from West Africa to Southeast Asia—our efforts will be focused on the Arab heartland. A third and final choice is that, within the Arab heartland, itself a tremendous swath of territory, Iraq is the top priority.

It is in Iraq that American power—military, economic, and political—is being marshaled in an ambitious attempt to transform the traditional political order. The purpose of this

enterprise is not strictly altruistic or humanitarian, but strategic; it is part of a broader effort to “roll back” anti-American and antidemocratic forces in the world.

This ambition marks a departure for the United States in a number of ways. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that the strategic realities of our time were not readily grasped by either the first Bush administration, which clung to Cold War realpolitik even after the Berlin Wall had come down; or the Clinton administration, which desperately sought to transcend power politics and remained deeply ambivalent about the legitimacy of military force; or even by the current Bush administration during its early days, when it appeared headed back toward a traditional balance of power calculus. Although each of these approaches reflected a natural American modesty or “humility,” as President Bush himself said during the 2000 campaign, they did not fully account for the fact that, as the sole superpower, America represents the only practical hope for preserving the liberal international order.

There are two great threats to this order, which the United States must address. Both the government of the People’s Republic of China and the loose assortment of illiberal forces in the Islamic world fundamentally reject the principle of individual freedom around which the global

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order coheres. These are two very different threats, to be sure. China, for all its fissiparous tendencies, acts internationally as a traditional rising great power, building economic and political strength and, in the process, expanding its conventional military capabilities in pursuit of its geostrategic goals, most immediately in regard to Taiwan.

American strategy toward China has been, and will continue to be, a variation upon the theme of containment. China itself must choose between its two possible futures. The country may recognize that, in the words of the National Security Strategy, “social and political freedom is the only source of greatness,” or it may continue to seek a traditional form of empire, at least within East Asia—although it is difficult to see, in a globalized world, how any state can exercise regional hegemony in a way that is not deeply disruptive to the larger world order.² Before September 11, 2001, the Bush administration was cautiously working its way toward a more robust form of deterring China from the latter path. But even the previous Clinton administration policy of “engagement” was, to no small degree, merely containment by a gentler name.

The Middle East offers a different strategic challenge altogether.

To Transform the Middle East

In contrast to China, no dictator or terrorist in the greater Middle East wields or has any obvious prospect of wielding significant conventional military power. However, the threat of asymmetrical warfare through either nihilistic terrorism or the use of weapons of mass destruction has the potential to transform the antiliberal forces of this region into a global threat.

The United States traditionally has tried to contain the problems of the Islamic world by manipulating the local balance of power through a partnership with one or more regional regimes. Even after September 11, 2001, it might still have been possible to attempt to perpetuate the balance-of-power game in the Middle East by solidifying alliances with thugish regimes formally opposed to al Qaeda, such as Syria and Libya.

Instead, President Bush conceived a war not only against terrorists per se, but against the Middle Eastern political orders responsible for terrorism. On the night of September 11, 2001, the president declared, “We

will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.”³ The full scope of this mission is only now becoming clear in the American domestic political dialogue, but it has been an explicit part of the White House’s strategy from the beginning. President Bush’s May 1 speech aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, in which he declared the end of “major combat operations” in Operation Iraqi Freedom, has been widely caricatured as a swaggering and premature boast. In fact, the speech strikes a somber note, defining ultimate success as achievable but certainly distant and requiring great resolve to reach. “The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on September 11, 2001—and still goes on,” said Bush.

Our mission continues. Al Qaeda is wounded, not destroyed. The scattered cells of the terrorist network still operate in many nations, and we know from daily intelligence that they continue to plot against free people. The proliferation of deadly weapons remains a serious danger. The enemies of freedom are not idle, and neither are we. Our government has taken unprecedented measure to defend the homeland. And we will continue to hunt down the enemy before he can strike.

The war on terror is not over; yet it is not endless. We do not know the day of final victory, but we have seen a turning of the tide. No act of the terrorists will change our purpose, or weaken our resolve, or alter their fate. Their cause is lost. Free nations will press on to victory.⁴

The president seeks victory not through containment, but rather through a wholesale transformation of the Middle East. As the challenges of democratizing Iraq have become plainer, the administration has spoken more clearly about the immensity of the task before us: to bring, in the words of National Security adviser Condoleezza Rice, “greater political and economic freedom” so as the Middle East “can fully join in the progress of our times.” Rice drew an extended analogy between reconstruction in post-Saddam Iraq and the reconstruction of post-Nazi Europe:

Like the transformation of Europe, the transformation of the Middle East will require a commitment of many years. . . . America and our friends

and allies must engage broadly throughout the region, across many fronts, including diplomatic, economic and cultural [fronts]. And—as in Europe—our efforts must work in full partnership with the peoples of the region who share our commitment to human freedom and who see it in their own self-interest to defend that commitment.

