
Wars Without End?

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The rosy scenario for a war against Iraq is rosy indeed. It is largely the product of a very imaginative Pentagon official named Paul Wolfowitz. “Wolfie,” as President Bush affectionately calls him, is an Ithaca native, Cornell graduate, and now deputy secretary of defense. He has advocated war against Iraq since long before September 2001. In an article for *The New York Times Magazine* last fall, journalist Bill Keller reported Wolfowitz’s vision of how a war against Iraq would go. A “choreography of unmanned aerial vehicles, precision-guided weapons, indigenous insurgents and special-operations soldiers on the ground” would “in the first hours of an attack” destroy the weapons of mass destruction that serve as the primary public justification for the war. What then? Watch the qualifications, but don’t miss the main point, as Wolfowitz put it to Keller: “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.”

It is something of a truism that the foreign-policy advisers around President George W. Bush are captive of the Cold War policies they pursued in a previous era, however irrelevant they may be to today’s international problems. Wolfowitz is no exception, but his policy prescription for Iraq is not based so much on the standard “peace through strength” story of how the United States out-arms-raced the Soviet Union into surrender. His focus is on the contagious appeal of democracy. The image that animates his crystal ball on the future of the Middle East is the chain reaction of popular movements that overthrew communist regimes in Eastern Europe in autumn 1989, in quick succession, and largely without violence.

An exception was Romania. According to Keller, Wolfowitz loves to tell a joke about Saddam Hussein’s barber who queries the dictator every time he cuts his hair about the fate of Nicolae Ceausescu, the Romanian tyrant who was murdered in the course of a violent anti-communist uprising in 1989. When Saddam asks the barber why he always brings up this subject, the barber responds, “because every time I do, the hair goes up on the back of your neck, and it’s easier to cut it.” Wolfowitz acknowledges that a postwar Iraq might be closer to the Romanian example than to the peaceful, “velvet” revolution that led to communism’s downfall in Czechoslovakia or the negotiated roundtable and electoral transition in Poland. Anarchic

violence, combined with a tenacious grasping for power by the dictator's erstwhile cronies, could be Iraq's immediate postwar future. Such a prospect suggests a darkening of the deputy secretary's rosy picture. But the rest of the picture remains very bright. Wolfowitz foresees the eventual emergence of a democratic Iraq as a beacon to its Arab neighbors, where multitudes languish under feudal monarchies or modern despots. Imagine Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria transformed into democracies on the American model! Following the all-good-things-go-together maxim, we further imagine that the newly democratized states guarantee the flow of cheap oil to US consumers and contribute to a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on terms acceptable to Israel's right wing.

The Bush administration's plans for "preemptive" war against a country that poses no imminent threat of attack on the United States or any regional neighbors have given rise to an unprecedented "preemptive" peace movement. The administration's rationales for launching a war have not convinced the vast majority of people, in the United States or worldwide, who fear that its risks do not justify abandoning more promising alternatives, such as an intensification of the efforts of international inspectors. One is compelled to wonder if administration officials themselves really believe their own arguments for insisting that war is the best policy. At least in the Wolfowitz scenario we can glimpse a positive, hopeful vision of the war's objectives rather than the negative goals of preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction and undermining international terrorism—goals that many believe will be hindered rather than advanced by an attack on Iraq. A recent poll, for example, found that the average American gives an estimate of 70% probability that there will be a major terrorist attack in response to a US invasion of Iraq, rising to 79% if the US attacks without UN approval.

However positive the vision, one can, however, reasonably doubt the plausibility of the sequence of events Wolfowitz predicts—from forceful "regime change" in Iraq to a democratic and peaceful Middle East. But let us consider just the initial set of assumptions: that a war against Iraq will be relatively quick ("It could last, you know, six days, six weeks—I doubt six months," according to war secretary Donald Rumsfeld); that casualties will be low; that the majority of Iraqis will welcome US intervention; and that establishing postwar order will be a relatively straightforward task. These points are all interrelated.

