



Practice to Deceive

Chaos in the Middle East is not the Bush hawks' nightmare scenario--it's their plan.

By [Joshua Micah Marshall](#)

Imagine it's six months from now. The Iraq war is over. After an initial burst of joy and gratitude at being liberated from Saddam's rule, the people of Iraq are watching, and waiting, and beginning to chafe under American occupation. Across the border, in Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, our conquering presence has brought street protests and escalating violence. The United Nations and NATO are in disarray, so America is pretty much on its own.



Hemmed in by budget deficits at home and limited financial assistance from allies, the Bush administration is talking again about tapping Iraq's oil reserves to offset some of the costs of the American presence--talk that is further inflaming the region. Meanwhile, U.S. intelligence has discovered fresh evidence that, prior to the war, Saddam moved quantities of biological and chemical weapons to Syria. When Syria denies having such weapons, the administration starts massing troops on the Syrian border. But as they begin to move, there is an explosion: Hezbollah terrorists from southern Lebanon blow themselves up in a Baghdad restaurant, killing dozens of Western aid workers and journalists. Knowing that Hezbollah has cells in America, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge puts the nation back on Orange Alert. FBI agents start sweeping through mosques, with a new round of arrests of Saudis, Pakistanis, Palestinians, and Yemenis.

To most Americans, this would sound like a frightening state of affairs, the kind that would lead them to wonder how and why we had got ourselves into this mess in the first place. But to the Bush administration hawks who are guiding American foreign policy, this isn't the nightmare scenario. It's everything going as anticipated.

In their view, invasion of Iraq was not merely, or even primarily, about getting rid of Saddam Hussein. Nor was it really about weapons of mass destruction, though their elimination was an important benefit. Rather, the administration sees the invasion as only the first move in a wider effort to reorder the power structure of the entire Middle East. Prior to the war, the president himself never quite said this openly. But hawkish neoconservatives within his administration gave strong hints. In February, Undersecretary of State John Bolton told Israeli officials that after defeating Iraq, the United States would "deal with" Iran, Syria, and North Korea. Meanwhile, neoconservative journalists have been channeling the administration's thinking. Late last month, *The Weekly Standard's* Jeffrey Bell reported that the administration has in mind a "world war between the United States and a political wing of Islamic fundamentalism ... a war of such reach and magnitude [that] the invasion of Iraq, or the capture of top al Qaeda commanders, should be seen as tactical events in a series of moves and countermoves stretching well into the future."

In short, the administration is trying to roll the table--to use U.S. military force, or the threat of it, to reform or topple virtually every regime in the region, from foes like Syria to friends like Egypt, on the theory that it is the undemocratic nature of these regimes that ultimately breeds terrorism. So events that may seem negative--Hezbollah for the first time targeting American civilians; U.S. soldiers preparing for war with Syria--while unfortunate in themselves, are actually part of the hawks' broader agenda. Each crisis will draw U.S. forces further into the region and each countermove in turn will create problems that can only be fixed by still further American involvement, until democratic governments--or, failing that, U.S. troops--rule the entire Middle East.

There is a startling amount of deception in all this--of hawks deceiving the American people, and perhaps in some cases even themselves. While it's conceivable that bold American action could democratize the Middle East, so broad and radical an initiative could also bring chaos and bloodshed on a massive scale. That all too real possibility leads most establishment foreign policy hands, including many in the State Department, to view the Bush plan with alarm. Indeed, the hawks' record so far does not inspire confidence. Prior to the invasion, for instance, they predicted that if the United States simply announced its intention to act against Saddam regardless of how the United Nations voted, most of our allies, eager to be on our good side, would support us. Almost none did. Yet despite such grave miscalculations, the hawks push on with their sweeping new agenda.

Like any group of permanent Washington revolutionaries fueled by visions of a righteous cause, the neocons long ago decided that criticism from the establishment isn't a reason for self-doubt but the surest sign that they're on the right track. But their confidence also comes from the curious fact that much of what could go awry with their plan will also serve to advance it. A full-scale confrontation between the United States and political Islam, they believe, is inevitable, so why not have it now, on our terms, rather than later, on theirs? Actually, there are plenty of good reasons not to purposely provoke a series of crises in the Middle East. But that's what the hawks are setting in motion, partly on the theory that the worse things get, the more their approach becomes the only plausible solution.

