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An interview with Richard Perle

Barry James/IHT IHT
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On the threats of the 21st Century:

They have to do largely with acts of terror and potential acts of terror utilizing weapons of mass destruction. No-one is now concerned as we were during the Cold War about acts of aggression across national borders.

The concern today is the combination of terrorist organizations and rogue states. This has given rise to an essential idea about how to respond, which has been derided. That essential idea is preemption.

The mechanisms of collective security at the United Nations are inadequate and only the possibility of preemption can give us a reasonable prospect of dealing with those threats. It's not surprising that this is not well understood, because we are seeing a radical change in global security.

Iraq today: who's next? If next means who will next experience the 3rd division or the 82nd airborne, it's the wrong question. If the question is who poses a threat that the United States must find ways of dealing with, that list is well known. It's Iran, it's North Korea. It's Syria. It's Libya and I could go on.

The point about Iraq and Afghanistan is that twice now the United States will have used force to deal with a threat that could not be managed in any other way. So the message to those on the who's next list is, give us another way to manage the threat.

Obviously our strong preference is always going to be to manage threats by peaceful means. And every one of the countries on the who's next list is in a position to end the threat by peaceful means. So the message to Syria, to Iran, to North Korea to Libya should be clear: If we have no alternative, we are prepared to do what is necessary to defend Americans and others. But that doesn't mean that we are readying the troops for a next military engagement. We're not.

On state sponsorship of terrorism:

Potential sources of terrorism cannot be held at risk in the way the state that harbors them can be, because they have no permanent concrete infrastructure that can be targeted. That is precisely why American policy is now focused on discouraging state sponsorship.

The President on Sept. 11, 2001 said we will not distinguish

between those that have committed these acts and the states that harbor them. This was a radical departure from all previous American policy, because until then terrorism had been regarded as an act of lawlessness that could be dealt with by the mechanisms of intelligence and law enforcement, and the states that harbored terrorists and in some cases virtually sponsored them were not held to account. This reached, in my view, absurd proportions in the case of the Lockerbie bombing where we conducted a trial under Scottish law to go after the individuals who placed the explosives, and not the state that ordered it.

So September 11 changed all that and the reason is clear. If we cannot separate terrorist organizations from the sanctuaries that states offer them it's going to be vastly more difficult to defeat them. We now understand as we didn't before September 11, the magnitude of the damage that can be done by terrorists who now are working feverishly to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

There is no doubt that if some of the organizations that are determined to destroy this country could lay their hands on a nuclear weapon they would detonate it, and they would detonate in the most densely populated cities in this country with a view to killing as many Americans as possible. What would be the U.S. response if it found Syria was concealing weapons of mass destruction on behalf of Iraq? If we were to learn, for example, that Syria, had taken possession of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, I'm quite sure that we would have to respond to that. It would be an act of such foolishness on Syria's part that it would raise the question of whether Syria could be reasoned with. But I suppose our first approach would be to demand that the Syrians terminate that threat by turning over anything they have come to possess. And failing that, I don't think anyone would rule out the use of any of our full range of capabilities. Should UN weapons inspectors go back to Iraq?

I certainly don't think so. The UN inspectors failed and failed catastrophically not because they didn't find things but because they weren't honest about their capacity to find things. What Hans Blix should have done when the Iraqi declaration came in on December 7 was announce that there was no reason for the inspectors to return to Iraq because Saddam had not provided the information it was the role of the inspectors to verify.

It was never the role of the inspectors to scour the country looking for hidden weapons. They had no capacity to do that. They were a hundred in a country the size of France and Portugal put together and Hans Blix understood that perfectly well. What Saddam was supposed to have delivered on December 7 was a balance sheet and the inspectors were auditors, and when there was no balance sheet they should have said they had nothing to audit. Great confusion was caused by inspectors returning to sites which we knew had been sanitized. On weapons of mass destruction: We will find weapons of mass destruction. I haven't any doubt of that. We

will not find them, however, unless we stumble across them, until we are able to interview those Iraqis who know where they are. It was always the case that access to people with knowledge where things had been hidden was the key to discovery, which is why it was infuriating that Hans Blix and the French government and the Russian government, during the course of the negotiations on resolution 1441, refused the U.S. request that interviews with scientists identified as being involved in the weapons programs be mandatory and conducted outside the country, together with the families of those individuals, because it was a certain death sentence to reveal information. Saddam knew that and Hans Blix knew that. And I'm sure Jacques Chirac and Vladimir Putin all knew that and yet they all opposed the one thing that might have led to the discovery of those weapons.

