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U.S. Shifts Rhetoric On Its Goals in Iraq

New Emphasis: Middle East Stability

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As the search for illegal weapons in Iraq continues without success, the Bush administration has moved to emphasize a different rationale for the war against Saddam Hussein: using Iraq as the "linchpin" to transform the Middle East and thereby reduce the terrorist threat to the United States.

▼ ADVERTISING President Bush, who has mostly stopped talking about Iraq's weapons, said at a news conference Wednesday that "the rise of a free and peaceful Iraq is critical to the stability of the Middle East, and a stable Middle East is critical to the security of the American people."

Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz said on NBC's "Meet the Press" Sunday that "the battle to secure the peace in Iraq is now the central battle in the global war on terror, and those sacrifices are going to make not just the Middle East more stable, but our country safer."

And Vice President Cheney, in a speech last week, said Iraq "will stand as an example to the entire Middle East" and thus "contribute directly to the security of America and our friends."

In an interview yesterday, a senior administration official expanded on that theme, saying the United States has embarked on a "generational commitment" to Iraq similar to its efforts to transform Germany in the decades after World War II.

The Bush aide, who spoke on condition of anonymity, outlined a long-term strategy in which the United States would spread its values through Iraq and the Middle East much as it transformed Europe in the second half of the 20th century. As outlined, the U.S. commitment to Iraq and the Middle East would be far more expansive than the administration had described to the public and the world before the Iraq war.

"The great goal for the United States after 9/11 is worthy of a country of the importance and the power of the United States," the adviser said. "That goal is to see the spread of our values and to understand that our values and our security are inextricably linked, much as they were in Europe, but they are also linked in the Middle East."

The vision described by the official represents a change in the administration's emphasis in describing the U.S. purpose in Iraq. Before the war, Bush at times stressed the limits of the mission, promising to "remain in Iraq as long as necessary and not a day more." At that time, Bush justified the conflict largely by asserting the need to strip Hussein of chemical and biological weapons and disrupt his nuclear ambitions.

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The notion of a free Iraq as a catalyst for change in the region is not new. In a Feb. 26 speech at the American Enterprise Institute, Bush said: "A liberated Iraq can show the power of freedom to transform that vital region by bringing hope and progress into the lives of millions."

More recently, in a speech in London a month ago, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice compared the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon to Pearl Harbor. Rice urged Europeans to expand on the defeat of Hussein's government by turning "to the Middle East with the same vision, determination and patience that we exhibited in building a united transatlantic community after 1945."

While that notion was low on the original list of reasons for war, it has largely replaced the "weapons of mass destruction" as justification.

The newly emphasized rationale is not as clear as the emphasis on the threat Hussein represented. Though the United States seeks to transform the Middle East, some key allies in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, have resisted democracy.

The Bush adviser spoke of an open-ended commitment to Iraq as the United States helps to build its economy and its infrastructure. "When we're talking about resources, this is something that isn't going to be firm for years out into the future," the aide said.

The official drew an extended analogy, comparing the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, to Pearl Harbor, and the difficulties in Iraq to the occupation of West Germany between 1945 and 1947. "That was a generational commitment to Europe, because the only way the United States believed that we could actually make certain that Americans were not going to fight in European wars again was to make certain that Europe was democratized and prospered," the adviser said. "In a sense, what 9/11 did was to give the United States the same kind of impulse toward the Middle East. . . . You really have to have a transformation of that region if we're not to have terrorists stalking the American people for generations to come."

In a crucial departure from the analogy, the official did not envision a decades-long military presence in Iraq such as the half-century presence in Germany necessitated by the Cold War.

The official said Europeans understand that "if we're ever to make the Middle East a different place than it is, you're going to have to see a transformation of the Middle East and an addressing of the freedom deficit. It's a long-term project, but I think it would be a mistake to think that it's going to be the U.S. military that's going to do it or the United States alone that's going to do it."





The official said that in the short term, the administration expects the number of nations contributing troops to the Iraq occupation to grow from the current 16 to 30 or more over the next "couple of months."

"Much as a different Germany becomes a kind of linchpin for a Europe in which you will not have war, a different Iraq becomes a kind of linchpin for a different Middle East out of which these ideologies of hatred would not come," the official said yesterday.

"The reason I make the historical analogy is, it means it has to be a generational commitment. You can't say after a year, 'Well, this is hard.' You have to stay with it."

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