Moral Cloudiness

Ever since the neocons burst upon the public policy scene 30 years ago, their movement has been a marriage of moral idealism, military assertiveness, and deception. Back in the early 1970s, this group of then-young and still mostly Democratic political intellectuals grew alarmed by the post-Vietnam Democrats' seeming indifference to the Soviet threat. They were equally appalled, however, by the amoral worldview espoused by establishment Republicans like Henry

Kissinger, who sought co-existence with the Soviet Union. As is often the case with ex-socialists, the neocons were too familiar with communist tactics to ignore or romanticize communism's evils. The fact that many neocons were Jewish, and outraged by Moscow's increasingly visible persecution of Jews, also caused them to reject both the McGovernite and Kissingerian tendencies to ignore such abuses.

In Ronald Reagan, the neocons found a politician they could embrace. Like them, Reagan spoke openly about the evils of communism and, at least on the peripheries of the Cold War, preferred rollback to coexistence. Neocons filled the Reagan administration, and men like Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Frank Gaffney, and others provided the intellectual ballast and moral fervor for the sharp turn toward confrontation that the United States adopted in 1981.



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But achieving moral clarity often requires hiding certain realities. From the beginning, the neocons took a much more alarmist view of Soviet capacities and intentions than most experts. As late as 1980, the ur-neocon Norman Podhoretz warned of the imminent "Finlandization of America, the political and economic subordination of the United States to superior Soviet power," even raising the possibility that America's only options might be "surrender or war." We now know, of course, that U.S. intelligence estimates, which many neocons thought underestimated the magnitude and durability of Soviet power, in fact wildly overestimated them.

This willingness to deceive--both themselves and others--expanded as neocons grew more comfortable with power. Many spent the Reagan years orchestrating bloody wars against Soviet proxies in the Third World, portraying thugs like the Nicaraguan Contras and plain murderers like Jonas Savimbi of Angola as "freedom fighters." The nadir of this deceit was the Iran-Contra scandal, for which Podhoretz's son-in-law, Elliot Abrams, pled guilty to perjury. Abrams was later pardoned by Bush's father, and today, he runs Middle East policy in the Bush White House.

But in the end, the Soviet Union did fall. And the hawks' policy of confrontation did contribute to its collapse. So too, of course, did the economic and military rot most of the hawks didn't believe in, and the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev, whom neocons such as Richard Perle counseled Reagan not to trust. But the neocons did not dwell on what they got wrong. Rather, the experience of having played a hand in the downfall of so great an evil led them to the opposite belief: that it's okay to be spectacularly wrong, even brazenly deceptive about the details, so long as you have moral vision and a willingness to use force.

What happened in the 1990s further reinforced that mindset. Hawks like Perle and William Kristol pulled their hair out when Kissingerians like Brent Scowcroft and Colin Powell left Saddam's regime in place after the first Gulf War. They watched with mounting fury as terrorist attacks by Muslim fundamentalists claimed more and more American and Israeli lives. They considered the Oslo accords an obvious mistake (how can you negotiate with a man like Yasin Arafat?), and as the decade progressed they became increasingly convinced that there was a

nexus linking burgeoning terrorism and mounting anti-Semitism with repressive but nominally "pro-American" regimes like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In 1996, several of the hawks--including Perle--even tried to sell Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the idea that Israel should attack Saddam on its own--advice Netanyahu wisely declined. When the Oslo process crumbled and Saudi Arabian terrorists killed 3,000 Americans on 9/11, the hawks felt, not without some justification, that they had seen this danger coming all along, while others had ignored it. The timing was propitious, because in September 2001 many already held jobs with a new conservative president willing to hear their pitch.

Prime Minister bin Laden

The pitch was this: The Middle East today is like the Soviet Union 30 years ago. Politically warped fundamentalism is the contemporary equivalent of communism or fascism. Terrorists with potential access to weapons of mass destruction are like an arsenal pointed at the United States. The primary cause of all this danger is the Arab world's endemic despotism, corruption, poverty, and economic stagnation. Repressive regimes channel dissent into the mosques, where the hopeless and disenfranchised are taught a brand of Islam that combines anti-modernism, anti-Americanism, and a worship of violence that borders on nihilism. Unable to overthrow their own authoritarian rulers, the citizenry turns its fury against the foreign power that funds and supports these corrupt regimes to maintain stability and access to oil: the United States. As Johns Hopkins University professor Fouad Ajami recently wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, "The great indulgence granted to the ways and phobias of Arabs has reaped a terrible harvest"--terrorism. Trying to "manage" this dysfunctional Islamic world, as Clinton attempted and Colin Powell counsels us to do, is as foolish, unproductive, and dangerous as *détente* was with the Soviets, the hawks believe. Nor is it necessary, given the unparalleled power of the American military. Using that power to confront Soviet communism led to the demise of that totalitarianism and the establishment of democratic (or at least non-threatening) regimes from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea to the Bering Strait. Why not use that same power to upend the entire corrupt Middle East edifice and bring liberty, democracy, and the rule of law to the Arab world?