Regardless of what the experts say, there is no way of knowing in advance how long the war would last, how long it would take for the United States to induce an Iraqi surrender. But we do know how some people around the Pentagon hope to speed up the victory. They refer to their strategy as the "shock and awe" approach. Its main proponent is Harlan Ullman, a former Navy official and current "defense intellectual" who first developed his ideas several years ago. He has recently appeared on television to articulate a plan that reportedly has become a favorite of the White House. The goal of the initial stage of a war, according to Ullman, is to "deter and

overpower an adversary through the adversary's perception and fear of his vulnerability and our own invincibility." It requires an "ability to impose massive shock and awe, in essence to be able to 'turn the lights on and off' of an adversary as we choose," and "so overload the perception, knowledge and understanding of that adversary that there will be no choice except to cease and desist or risk complete and total destruction."

According to CBS News, the Pentagon plans to implement a strategy like Ullman's by launching 800 cruise missiles at Baghdad in the first two days of the war. "We want them to quit. We want them not to fight," Ullman told CBS reporter David Martin. So "you take the city down. You get rid of their power, water. In two, three, four, five days they are physically, emotionally and psychologically exhausted." Probably many of them are dead as well. Perhaps that is where Rumsfeld got his low-end estimate of six days to win the war. Ullman is confident that the mass cruise-missile attack will work: "You have this simultaneous effect, rather like the nuclear weapons at Hiroshima, not taking days or weeks but in minutes."

Baghdad is a city of over five million people. If officials in the Pentagon and the White House expect its citizens to welcome US military forces as liberators, they had better not treat them as enemies. If US leaders authorize the launch of 800 cruise missiles in the expectation of turning Baghdad into another Hiroshima, any surviving residents will view them as war criminals, and well they should. Much the worse if the United States employs actual nuclear weapons, which some officials have advocated as a means of destroying deep underground bunkers.

At least in the sphere of public relations, the Bush administration has been emphasizing the need to spare civilians in a war against Iraq, an approach that would seem inconsistent with the "shock and awe" strategy. A recent New York Times article reported favorably on the military's purported intention to reduce "collateral damage," but included this telling remark from a retired Air Force colonel who directed the bombing campaign in the 1991 Gulf War. According to the reporter, the colonel "argues that while preventing the deaths of civilians should be a priority, it must not outweigh another objective: ending the war quickly." The incoherence of the statement aside (how can something be a priority without outweighing other objectives?), it suggests a means-justifies-the-ends approach that is inconsistent with the laws of war and reflects considerable ambivalence about the international legal obligation to avoid disproportionate civilian casualties.

In an exchange a few years ago in the *Naval War College Review*, Harlan Ullman made the suggestion, now quite commonplace within certain circles, of looking to the Roman empire as a model for US foreign policy after the Cold War. Not surprisingly he was keen to propose "the example of the Roman legions and their relevance to shock and awe." According to Ullman, "the threat that dissent or disobedience in the hinterlands would ultimately be crushed by Roman power indeed produced enough 'shock and awe' to affect will and perception." In response, Mark Conversino, a

military historian and a major in the US Air Force, suggested that “a cursory look at Roman history, particularly following the turn of the third century A.D., would reveal an empire often convulsed by major upheavals and rebellions, not all of which were easily or even successfully put down.” “Was it merely the ‘shock and awe’ supposedly generated by the Roman legions,” Major Conversino wondered, “that established order and stability?” One would hope that in today’s Pentagon similar voices are raising questions about the relationship between military strategy and postwar efforts at establishing order and stability, not to say democracy. Let us assume for the sake of argument that the damage to ordinary Iraqis from a US invasion is relatively low. What about the next stage? Will democracy, or even some semblance of internal order, be easy to achieve? There are several reasons to doubt it.

Few claim that Iraq would be another Afghanistan, the archetypal country riven by tribal and regional conflicts, ungovernable by any central authority, let alone a foreign invader. But to assume the opposite seems unrealistic—that a postwar Iraq would evince sufficient coherence or homogeneity as a society to provide the basis for democratic governance. In the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, the first Bush administration refrained from removing Saddam Hussein by force, not only out of concern for the US casualties that a march on Baghdad would entail. One could hardly avoid the impression that Bush the elder and his advisers valued Saddam Hussein’s strong hand as the only thing capable of keeping Iraq together. Fearful of creating a “vacuum” that other regional powers would seek to fill, the Bush team longed to replace Saddam with someone just like him, only slightly less nasty.

