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Tuesday, Sep 16, 2003

## Perspective

Posted on Mon, Sep. 15, 2003

**The Mercury News**

### Seeking honesty in U.S. policy

EX-U.S. DIPLOMAT SAYS WHITE HOUSE IS IN FULL RETREAT FROM IRAQ

REALITY

By Joseph Wilson

During the gulf war in 1991, when I was in charge of the American Embassy in Baghdad, I placed a copy of Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" on my office coffee table. I thought it conveyed far better than words ever could the weird world that was Iraq at that time, a world in which nothing was what it seemed: The several hundred Western hostages Saddam Hussein took during Desert Shield were not really hostages but "guests." Kuwait was not invaded, but "liberated."

It is clearly time to dust the book off and again display it prominently, only this time because our own government has dragged the country down a rabbit hole, all the while trying to convince the American people that life in newly liberated Iraq is not as distorted as it seems.

It is returning to normal, we are assured, even as we are asked to ante up an additional \$75 billion and pressure builds to send more troops and extend the tours of duty of those who are there. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz tells Congress that all we need is to project a little confidence. The Mad Hatter could not have said it better.

President Bush's speech last Sunday was just the latest example of the administration's concerted efforts to misrepresent reality -- and rewrite history -- to mask its mistakes. The president said Iraq is now the center of our battle against terrorism. But we did not go to Iraq to fight Al-Qaida, which remains perhaps our deadliest foe, and we will not defeat it there.

By trying to justify the current fight in Iraq as a fight against terrorism, the administration has done two frightening things. It has tried to divert attention from Osama bin Laden, the man responsible for the wave of terrorist attacks against American interests from New York and

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Washington to Yemen, and who reappeared in rugged terrain in a video broadcast last week. And the policy advanced by the speech is a major step toward creating a dangerous, self-fulfilling prophecy and reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the facts on the ground.

This is an insurgency we're fighting in Iraq. Our 130,000 soldiers in Iraq now confront an angry but not yet defeated Sunni Muslim population who, although a minority in Iraq, had been in power for a century. We are now also beginning to face terrorists there, but it is our own doing. Our attack on Iraq -- and our bungling of the peace -- led to the guerrilla insurgency that is drawing jihadists from around the Muslim world. The "shock and awe" campaign so vividly shown on our television screens has galvanized historic Arab envy, jealousy and resentment of the United States into white-hot hatred of America.

Where once there were thousands, now there are potentially millions of terrorists and sympathizers who will be drawn into this campaign.

We've seen other examples of the kind of insurgency we're now facing. One was in Afghanistan against the Soviets in the 1980s, and we all should know the end of that story by now. Bin Laden was one of the outside jihadists drawn into that battle; he emerged as the head of a group of hardened soldiers he called Al-Qaida.

It is perhaps not surprising that the administration is trying to redefine why we went to Iraq, because we have accomplished so little of what we set out to do -- and severely underestimated the commitment it would take to deal with the aftermath of war.

The president told us in his seminal speech in Cincinnati in October 2002 that Iraq "possesses and produces chemical and biological weapons . . . is seeking nuclear weapons . . . has given shelter and support to terrorism, and practices terror against its own people."

He dismissed the concerns raised by critics of his approach as follows: "Some worry that a change of leadership in Iraq could create instability and make the situation worse. The situation could hardly get worse, for world security and for the people of Iraq. The lives of Iraqi citizens would improve dramatically if Saddam Hussein were no longer in power."

Now we know that even if we find chemical or biological weapons, the threat that they posed to our national security was, to be charitable, exaggerated.

It all but disappeared from the president's speech last week and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, one of the leading proponents of the threat, now tells us that he didn't even ask the chief weapons-of-mass-destruction sleuth in Iraq, David Kay, for a status report during his recent trip to Baghdad, relegating such weapons to the same dark corner as bin Laden, whose name rarely passes the lips of our leaders these days.

Indeed, in the most telling revision of the justification for going to war, the State Department's undersecretary for arms control, John Bolton, recently said that whether Saddam's government actually possessed weapons of mass destruction `` isn't really the issue. The issue, I think, has been the capability that Iraq sought to have . . . WMD programs."

In other words, we're now supposed to believe that we went to war not because Saddam's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction threatened us, but because he had scientists on his payroll.

And the cakewalk post-war scenario that had been painted by some in the administration is anything but. More Americans have died since the president announced the end of major combat operations than during the war itself. The cost runs \$1 billion per week in military support alone, and some experts say our deployment is already affecting future military preparedness.

Iraqis live in chaotic conditions as crime flourishes in the unpatrolled streets and family squabbles are settled vigilante style; basic services such as electricity remain unavailable to large segments of the urban population.

The truth is, the administration has never leveled with the American people on the war with Iraq.

It is true that many people outside the administration, including me and many leading Democrats, thought Saddam had residual stocks of weapons of mass destruction; disarmament was a legitimate international objective supported unanimously by the United Nations Security Council. But we did not need to rush to war before exploring other, less risky options.