The hawks' grand plan differs depending on whom you speak to, but the basic outline runs like this: The United States establishes a reasonably democratic, pro-Western government in Iraq--assume it falls somewhere between Turkey and Jordan on the spectrum of democracy and the rule of law. Not perfect, representative democracy, certainly, but a system infinitely preferable to Saddam's. The example of a democratic Iraq will radically change the political dynamics of the Middle East. When Palestinians see average Iraqis beginning to enjoy real freedom and economic opportunity, they'll want the same themselves. With that happy prospect on one hand and implacable United States will on the other, they'll demand that the Palestinian Authority reform politically and negotiate with Israel. That in turn will lead to a real peace deal between the Israelis and Palestinians. A democratic Iraq will also hasten the fall of the fundamentalist Shi'a mullahs in Iran, whose citizens are gradually adopting anti-fanatic, pro-Western sympathies. A democratized Iran would create a string of democratic, pro-Western governments (Turkey, Iraq, and Iran) stretching across the historical heartland of Islam. Without a hostile Iraq towering over it, Jordan's pro-Western Hashemite monarchy would likely come into full bloom. Syria would be no more than a pale reminder of the bad old days. (If they made trouble, a U.S. invasion would take care of them, too.) And to the tiny Gulf emirates making hesitant steps toward democratization, the corrupt regimes of Saudi Arabia and Egypt would no longer look like examples of stability and strength in a benighted region, but holdouts against the democratic tide. Once the dust settles, we could decide whether to ignore them as harmless throwbacks to the bad old days or deal with them, too. We'd be in a much stronger position to do so since we'd no longer require their friendship to help us manage ugly regimes in Iraq, Iran, and Syria.

The audacious nature of the neocons' plan makes it easy to criticize but strangely difficult to dismiss outright. Like a character in a bad made-for-TV thriller from the 1970s, you can hear yourself saying, "That plan's just crazy enough to work."

But like a TV plot, the hawks' vision rests on a willing suspension of disbelief, in particular, on the premise that every close call will break in our favor: The guard will fall asleep next to the cell so our heroes can pluck the keys from his belt. The hail of enemy bullets will plink-plink-plink over our heroes' heads. And the getaway car in the driveway will have the keys waiting in the ignition. Sure, the hawks' vision could come to pass. But there are at least half a dozen equally plausible alternative scenarios that would be disastrous for us.

To begin with, this whole endeavor is supposed to be about reducing the long-term threat of terrorism, particularly terrorism that employs weapons of mass destruction. But, to date, every time a Western or non-Muslim country has put troops into Arab lands to stamp out violence and terror, it has awakened entire new terrorist organizations and a generation of recruits. Placing U.S. troops in Riyadh after the Gulf War (to protect Saudi Arabia and its oilfields from Saddam) gave Osama bin Laden a cause around which he built al Qaeda. Israel took the West Bank in a war of self-defense, but once there its occupation helped give rise to Hamas. Israel's incursion into southern Lebanon (justified at the time, but transformed into a permanent occupation) led to the rise of Hezbollah. Why do we imagine that our invasion and occupation of Iraq, or whatever countries come next, will turn out any differently?

The Bush administration also insists that our right to act preemptively and unilaterally, with or without the international community's formal approval, rests on the need to protect American lives. But with the exception of al Qaeda, most terrorist organizations in the world, and certainly in the Middle East, do not target Americans. Hamas certainly doesn't. Hezbollah, the most fearsome of terrorist organizations beside al Qaeda, has killed American troops in the Middle East, but not for some years, and it has never targeted American civilians on American soil. Yet like Hamas, Hezbollah has an extensive fundraising cell operation in the States (as do many terrorist organizations, including the Irish Republican Army). If we target them in the Middle East, can't we reasonably assume they will respond by activating these cells and taking the war worldwide?

Next, consider the hawks' plans for those Middle East states that are authoritarian yet "friendly" to the United States--specifically Egypt and Saudi Arabia. No question these are problem countries. Their governments buy our weapons and accept our foreign aid yet allow vicious anti-Semitism to spew from the state run airwaves and tolerate clerics who preach jihad against the West. But is it really in our interests to work for their overthrow? Many hawks clearly think so. I asked Richard Perle last year about the dangers that might flow from the fall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. "Mubarak is no great shakes," he quipped. "Surely we can do better than Mubarak." When I asked Perle's friend and fellow Reagan-era neocon Ken Adelman to calculate the costs of having the toppling of Saddam lead to the overthrow of the House of Saud, he shot back: "All the better if you ask me."

