Bush's Real Goal in Iraq Invasion: an American Empire

BY

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The official story on Iraq has never made sense. The connection that the Bush administration has tried to draw between Iraq and al-Qaida has always seemed contrived and artificial. In fact, it was hard to believe that smart people in the Bush administration would start a major war based on such flimsy evidence.

The pieces just didn't fit. Something else had to be going on; something was missing. In recent days, those missing pieces have finally begun to fall into place. As it turns out, this is not really about Iraq. It is not about weapons of mass destruction, or terrorism, or Saddam, or U.N. resolutions.

This war, should it come, is intended to mark the official emergence of the United States as a full-fledged global empire, seizing sole responsibility and authority as planetary policeman. It would be the culmination of a plan ten years or more in the making, carried out by those who believe the United States must seize the opportunity for global domination, even if it means becoming the "American imperialists" that our enemies always claimed we were.

Once that is understood, other mysteries solve themselves. For example, why does the administration seem unconcerned about an exit strategy from Iraq once Saddam is toppled? Because we won't be leaving. Having conquered Iraq, the United States will create permanent military bases in that country from which to dominate the Middle East, including neighboring Iran.

In an interview Friday, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld brushed aside that suggestion, noting that the United States does not covet other nations' territory. That may be true, but 57 years after World War II ended, we still have major bases in Germany and Japan. We will do the same in Iraq.

And why has the administration dismissed the option of containing and deterring Iraq, as we had the Soviet Union for 45 years? Because even if it worked, containment and deterrence would not allow the expansion of American power. Besides, such tactics are beneath us as an empire. Rome did not stoop to containment; it conquered. And so, the thinking goes, should we.

Among the architects of this would-be American Empire are a group of brilliant and powerful people who now hold key positions in the Bush administration: They envision the creation and enforcement of what they call a worldwide "Pax Americana," or American peace. But so far, the American people have not appreciated the true extent of that ambition.

Part of it's laid out in the National Security Strategy, a document in which each administration outlines its approach to defending the country. The Bush administration plan, released Sept. 20, marks a significant departure from previous approaches, a change that it attributes largely to the attacks of Sept. 11.

To address the terrorism threat, the president's report lays out a newly aggressive military and foreign policy, embracing pre-emptive attack against perceived enemies. It speaks in blunt terms of what it calls "American internationalism," of ignoring international opinion if that suits U.S. interests. "The best defense is a good offense," the document asserts.

It dismisses deterrence as a Cold War relic and instead talks of "convincing or compelling states to accept their sovereign responsibilities." In essence, it lays out a plan for permanent U.S. military and economic domination of every region on the globe, unfettered by international treaty or concern. And to make that plan a reality, it envisions a stark expansion of our global military presence.

"The United States will require bases and stations within and beyond Western Europe and Northeast Asia," the document warns, "as well as temporary access arrangements for the long-distance deployment of U.S. troops."

The report's repeated references to terrorism are misleading, however, because the approach of the new National Security Strategy was clearly not inspired by the events of Sept. 11. They can be found in much the same language in a report issued in September 2000 by the Project for the New American Century, a group of conservative interventionists outraged by the thought that the United States might be forfeiting its chance at a global empire.

"At no time in history has the international security order been as conducive to American interests and ideals," the report said. "The challenge of this coming century is to preserve and enhance this 'American peace.'"

Familiar themes

Overall, that 2000 report reads like a blueprint for current Bush defense policy. Most of what it advocates, the Bush administration has tried to accomplish. For example, the project report urged the repudiation of the anti-ballistic missile treaty and a commitment to a global missile defense system. The administration has taken that course.

It recommended that to project sufficient power worldwide to enforce Pax Americana, the United States would have to increase defense spending from 3 percent of gross domestic product to as much as 3.8 percent. For next year, the Bush administration has requested a defense budget of $379 billion, almost exactly 3.8 percent of GDP.

