



Iraqi Freedom and American History

By Thomas Donnelly

With the capture of Saddam Hussein and the diminishing number of attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq, there is a new sense of confidence and optimism about the direction of the Bush administration's foreign policy. It is important, however, to place these recent developments within the broader context of the endeavor to which the president has committed our nation. The invasion of Afghanistan in the autumn of 2001 and that of Iraq in the spring of 2003 together mark a significant departure from longstanding American strategy in the greater Middle East. In place of "off-shore balancing," wherein the United States sought to preserve the status quo by supporting a revolving rogue's gallery of native regimes, American power is now actively engaged in reshaping the political order of the Islamic world. This is, by definition, a generational commitment.

For much of its history as a world power and especially during the decades of the Cold War, the United States sought to preserve the political order of the greater Middle East as roughly established in the aftermath of World War I. Security was conflated with stability, and stability with the status quo. Consequently, America applied its political, economic, and military power to prop up an array of local governments, irrespective of their political and moral legitimacy. This strategy, known as "off-shore balancing," kept the United States engaged in the region, but at a distance, juggling its proxies to ensure that the oil kept flowing out and to prevent the Russians from pushing in.

In this regard, the United States found itself throughout the twentieth century in a geopolitical position vis-à-vis the Middle East comparable in some sense to that of the British Empire during the nineteenth century. During much of that earlier era, London was engaged in its own "great game" across the Muslim world with the other European empires—most notably, the Russians. As David Fromkin argues in *A Peace to End All Peace*, "Britain's [strategy] was to support the native regimes of the Middle East against European

expansion. She did not desire to control the region, but to keep any other European power from doing so. Throughout the 19th century, successive British governments therefore pursued a policy of propping up the tottering Islamic realms in Asia against European interference, subversion, and invasion."¹

But such balancing acts are inherently delicate affairs—regardless of the century in which they are attempted—and both Britain and the United States ultimately abandoned "off-shore balancing" in favor of direct military intervention in the Middle East. For Britain, the immediate catalyst for this transformation came in the form of World War I; for the United States, it was the September 11 attacks. But for both nations, the process by which their political, economic, and military power became drawn into the Middle East—laying the basis for an interventionist foreign policy—was more incremental than a cursory reading of history might otherwise suggest.

For the United States, the progression from seeking to preserve the political order in the Middle East to radically remaking it is intrinsically tied to the events of 1979. It was during this tumultuous year that the disintegration of the old political order in the Middle East accelerated, with

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Saddam Hussein openly coming to power in Baghdad, the Islamist revolution toppling the Shah in Iran, and the Soviet Union invading Afghanistan. In many ways, what 1914 was to the old order in Europe, 1979 would be to the Middle East.

At the time, of course, developments in Iran and Afghanistan appeared to be of far greater urgency to American decision makers than the appearance of another dictator in Iraq. And indeed, the United States largely confronted the former challenges in its traditional manner—that is to say, by attempting to balance them from afar. The rise of fundamentalist Iran, for instance, drove both the Reagan and first Bush administrations to support Saddam Hussein as a counterweight to the mul-lahs. And while the CIA helped lead a fierce war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, it did so largely in the form of covert assistance to another proxy force: the *mujahedeen*.

Maintaining the Status Quo

The events of 1979 also had more a profound and long-lasting impact on U.S. policy in the Middle East, however. On the one hand, the hostage crisis—and with it, the disastrous Desert One raid—reinforced the trepidation among America’s reigning political class about military intervention and the unwillingness of the public to accept casualties. In this regard, the American failure in Iran—as subsequently reinforced in Lebanon, Somalia, and the aftermath of the U.S. embassy bombings in 1998—taught Middle Eastern tyrants, from Saddam Hussein’s Baathists to Osama bin Laden’s jihadists, that Washington could be defeated by wearing down its willpower through desultory terrorist attacks. Perversely, America’s determination to maintain the status quo in the Middle East—by avoiding too much entanglement with it—helped encourage those within the region most determined to overrun it.

At the same time, 1979 challenged the ingrained assumptions of military planners and strategic thinkers in the United States. The collapse of America’s premiere proxy state in the Middle East and the specter of Soviet power in South Asia prompted them to imagine a world in which our erstwhile allies failed to turn back the enemy. What would the United States do, then, if off-shore balancing became itself unbalanced?

Clearly, in such an eventuality, the United States had to be prepared to apply direct military force in the region—if only as a last resort. Thus, in January 1980, President Jimmy Carter used his State of the Union

address to articulate America’s willingness to do precisely this:

Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.²

Carter’s declaration came with an unspoken but significant caveat. The United States simply did not have any robust conventional military capabilities in the Persian Gulf. As Carter speechwriter Hendrik Hertzberg later recalled: “We knew that we didn’t really have the teeth to back up the [threat of force in the Middle East]. We had nuclear weapons, but not the conventional forces to make it stick if the Soviets chose to challenge it.”³

To give substance to the “Carter Doctrine,” the president authorized the creation of a Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, an ad hoc military organization that would later be formalized in 1983 by President Ronald Reagan as U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). CENTCOM did not play a significant interventionist role in the Middle East during the 1980s, but instead directed its attention initially more toward Libyan-led insurrections in Africa—Operations Early Call and Arid Farmer in Sudan and Chad, for instance. However, when Saddam Hussein launched his invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the existence of CENTCOM (coupled with the implosion of the Soviet Union) provided President George H. W. Bush with far greater latitude in mounting a military action in the Middle East than had been institutionally available to any of his predecessors in the White House.