This cavalier call for regime change, however, runs into a rather obvious problem. When the communist regimes of Eastern and Central Europe fell after 1989, the people of those nations felt grateful to the United States because we helped liberate them from their Russian colonial masters. They went on to create pro-Western democracies. The same is unlikely to happen, however, if we help "liberate" Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The tyrannies in these countries are home grown, and the U.S. government has supported them, rightly or wrongly, for decades, even as we've ignored (in the eyes of Arabs) the plight of the Palestinians. Consequently, the citizens of these countries generally hate the United States, and show strong sympathy for Islamic radicals. If free elections were held in Saudi Arabia today, Osama bin Laden would

probably win more votes than Crown Prince Abdullah. Topple the pro-Western autocracies in these countries, in other words, and you won't get pro-Western democracies but anti-Western tyrannies.

To this dilemma, the hawks offer two responses. One is that eventually the citizens of Egypt and Saudi Arabia will grow disenchanted with their anti-Western Islamic governments, just as the people of Iran have, and become our friends. To which the correct response is, well, sure, that's a nice theory, but do we really want to make the situation for ourselves hugely worse now on the strength of a theoretical future benefit?

The hawks' other response is that if the effort to push these countries toward democracy goes south, we can always use our military might to secure our interests. "We need to be more assertive," argues Max Boot, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, "and stop letting all these two-bit dictators and rogue regimes push us around and stop being a patsy for our so-called allies, especially in Saudi Arabia." Hopefully, in Boot's view, laying down the law will be enough. But he envisions a worst-case scenario that would involve the United States "occupying the Saudi's oil fields and administering them as a trust for the people of the region."

What Boot is calling for, in other words, is the creation of a de facto American empire in the Middle East. In fact, there's a subset of neocons who believe that given our unparalleled power, empire is our destiny and we might as well embrace it. The problem with this line of thinking is, of course, that it ignores the lengthy and troubling history of imperial ambitions, particularly in the Middle East. The French and the English didn't leave voluntarily; they were driven out. And they left behind a legacy of ignorance, exploitation, and corruption that's largely responsible for the region's current dysfunctional politics.

Another potential snafu for the hawks is Iran, arguably the most dangerous state in the Middle East. The good news is that the fundamentalist Shi'a mullahs who have been running the government, exporting terrorism, and trying to enrich their uranium, are increasingly unpopular. Most experts believe that the mullahs' days are numbered, and that true democracy will come to Iran. That day will arrive sooner, the hawks argue, with a democratic Iraq on Iran's border. But the opposite could happen. If the mullahs are smart, they'll cooperate just enough with the Americans not to provoke an attack, but put themselves forth to their own people as defenders of Iranian independence and Iran's brother Shi'a in southern Iraq who are living under the American jackboot. Such a strategy might keep the fundamentalists in power for years longer than they otherwise might have been.

Then there is the mother of all problems, Iraq. The hawks' whole plan rests on the assumption that we can turn it into a self-governing democracy--that the very presence of that example will transform politics in the Middle East. But what if we can't really create a democratic, self-governing Iraq, at least not very quickly? What if the experience we had after World War II in Germany and Japan, two ethnically homogeneous nations, doesn't quite work in an ethnically divided Iraq where one group, the Sunni Arabs, has spent decades repressing and slaughtering the others? As one former Army officer with long experience with the Iraq file explains it, the "physical analogy to Saddam Hussein's regime is a steel beam in compression." Give it one good hit, and you'll get a violent explosion. One hundred thousand U.S. troops may be able to keep a lid on all the pent-up hatred. But we may soon find that it's unwise to hand off power to the fractious Iraqis. To invoke the ugly but apt metaphor which Jefferson used to describe the American dilemma of slavery, we will have the wolf by the ears. You want to let go. But you dare not.

And what if we do muster the courage to allow elections, but the Iraqis choose a government we

can't live with--as the Japanese did in their first post-war election, when the United States purged the man slated to become prime minister? But if we do that in Iraq, how will it look on Al Jazeera? Ultimately, the longer we stay as occupiers, the more Iraq becomes not an example for other Arabs to emulate, but one that helps Islamic fundamentalists make their case that America is just an old-fashioned imperium bent on conquering Arab lands. And that will make worse all the problems set forth above.