It advocates the "transformation" of the U.S. military to meet its expanded obligations, including the cancellation of such outmoded defense programs as the Crusader artillery system. That's exactly the message being preached by Rumsfeld and others.

It urges the development of small nuclear warheads "required in targeting the very deep, underground hardened bunkers that are being built by many of our potential adversaries." This year the GOP-led U.S. House gave the Pentagon the green light to develop such a weapon, called the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, while the Senate has so far balked.

That close tracking of recommendation with current policy is hardly surprising, given the current positions of the people who contributed to the 2000 report.

Paul Wolfowitz is now deputy defense secretary. John Bolton is undersecretary of state. Stephen Cambone is head of the Pentagon's Office of Program, Analysis and Evaluation. Eliot Cohen and Devon Cross are members of the Defense Policy Board, which advises Rumsfeld. I. Lewis Libby is chief of staff to Vice President Dick Cheney. Dov Zakheim is comptroller for the Defense Department.

'Constabulary duties'

Because they were still just private citizens in 2000, the authors of the project report could be more frank and less diplomatic than they were in drafting the National Security Strategy. Back in 2000, they clearly identified Iran, Iraq and North Korea as primary short-term targets, well before President Bush tagged them as the Axis of Evil. In their report, they criticize the fact that in war planning against North Korea and Iraq, "past Pentagon wargames have given little or no consideration to the force requirements necessary not only to defeat an attack but to remove these regimes from power."

To preserve the Pax Americana, the report says U.S. forces will be required to perform "constabulary duties—the United States acting as policeman of the world—and says that such actions "demand American political leadership rather than that of the United Nations."

To meet those responsibilities, and to ensure that no country dares to challenge the United States, the report advocates a much larger military presence spread over more of the globe, in addition to the roughly 130 nations in which U.S. troops are already deployed.

More specifically, they argue that we need permanent military bases in the Middle East, in Southeast Europe, in Latin America and in Southeast Asia, where no such bases now exist. That helps to explain another of the mysteries of our post-Sept. 11 reaction, in which the Bush administration rushed to install U.S. troops in Georgia and the Philippines, as well as our eagerness to send military advisers to assist in the civil war in Colombia.

The 2000 report directly acknowledges its debt to a still earlier document, drafted in 1992 by the Defense Department. That document had also envisioned the United States as a colossus astride the world, imposing its will and keeping world peace through military and economic power. When leaked in final draft form, however, the proposal drew so much criticism that it was hastily withdrawn and repudiated by the first President Bush.

The defense secretary in 1992 was Richard Cheney; the document was drafted by Wolfowitz, who at the time was defense undersecretary for policy. The potential implications of a Pax Americana are immense. Effect on allies

One is the effect on our allies. Once we assert the unilateral right to act as the world's policeman, our allies will quickly recede into the background. Eventually, we will be forced to spend American wealth and American blood protecting the peace while other nations redirect their wealth to such things as health care for their citizenry.

Donald Kagan, a professor of classical Greek history at Yale and an influential advocate of a more aggressive foreign policy —he served as co-chairman of the 2000 New Century project —acknowledges that likelihood.

"If [our allies] want a free ride, and they probably will, we can't stop that," he says. But he also argues that the United States, given its unique position, has no choice but to act anyway.

"You saw the movie *High Noon*'? he asks. "We're Gary Cooper." Accepting the Cooper role would be a historic change in who we are as a nation, and in how we operate in the international arena.

Candidate Bush certainly did not campaign on such a change. It is not something that he or others have dared to discuss honestly with the American people. To the contrary, in his foreign policy debate with Al Gore, Bush pointedly advocated a more humble foreign policy, a position calculated to appeal to voters leery of military intervention.

For the same reason, Kagan and others shy away from terms such as empire, understanding its connotations. But they also argue that it would be naive and dangerous to reject the role that history has thrust upon us. Kagan, for example, willingly embraces the idea that the United States would establish permanent military bases in a post-war Iraq.