Rice also spoke of “a generational commitment to helping the people of the Middle East transform their region.”

[W]e must have the patience and perseverance to see it through. There is an understandable tendency to look back on America’s experience in post-war Germany and see only the successes. But the road we traveled was very difficult. [Nineteen-forty-five] through 1947 were especially challenging [years]. The Marshall Plan was actually a response to the failed efforts to rebuild Germany in late ’45 and early ’46.⁵

Any lingering doubts about the seriousness of Middle East transformation evaporated [ended?] with President Bush’s September 7 address calling for a huge increase in military operational and reconstruction funds for Iraq. He reminded the Congress and the nation that, “the war on terror would be a lengthy war, a different kind of war, fought on many fronts in many places [of which] Iraq is now the central front.”

Enemies of freedom are making a desperate stand there—and there they must be defeated. This will take time and require sacrifice. Yet we will do what is necessary, we will spend what is necessary, to achieve this essential victory in the war on terror, to promote freedom and to make our own nation more secure.⁶

No other statement better characterizes the transformation of U.S. national security strategy since the Cold War. In 1989, the Soviet Union and its satellite states were the enemy and the German plain was the central front; now, terrorists and the states that foster them are the enemy and the flood plains of Mesopotamia are the central front. Also unlike the Cold War, our enemy’s strategy is primarily offensive, and so, too, is our response. “We have carried the fight

to the enemy,” said the president on September 7. “We are rolling back the terrorist threat to civilization, not on the fringes of its influence, but at the heart of its power.”⁷

Rhetoric and Resources

If President Bush has not lost his eloquence in expressing his strategic purposes, neither has he found a way to instill the institutions of American power with an equal sense of urgency or commitment. The president seems the inverse of his father. Where Bush *père* admitted to a lack of vision, his son has a stunning dream of a liberal, democratic Middle East. If George H. W. Bush was a helmsman at the wheel of the American ship of state, George W. Bush is a great navigator, plotting a bold course and leaving it to the crew to trim or let out sail and work the rudder.

The interagency sniping between Defense, State, and the intelligence community, which hampered pre-war diplomacy and military planning, has not had fatal consequences so far. But as the war in Iraq moves farther from the period of major combat operations and into a counterinsurgency campaign, the measures of victory are shifting. The goal of the guerrillas—Ba’athist remnants, Islamic terrorists, and apolitical thugs—is simply *not to lose*. Ours is to secure a complete victory that will provide a foundation for Iraqi democracy.

The administration’s internal squabbles are especially debilitating in light of the continued difficulty of gaining international cooperation in working toward a new Iraq and a transformed Middle East. Given the deep fear of radical change that animated the anti-American opposition during the pre-war debate, generally and particularly in the United Nations process, it is perhaps no surprise that even the August 19 attack on the UN headquarters and the murder of Sergio Vieira de Mello could do no more than open an opportunity for reconciliation. It may be years before there is sufficient change of heart among those who did not support the war in Iraq to enable them to contribute meaningfully to its reconstruction.

The Bush administration has been mostly pragmatic about the slim chance for the “internationalization” of Iraq’s reconstruction, even as it makes a good-faith effort to try to enlist new partners. Moreover, what genuine military contribution such prospective coalition members might make is far from evident. But

where the administration is clear-eyed about internationalization, some quarters retain unrealistic hopes for “Iraqification”—turning control over to a free government in Baghdad. While the Bush administration is rightly committed to handing the country over to Iraqis as quickly as possible, “Iraqification” cannot become a codeword for American retreat. Ambassador L. Paul Bremer’s approach, measuring progress in substantive terms rather than by the clock, is the correct one.

In sum, the most compelling strategic argument for the Bush Doctrine is that it alone, of realistic futures, offers the United States and the world some hope for security, liberty, and prosperity. The most forceful argument against the doctrine is that it is too audacious, too costly for America to accept—even after the attacks of September 11 supposedly woke us from a decade’s slumber. We cannot have the rewards of the Bush Doctrine unless we are willing to pay the costs.

Notes

1. George W. Bush, “The National Security Strategy of the United States,” The White House, Washington, D.C., September 2002, p. 1. The document is accessible at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>.

2. Ibid, p. 27.

3. “President Addresses the Nation on Night of the Attacks,” The White House, September 11, 2001.

4. “President Bush Announces Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended,” The White House, Washington, D.C., May 1, 2003.

5. “Remarks by National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice at 28th Annual Convention of the National Associate of Black Journalists,” The White House, Washington, D.C., August 7, 2003.

6. “President Bush Addressed the Nation Sunday Night,” The White House, Washington, D.C., September 7, 2003.

7. Ibid.