Now many of the same advisers recommend “regime change” and some of them speak hopefully of democracy. But the conditions of a postwar Iraq, even one not devastated by a military campaign of “shock and awe,” might not provide the most fertile ground for democracy. This claim has nothing to do with arguments to the effect that Islamic societies are not culturally suited or ready for democracy. In fact, the Kurdish areas of Iraq, free from Saddam Hussein’s rule and under the protection of a US no-fly zone, seem to have implemented a reasonable system of democratic self-governance. But this only reinforces doubts about postwar Iraq’s governability. Within the Kurdish regions there are two major areas ruled by separate and competing political organizations. They engaged in a bloody internecine conflict in 1994, but have since worked out a modus vivendi in the form of a geographic division of rule. Secretary of State Colin Powell has recently revealed to the United Nations a third Kurdish area, run by an Islamicist organization, purportedly with ties to al Qaeda. Add to these the Shi’ia region in southern Iraq, with links to Iran, and the various members of the minority Sunni community who were favored under Saddam but might fear retributive discrimination in his absence. Is it realistic to expect that these disparate groups will be able to work together in a democratic fashion once their common enemy is eliminated? And what about the possible

intervention of Turkey in the Kurdish regions—a recent source of conflict between the United States and key NATO allies? Do we expect external interference (perhaps from Iran as well as Turkey) to bolster the prospects for democracy in Iraq?

The precedent of US policy in postwar Afghanistan does not bode well for a future democratic Iraq—however dissimilar the countries themselves may be. Indeed, the extraordinary efforts that Bush administration officials are making to promote a new war come at the expense of the attention and aid they had promised to rebuild Afghanistan after the last war. Perhaps more significantly, there is still a strong streak of that peculiar mix of unilateralism and isolationism among key Washington officials that renders implausible the idea of a long-term commitment to fostering a democratic Iraq.

We shouldn't forget that the Bush administration came into office criticizing the limited efforts its predecessors had made in trying to fashion a workable political solution in the wake of the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo. Soldiers from NATO countries were serving as peacekeepers there, with the US contingent making up about 15 percent of the total. Even that was too much for candidate Bush, who vowed, if elected, to withdraw them. His advisers dismissed the Clinton administration's limited "nation-building" projects as an unrealistic and inappropriate use of US resources. As Condoleezza Rice, a Bush campaign consultant, and now national security adviser, put it in an interview with *The New York Times* in October 2000, "We don't need to have the 82nd Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten." Such attitudes remain just below the surface for many officials who now spout the rhetoric of democratization-by-war. They hardly imply a sustained commitment to building a postwar Iraqi democracy.

But that is what US citizens expect of its government if it launches this war. Eighty-six percent of respondents in a recent poll believe that the United States would have the responsibility to remain in Iraq until there is a stable government. Seventy-four percent claim that it is important to bring democracy to the country, although the median estimate is that this will require US troops to stay there 3-5 years. The Bush administration's isolationist hawks seem to be setting up the American public for a disappointment by trying to sell them the Wolfowitz scenario. It looks like a bait-and-switch operation.

Let us, for the sake of argument, suppose that Iraq does emerge from a US invasion as a relatively stable and democratic place. What next? Will the administration's appetite for violent promotion of "regime change" be satiated or will it increase? Judging by *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, a document issued by the administration in September 2002, the country should already be at war with the other members of the "axis of evil." The North Korean government has made clear its nuclear ambitions, and the Iranian one is probably not far behind. "America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully

formed,” according to the document, which even includes the sophomoric, albeit dangerous, cliché: “our best defense is a good offense.” Moreover, the Bush administration vows to “make no distinction between terrorists and those who knowingly harbor or provide aid to them.” This commitment puts several more countries onto the target list, including supposed allies in the war against terrorism, such as Pakistan.