"I think that's highly possible," he says. "We will probably need a major concentration of forces in the Middle East over a long period of time. That will come at a price, but think of the price of not having it. When we have economic problems, it's been caused by disruptions in our oil supply. If we have a force in Iraq, there will be no disruption in oil supplies."

Costly global commitment

Rumsfeld and Kagan believe that a successful war against Iraq will produce other benefits, such as serving as an object lesson for nations such as Iran and Syria. Rumsfeld, as befits his sensitive position, puts it rather gently. If a regime change were to take place in Iraq, other nations pursuing weapons of mass destruction "would get the message that having them…is attracting attention that is not favorable and is not helpful," he says.

Kagan is more blunt.

"People worry a lot about how the Arab street is going to react," he notes. "Well, I see that the Arab street has gotten very, very quiet since we started blowing things up."

The cost of such a global commitment would be enormous. In 2000, we spent $281 billion on our military, which was more than the next 11 nations combined. By 2003, our expenditures will have risen to $378 billion. In other words, the increase in our defense budget from 1999-2003 will be more than the total amount spent annually by China, our next largest competitor.

The lure of empire is ancient and powerful, and over the millennia it has driven men to commit terrible crimes on its behalf. But with the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Soviet Union, a global empire was essentially laid at the feet of the United States. To the chagrin of some, we did not seize it at the time, in large part because the American people have never been comfortable with themselves as a New Rome.

Now, more than a decade later, the events of Sept. 11 have given those advocates of empire a new opportunity to press their case with a new president. So in debating whether to invade Iraq, we are really debating the role that the United States will play in the years and decades to come. Are peace and security best achieved by seeking strong alliances and international consensus, led by the United States? Or is it necessary to take a more unilateral approach, accepting and enhancing the global dominance that, according to some, history has thrust upon us?

If we do decide to seize empire, we should make that decision knowingly, as a democracy. The price of maintaining an empire is always high. Kagan and others argue that the price of rejecting it would be higher still.

(Mr. Bookman, the author of this analysis, may be contacted at jbookman@ajc.com)

Contributing to the 2000 report

"Rebuilding America's Defenses," a 2000 report by the Project for the New American Century, listed 27 people as having attended meetings or contributed papers in preparation of the report. Among them are six who have since assumed key defense and foreign policy positions in the Bush administration.

Paul Wolfowitz

Political science doctorate from University of Chicago and dean of the international relations program at Johns Hopkins University during the 1990s. Served in the Reagan State Department, moved to the Pentagon during the first Bush administration as undersecretary of defense for policy. Sworn in as deputy defense secretary in March 2001.

John Bolton

Yale Law grad who worked in the Reagan administration as an assistant attorney general. Switched to the State Department in the first Bush administration as assistant secretary for international organization affairs. Sworn in as undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, May 2001.

Eliot Cohen

Harvard doctorate in government who taught at Harvard and at the Naval War College. Now directs strategic studies at Johns Hopkins and is the author of several books on military strategy. Was on the Defense Department's policy planning staff in the first Bush administration and is now on Donald Rumsfeld's Defense Policy Board.

Lewis Libby

Law degree from Columbia (Yale undergrad). Held advisory positions in the Reagan State Department. Was a partner in a Washington law firm in the late '80s before becoming deputy undersecretary of defense for policy in the first Bush administration (under Dick Cheney). Now is the vice president's chief of staff.

Dov Zakheim

Doctorate in economics and politics from Oxford University. Worked on policy issues in the Reagan Defense Department and went into private defense consulting during the 1990s. Was foreign policy adviser to the 2000 Bush campaign. Sworn in as undersecretary of defense (comptroller) and chief financial officer for the Pentagon, May 2001.

Stephen Cambone

Political science doctorate from Claremont Graduate School. Was in charge of strategic defense policy at the Defense Department in the first Bush administration. Now heads the Office of Program, Analysis and Evaluation at the Defense Department.

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