None of these problems are inevitable, of course. Luck, fortitude, deft management, and help from allies could bring about very different results. But we can probably only rely on the first three because we are starting this enterprise over the expressed objections of almost every other country in the world. And that's yet another reason why overthrowing the Middle East won't be the same as overthrowing communism. We did the latter, after all, within a tight formal alliance, NATO. Reagan's most effective military move against Moscow, for instance, placing Pershing II missiles in Western Europe, could never have happened, given widespread public protests, except that NATO itself voted to let the weapons in. In the Middle East, however, we're largely alone. If things go badly, what allies we might have left are liable to say to us: You broke it, you fix it.

Whacking the Hornet's Nest

If the Bush administration has thought through these various negative scenarios--and we must presume, or at least pray, that it has--it certainly has not shared them with the American people. More to the point, the president has not even leveled with the public that such a clean-sweep approach to the Middle East is, in fact, their plan. This breaks new ground in the history of pre-war presidential deception. Franklin Roosevelt said he was trying to keep the United States out of World War II even as he--in some key ways--courted a confrontation with the Axis powers that he saw as both inevitable and necessary. History has judged him well for this. Far more brazenly, Lyndon Johnson's administration greatly exaggerated the Gulf of Tonkin incident to gin up support for full-throttle engagement in Vietnam. The war proved to be Johnson's undoing. When President Clinton used American troops to quell the fighting in Bosnia he said publicly that our troops would be there no longer than a year, even though it was widely understood that they would be there far longer. But in the case of these deceptions, the public was at least told what the goals of the wars were and whom and where we would be fighting.

Today, however, the great majority of the American people have no concept of what kind of conflict the president is leading them into. The White House has presented this as a war to depose Saddam Hussein in order to keep him from acquiring weapons of mass destruction--a goal that the majority of Americans support. But the White House really has in mind an enterprise of a scale, cost, and scope that would be almost impossible to sell to the American public. The White House knows that. So it hasn't even tried. Instead, it's focused on getting us into Iraq with the hope of setting off a sequence of events that will draw us inexorably towards the agenda they have in mind.

The brazenness of this approach would be hard to believe if it weren't entirely in line with how the administration has pursued so many of its other policy goals. Its preferred method has been to use deceit to create *faits accomplis*, facts on the ground that then make the administration's broader agenda almost impossible not to pursue. During and after the 2000 campaign, the president called for major education and prescription drug programs plus a huge tax cut, saying America could easily afford them all because of large budget surpluses. Critics said it wasn't true, and the growing budget deficits have proven them right. But the administration now uses the existence of big budget deficits as a way to put the squeeze on social programs--part of its plan all along. Strip away the presidential seal and the fancy titles, and it's just a straight-up con.

The same strategy seemed to guide the administration's passive-aggressive attitude towards our allies. It spent the months after September 11 signaling its distaste for international agreements and entangling alliances. The president then demanded last September that the same countries he had snubbed support his agenda in Iraq. And last month, when most of those countries refused, hawks spun that refusal as evidence that they were right all along. Recently, a key neoconservative commentator with close ties to the administration told me that the question since the end of the Cold War has been which global force would create the conditions for global peace and security: the United States, NATO, or the United Nations. With NATO now wrecked, he told me, the choice is between the United States and the United Nations. Whether NATO is actually wrecked remains to be seen. But the strategy is clear: push the alliance to the breaking point, and when it snaps, cite it as proof that the alliance was good for nothing anyway. It's the definition of chutzpah, like the kid who kills his parents and begs the judge for sympathy because he's an orphan.

Another president may be able to rebuild NATO or get the budget back in balance. But once America begins the process of remaking the Middle East in the way the hawks have in mind, it will be extremely difficult for any president to pull back. Vietnam analogies have long been overused, and used inappropriately, but this may be one case where the comparison is apt.

Ending Saddam Hussein's regime and replacing it with something stable and democratic was always going to be a difficult task, even with the most able leadership and the broadest coalition. But doing it as the Bush administration now intends is something like going outside and giving a few good whacks to a hornets' nest because you want to get them out in the open and have it out with them once and for all. Ridding the world of Islamic terrorism by rooting out its ultimate sources--Muslim fundamentalism and the Arab world's endemic despotism, corruption, and poverty--might work. But the costs will be immense. Whether the danger is sufficient and the costs worth incurring would make for an interesting public debate. The problem is that once it's just us and the hornets, we really won't have any choice.

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