The French called it legalized abduction, legalized kidnapping. And they understood the importance of this and we conceded the point only to get resolution 1441, because we could not have achieved a consensus without relaxing our demands on the inspections. By the way we relaxed our demands not only on that issue but on a dozen other issues where the alignment of the French the Russians and Hans Blix was in every case to diminish the prospects that inspections would succeed.

Could I just add one ironic note? The prospect of inspections may have had the effect of causing the relocation of the weapons and their hiding in a manner that would minimize their discovery which I believe will turn out to mean burying things underground in inaccessible places. Given the rapidity of the coalition advance, those individual acts of concealment may have precluded retrieving and using those weapons in a timely fashion. But it would be an insult to send Hans Blix back. Is the United States doomed to follow this policy of preemption alone?

I think we should begin with trying to restructure the United Nations. It is an institution set up in the aftermath of a great event and thoroughly dominated by the immediate memory of that event. It would be rare for an organization so constituted to function effectively 60 years later in an entirely different world without change. And yet there has been no change to the charter of the United Nations since it was founded. It is not a living constitution like the American constitution, interpreted to reflect the times.

The UN needs a new charter and the essence of the change would be to recognize the threats that arise where national territory is used as a base for support or sanctuary of terrorist organizations, and in particular, when that activity occurs in the presence of weapons of mass destruction.

There is nothing in the UN charter now that authorizes collective preemption. That has to change if the UN is going to be effective and relevant. That would solve the problem of the United States having to act alone.

I think the charter could say that the terrorist threat is a threat to

all mankind. It is not just wars across national borders that constitute a threat to the international community, and we need to legitimize the collective right to take action against states harboring terrorists. I think if that right existed and the UN were properly reconstituted, it would discourage support for terrorism in a way that would be a very healthy development.

Interestingly enough, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, the French ambassador to the United Nation, David Levitt, came very close to saying what I have just said. But it was not permanent, it was not built into the structure of the United Nations, it was drawn rather too narrowly. But it was an intelligent and almost heroic act of French diplomacy and probably the last one we've seen. In fact, it is the only one we've seen. Why do you think you are demonized by the French press and segments of the political establishment in France? I like to think it is because some of the arguments I am making strike home, and most of all, I like to think that there are millions of Frenchmen who deep down do not agree with the policies of the French government which opposed regime change even against this brutal sadistic tyranny.

The French I know must be appalled at being associated with Saddam Hussein. I think it is possible that some people think it is a message they don't want their fellow Frenchmen to hear. There is another element, which is sadly that President Chirac and some others are trying to build Europe in opposition to the United States. I have been urging my fellow Americans to recognize that for what it is and develop a strategy for dealing with it. Can France and the United States make it up? I have my doubts about whether this French government can do that. It isn't just (Foreign Minister Dominique) De Villepin, although he has expressed, as well as any opponent of the United States, the depth of his opposition to us and everything we are doing.

Even now there are indications that France is working to turn the forthcoming G8 meeting into an anti-American occasion. Even after the war started, France went out of its way to obstruct the successful progress of the war and we all saw that De Villepin refused to say what side he wanted to win. When you have both the government and the opposition agreed on one thing, which is that they are not sure whether they want Saddam Hussein to win, that is a shocking development and Americans have been shocked. The Freedom Fries and all the rest is a pretty deeply held sentiment. I am afraid this is not something that is easily patched and cannot be dealt with simply in the normal diplomatic way because the feeling runs too deep. It's gone way beyond the diplomats. I don't believe you could get senior American officials together with French officials in a room and emerge with this behind them. Is there also a problem with Germany?

While the pacifist tendency there is a serious problem, it differs from the French situation in that there is not the same desire to build Europe in opposition to the United States, and so it is more amenable to reconciliation.

If I am right that the French policy is a deliberate one of diminishing the influence of the United States in the world and, in particular, in Europe, then you have, at least for the foreseeable future, a pretty direct conflict of interests.