Operation Desert Storm still required a massive logistical and diplomatic effort to deploy a half million troops to the Persian Gulf theater. And despite the overwhelming force at his disposal in the region, President Bush put forward a set of objectives consistent with the conservative, status-quo mindset that governed American foreign policy in this part of the world.

“The immediate, complete and unconditional withdrawal of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait, the restoration of Kuwait’s legitimate government . . . and the restoration of security and stability in the region”—this was the definition of the war that the rest of the world could live with.⁴ Beating Saddam’s legions back across the border would reestablish the preexisting state of affairs in the Middle East; pushing on to Baghdad would disrupt it. Thus, even

as the Bush administration made clear that it would prefer that Saddam be ousted from power, it was stubbornly unwilling to aid either the Kurdish or Shia uprisings that aimed to accomplish precisely this. If there were to be a successor to Saddam, he would ideally be another Sunni military strongman; the policy, in the words of one administration insider, was to get rid of Saddam, not his regime.

The first Bush administration's approach to Iraq was consistent with its general approach to national security, as manifest in its management of the Soviet collapse: it tended to fret about the unraveling of old power balances rather than celebrate the liberty of formerly captive nations. As General Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, explained in his biography: "Our practical intention was to leave Baghdad enough power to survive as a threat to an Iran that remained bitterly hostile to the United States."⁵ Quoting historian John Keegan, Powell insisted that Desert Storm fulfilled "the highest purpose of military action: the use of force in the cause of order."⁶ In their memoir, *A World Transformed*, President Bush and his national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft, likewise made clear that regional stability in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East was the primary goal. Otherwise, they wrote, "We would be committing ourselves—alone—to removing one regime and installing another. . . . We would be facing some dubious 'nation-building.'"⁷ The idea of a "desert democracy," as Powell put it, was "naïve."⁸

This was the accepted wisdom among those in power at the time of the Gulf War, with the Middle East still a security concern secondary to Europe. But in the aftermath of this conflict, it became readily apparent that the containment of Saddam would itself require a significant military commitment by the United States. Although then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney had promised the Saudis, "We will stay until justice is done but not stay a minute longer," America's military capability in the Persian Gulf remained, by necessity, robust through the 1990s.

Indeed, there was no real break in contact between the U.S. and Iraqi militaries from the March 1991 ceasefire agreement at Safwan until the March 2003 launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom. From Operation Provide Comfort in 1991, a belated measure of protection to the Kurds in northern Iraq following their uprising against Saddam, through the establishment of the "Northern Watch" and "Southern Watch" no-fly-zones (which resulted in a greater number of aircraft sorties than Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom combined—more than 150,000

flights under Operation Southern Watch alone), and punctuated by periodic strikes such as Operation Desert Fox in 1998, the American war against Saddam Hussein's regime continued for more than twelve years.

Challenging the Status Quo

But whereas through the 1990s, America's massive military capability in the Persian Gulf was justified in the name of preserving the status quo as established in the aftermath of the Gulf War, President George W. Bush has explicitly rejected this formulation. As he remarked in his groundbreaking speech before the National Endowment for Democracy in November:

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo.⁹

This recognition is a remarkable departure from previous policy. In this regard, too, it is useful to take a page from history. While Britain largely succeeded in its military and diplomatic attempt to redraw the Middle East, the effort stumbled on the home front:

Between 1914 and 1922, Britain changed, and British officials and politicians changed their minds, so that by 1922—when they formally committed themselves to their program for remaking the Middle East—they no longer believed in it. . . . Britain [thus embarked] on a vast new imperial enterprise in the Middle East—one that would take generations to achieve, if its object were to remake the Middle East as India had been remade—at the very time that the British public was turning to a policy of scaling down overseas commitments and was deciding it wanted no more imperial adventures.¹⁰

It remains to be seen whether American society will endorse the president's vision for a new Middle East policy; the election next November will in part be the first

referendum on it. While every creditable Democratic candidate acknowledges the necessity of deploying military force against the forces of terrorism, the central tenet of the president's Middle East policy—that the people of the United States will be made safe only when the people of the region are made free—is certain to remain a point of intense debate, even within the Bush administration itself.

Notes

1. David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989), 27.
2. President Jimmy Carter, "State of the Union Address," January 21, 1980. Available at <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/speeches/su80jec.phtml>.
3. Jennifer Huang, "A Cold War Legacy of Persian Gulf Conflict," [Newsdesk.org](http://www.newsdesk.org). Accessed at http://www.artsandmedia.net/cgi-bin/dc/newsdesk/2003/03/18_centcom_1?t=print.
4. George H. W. Bush, "Letter to Congressional Leaders on the Deployment of Additional United States Armed Forces to the Persian Gulf," November 16, 1990. Available at <http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/papers/1990/90111614.html>.
5. Colin Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 531.
6. *Ibid*, p. 528.
7. George H.W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 433.
8. Powell, *My American Journey*, 527.
9. George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy," November 6, 2003. Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>.
10. Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 19.