Invasion, conquest and occupation was always the highest-risk, lowest-reward choice. The intrusive U.N. inspections were disrupting Saddam's programs and weakening him in the eyes of his key supporters, including in the Iraqi military. That would explain why the United States, according to reports, was able to thoroughly infiltrate the army before the onset of hostilities and obtain commitments from Iraqi generals to send their troops home rather than have them fight.

The administration short-circuited the discussion of whether war was necessary because some of its most powerful members felt it was the best option -- ostensibly because they had deluded themselves into believing that they could easily impose flowering democracies on the region.

A more cynical reading of the agenda of certain Bush advisers could conclude that the Balkanization of Iraq was always an acceptable outcome, because Israel would then find itself surrounded by small Arab

countries worried about each other instead of forming a solid block against Israel. After all, Iraq was an artificial country that had always had a troublesome history.

One way the administration stopped the debate was to oversell its intelligence. I know, because I was in the middle of the efforts to determine whether Iraq had attempted to purchase uranium ``yellowcake" -- a form of lightly processed ore -- from Africa.

At the request of the administration I traveled to the West African nation of Niger in February 2002 to check out the allegation. I reported that such a sale was highly unlikely, but my conclusions -- as well as the same conclusions from our ambassador on the scene and from a four-star Marine Corps general -- were ignored by the White House.

Instead, the president relied upon an unsubstantiated reference in a British white paper to underpin his argument in the State of the Union address that Saddam was reconstituting his nuclear weapons programs. How many times did we hear the president, vice president and others speak of the looming threat of an Iraqi mushroom cloud?

Until several months ago, when it came out that the country was Niger, I assumed that the president had been referring to another African country. After I learned, belatedly to be sure, I came forward to insist that the administration correct the misstatements of fact. But the damage had already been done.

The overblown rhetoric about nuclear weapons inspired fear and drowned out the many warnings that invasion would create its own formidable dangers.

Middle East experts warned over and over again that Iraq's many religious and ethnic factions could start battling each other in a bloody struggle for power. Former British foreign secretary Douglas Hurd fretted that we would unleash a terrorist-recruiting bonanza, and former U.S. national security adviser Brent Scowcroft warned of a security meltdown in the region.

The U.S. army's top general at the time, Eric Shinseki, meanwhile, questioned the cakewalk scenario. He told Congress that we would need several hundred thousand soldiers in Iraq to put an end to the violence against our troops and against each other. His testimony was quickly repudiated by both Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz.

As we now know, he was close to the mark. Our 130,000 soldiers are failing to stem the violence. Even as Rumsfeld says jauntily that all is going well, Secretary of State Colin Powell is running to the United Nations to try to get more foreign boots on the ground. One of the administration's staunchest supporters, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, says ominously that we risk strategic failure if we don't send

reinforcements.

And the infighting that Middle East experts feared could still erupt. The majority Shiite Muslim population, brutalized during Saddam's rule, is content with a tactical truce with our forces so long as they are free to consolidate their control and the United States continues to kill Sunni Muslims so that they don't have to. That truce is threatened not only by Shiite political ambition but also by ongoing skirmishes with the Sunnis.

The recent car bomb at the An-Najaf mosque that killed one of Shiite Islam's most influential clerics and head of the largest Shiite party in Iraq almost resulted in the outbreak of civil war between the two groups. Widespread belief that Sunni elements were behind the assassination and that the United States failed in its responsibilities for security has brought Shiite armed militias back onto the streets, actively seeking to avenge the death of their leader. Such a war within a war would make our occupation infinitely more dangerous.

Some now argue that the president's speech Sunday represents a change of course. Even if the administration won't admit it made any mistakes, the mere call for international involvement should be enough to persuade the world to accept the burden of assisting us, as we continue to control both the military and the economic reconstruction.

That may well be true, but we cannot count on the international community to do our bidding blindly. While the administration scurries back to the United Nations for help, our historic friends and allies still smart from the gratuitous insults hurled at them nine months ago. This is the same United Nations which Richard Perle, a not-so-invisible hand behind the war, recently called an "abject failure."

As Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was President Carter's national security adviser, has pointed out, at a time when our military might is at its zenith, our political and moral authority is at its lowest ebb. Essential trust has been broken, and it will take time to repair. At a minimum, we need to jettison the hubris that has driven this policy, the pretensions of moral rectitude that mask a jodhpurs-and-pith-helmet imperialism that cannot succeed.

In the meantime, we must demonstrate that we understand that more than military might is required to tame the anger in the region. This includes both the internationalization of the reconstruction effort and the redoubling of efforts to ease tensions on the Israeli-Palestinian front.

That is the thorn that must be pulled from the side of the region. The road to peace in the Middle East still goes through Jerusalem.

But before we can hope to win back international trust or start down a truly new path in Iraq, the administration has to start playing it straight, with the American people and with the world. Recent administration

statements, including the president's speech, suggest that it still prefers to live in a fantasy world.

JOSEPH WILSON was deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad from 1988 to 1991. In July, he called into question the Bush administration's assertions about Iraq seeking uranium from Africa by revealing that he had been asked by the U.S. government to look into such claims -- and had reported in early 2002 that they were unfounded. He is an adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C. He wrote this article for Perspective.



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