The German case is different. When this war is over, Germans, like the rest of the world, can assess what was done and there will be a shift in German thinking about it.

People said that large numbers of civilians would be killed, that we were going to Iraq for unworthy motives -- oil, power and imperial ambition -- and that we would stay and dominate the country, that this was not a war of liberation.

Well, nothing is quite so convincing as seeing the reaction of the Iraqis to their liberation. People will see us leave. The oil will be there for the people of Iraq and we are going to leave something decent behind and I would like to believe that people will observe that and draw the appropriate conclusion. It is going to take a while. I think even the French will observe that and draw the appropriate conclusions. What obligations does the United States have to Iraq? I think we have an obligation to do what we said we were going to do -- to ensure that the country is liberated, so that Iraqis are able to govern themselves with a decent and humane representative government.

Democracy is not Nescafe. You can't just add water. What we can do is to provide a secure environment in which a political process can begin in Iraq that leads to pluralist and I very much hope democratic political institutions. And we can assist in the rebuilding of the country although very little damage was done by the war itself; this is not Dresden.

Someone asked me the other day, "Who's going to rebuild everything that's been destroyed?" I replied by asking, "Should we begin by rebuilding the headquarters of the secret police?" We destroyed essentially military installations and command and control facilities.

There was a little bit of unintended damage but very little and the oil fields and refineries and infrastructure are intact, the bridges are intact. This was an intelligently conducted war and it was conducted with a view to what would be left when it was over. We went to great lengths to avoid destruction that would diminish the prospects for the Iraqi people. We have a serious obligation to leave this country a lot better than we found it, and we are going to do that, I'm sure we are going to do that. What will be the shape of Iraq in future? I think a federal structure, given the distribution of Kurds, Shia and Sunnis, probably makes sense. There is a strong desire to keep Iraq together for international reasons as well as national ones. I think they will end up adopting a federal structure.

Is there a threat that Turkey will invade? I don't believe the Turks will move into northern Iraq and I never thought they would, except in a defensive posture in case things went wrong.

By wrong, the Turks meant the emergence of a separatist entity of some sort. We had a pretty clear understanding with the Turks all along on this issue. I could not image Turkey seizing Iraqi territory.

Is Saudi Arabia a problem? We have obviously a serious problem with the Saudis and that is that they have been funding extremist institutions and actual terrorists around the world, and this isn't just wealthy Saudi individuals. It includes the government. This poses such an obvious threat to the United States that it is intolerable that they continue to do this. They may even be in the process of discovering that it is contrary to their own long term interest.

Whatever benefits they achieve by buying off extremists who might pose a threat to them, the net result of that policy has been to create an extremist monster that's out of control. I hope they are reconsidering and will take the appropriate action to stop that and stop it immediately. After all, Bin Laden's first target was the royal family of Saudi Arabia. He made that very clear. On the road map to peace: I think it is a great mistake to believe that, now this war will soon be over, we must launch some initiative in respect to the Israelis and the Palestinians in a way that suggests we have done damage in the Arab world and now we need to repair that damage by some act of contrition in support of the peace process. There are very good reasons for supporting the peace process but contrition is not one of them. The sense that we somehow owe this to the Arab world only diminishes the essential truth about what we've done in Iraq. We have not damaged Arab interests. We have advanced them by freeing 25 million people from this brutal dictatorship.

Is the world safer as a result of the Iraq war?

I have no doubt the world is a safer place today than it was a month ago, and the idea that liberating Iraq would spawn terrorists all over the Muslim world, I think, will be proven to be wrong, and it will be proven to be wrong by the Iraqis themselves .

We are about to learn what life has been like under Saddam Hussein. Even in the tough world we are living in, people are going to be shocked about the depravity and sadism of the Saddam regime. I refuse to believe that when that has been thoroughly ventilated there will be any Arabs who will describe their hostility towards the United States as a product of what we did in Iraq.

There is a lot of hostility towards the United States and it deserves analysis, although I'm not sure there is a lot we can do about it. But I don't believe that it will flow from this act of liberation. On the contrary this has the potential to cause some serious rethinking among thoughtful Muslims and Arabs.



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