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Good versus evil isn't a strategy

Bush's worldview fails to see that in the Middle East, power politics is the key.

By Madeleine Albright
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THE BUSH administration's newly unveiled National Security Strategy might well be subtitled "The Irony of Iran." Three years after the invasion of Iraq and the invention of the phrase "axis of evil," the administration now highlights the threat posed by Iran — whose radical government has been vastly strengthened by the invasion of Iraq. This is more tragedy than strategy, and it reflects the Manichean approach this administration has taken to the world.

It is sometimes convenient, for purposes of rhetorical effect, for national leaders to talk of a globe neatly divided into good and bad. It is quite another, however, to base the policies of the world's most powerful nation upon that fiction. The administration's penchant for painting its perceived adversaries with the same sweeping brush has led to a series of unintended consequences.

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For years, the president has acted as if Al Qaeda, Saddam Hussein's followers and Iran's mullahs were parts of the same problem. Yet, in the 1980s, Hussein's Iraq and Iran fought a

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brutal war. In the 1990s, Al Qaeda's allies murdered a group of Iranian diplomats. For years, Osama bin Laden ridiculed Hussein, who persecuted Sunni and Shiite religious leaders alike. When Al Qaeda struck the U.S. on 9/11, Iran condemned the attacks and later participated constructively in talks on Afghanistan. The top leaders in the new Iraq — chosen in elections that George W. Bush called "a magic moment in the history of liberty" — are friends of Iran. When the U.S. invaded Iraq, Bush may have thought he was striking a blow for good over evil, but the forces unleashed were considerably more complex.

The administration is now divided between those who understand this complexity and those who do not. On one side, there are ideologues, such as the vice president, who apparently see Iraq as a useful precedent for Iran. Meanwhile, officials on the front lines in Iraq know they cannot succeed in assembling a workable government in that country without the tacit blessing of Iran; hence, last week's long-overdue announcement of plans for a U.S.-Iranian dialogue on Iraq — a dialogue that if properly executed might also lead to progress on other issues.

Although this is not an administration known for taking advice, I offer three suggestions. The first is to understand that although we all want to "end tyranny in this world," that is a fantasy unless we begin to solve hard problems. Iraq is increasingly a gang war that can be solved in one of two ways: by one side imposing its will or by all the legitimate players having a piece of the power. The U.S. is no longer able to control events in Iraq, but it can be useful as a referee.

Second, the Bush administration should disavow any plan for regime change in Iran — not because the regime should not be changed but because U.S. endorsement of that goal only makes it less likely. In today's warped political environment, nothing strengthens a radical government more than Washington's overt antagonism. It also is common sense to presume that Iran will be less willing to cooperate in Iraq and to compromise on nuclear issues if it is being threatened with destruction. As for Iran's choleric and anti-Semitic new president, he will be swallowed up by internal rivals if he is not unwittingly propped up by external foes.

Third, the administration must stop playing solitaire while Middle East and Persian Gulf leaders play poker. Bush's "march of freedom" is not the big story in the Muslim world, where Shiite Muslims suddenly have more power than they have had in 1,000 years; it is not the big story in Lebanon, where Iran is filling the vacuum left by Syria; it is not the story among Palestinians, who voted — in Western eyes — freely, and wrongly; it is not even the big story in Iraq, where the top three factions in the recent elections were all supported by decidedly undemocratic militias.

In the long term, the future of the Middle East may well be determined by those in the region dedicated to the hard work of building democracy. I certainly hope so. But hope is not a policy. In the short term, we must recognize that the region will be shaped primarily by fairly ruthless power politics in which the clash between good and evil will be swamped by differences between Sunni and Shiite, Arab and Persian, Arab and Kurd, Kurd and Turk, Hashemite and Saudi, secular and religious and, of course, Arab and Jew. This is the world, the president pledges in his National Security Strategy, that "America must continue to lead." Actually, it is the world he must begin to address — before it is too late.

MADELEINE ALBRIGHT, secretary of State from 1997 to 2001, is the author of "The Mighty



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and the Almighty -- Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs," to be published by Harper Collins in May. This essay appears by special arrangement with the Financial Times.

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