Having named the countries and indicated the grounds for “preemptive war” against them, the Bush administration has created a dilemma that can lead only to bad choices. It either follows through with its threats, embarking on a series of wars without apparent end. Or it refrains from attack and reveals its threats to have been hollow ones. In the meantime it has provided an incentive for the “evil” countries, and probably others, to accelerate their pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, if only to try to deter a possible future US attack. The administration’s reluctance to follow through with its threats against North Korea could represent a case of temporary sanity, given the destruction that Pyongyang’s “conventional” weapons could wreak on its South Korean neighbor. Or the Pentagon may be taking the pragmatic approach of one war at a time (despite years of military budgets premised on the need to fight simultaneous wars). But even if the Bush regime does not pursue the endless-war strategy, its bellicose rhetoric will have made the world a far more dangerous place. The Wolfowitz scenario is apparently the best the Bush administration can manage for a positive vision of the results of its planned war against Iraq. The new peace movement, very adept at responding to the administration’s shifting arguments, pseudo-evidence, and diplomatic maneuvers, has by necessity conducted itself mainly in a reactive mode. Can the peace movement offer a positive vision beyond “anti-war?” The emphasis on international law, the United Nations, letting the inspectors work, is all for the good, but it still reacts to Washington’s agenda. A positive agenda for the US peace movement, as globally connected and internationally oriented as it is, should probably focus on matters at home.

It might not be an easy sell during a time of tremendous national insecurity, but somebody has to say something about the extraordinarily bloated US military budget. The Bush administration’s proposed budget for fiscal year 2003 is nearly \$400 billion, over \$45 billion more than the previous year -- and, incredibly, it does not even include the cost of fighting wars like the one in Iraq. The total figure represents a 13 percent increase over the average military budget during the Cold War (also subtracting the cost of the hot wars), when the United States was locked in conflict with a nuclear-armed Soviet Union fielding millions of soldiers.

Today the United States faces no such enemies. US military spending is greater than that of the next twenty-six countries combined, and most of them are US allies. The closest thing to a major-power rival on the horizon is China, with its high growth rate, vast territory, natural resources, and large population. But China’s gross domestic product in 2001 was \$1.3 trillion, less than the size of California’s, whereas that of the United States

was \$10.2 trillion, nearly eight times larger. The increase in US military spending from 2002 to 2003 is alone more than twice the entire Chinese military budget.

If security is the purpose of military budgets, one could imagine many alternative ways to spend the money that could enhance US and global security. However much the threatened war against Iraq has to do with oil, for example, a clear domestic priority (with evident international implications) should be the pursuit of renewable energy sources. Here again the budgetary connection to the war in Iraq is instructive. The Bush administration proposes to spend \$720 billion over the next five years to develop the infrastructure for hydrogen fuel-cell production, distribution, and storage. It may seem like a lot of money, but more than that gets burned up whenever the United States launches a fleet of 800 cruise missiles (about a million dollars a piece) at a foreign country.

If the focus on alternative domestic priorities for US military spending seems too parochial and selfish, consider an international example. The United States, one of the least generous among the industrialized countries in foreign aid, grants about \$20 billion to the average African country in a given year. A single jet fighter costs about \$30 billion. The Bush administration plans to spend \$12 billion this year on developing three new models of fighter and attack aircraft. There is no country in the world that can match the current generation of US military aircraft (or other military technology), so the Pentagon is in effect running an arms race with itself as it strives to produce ever more capable and lethal weapons.

Last fall, student anti-war organizers at Cornell came up with the clever campaign (alluding to projected costs of a war in Iraq) centered on the question, "How would you rather spend \$200 billion?" At a time when school budgets are being slashed and local taxes raised, when the health care system is in terminal crisis, when corporate greed has sent pension funds plummeting and put the future of Social Security in doubt, such a campaign holds great promise. The Bush administration plans to invade Iraq in the utopian expectation that war will bring democracy to the Middle East, eliminate the threat of weapons of mass destruction, and seriously undermine international terrorism. It proposes vast increases in military spending, while giving enormous tax breaks to the rich, and offers us the prospect of endless wars in the pursuit of peace. By comparison, proposals to reorient US military spending to peaceful purposes, in an effort to redefine security in terms of the well-being of average citizens, appear quite realistic.

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A Note on References: The quotations of Wolfowitz come from Bill Keller, "The Sunshine Warrior," *New York Times Magazine*, 22 September 2002; those of Ullman are from Ira Chernus, "Shock & Awe: Is Baghdad the Next Hiroshima?" *CommonDreams.org*, 27 January 2003; of Ullman and Conversino, <http://www.nwc.navy.mil/press/Review/1999/spring/imv-sp9.htm>; of Rumsfeld, National Public Radio, 7 February 2003, <http://www.npr.org/programs/atc/transcripts/2003/feb/030207.gjelten.html>. Poll data come from the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland.