

The "Year Zero" Strategy:

Bush's Mission in Iraq Remains Unaccomplished

By Dilip Hiro

Middle East International (<http://meionline.com>)

The post-war problems of the Anglo-American occupiers of Iraq stem from what they did -- or did not -- do during the run up to the invasion in March 2003 and during the subsequent fighting. The Bush administration focused almost totally on overthrowing the regime of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in the shortest possible time and paid scant attention to the arduous task of tackling the post-invasion aftermath -- an essential step to realizing its goal of transforming post-Saddam Iraq into a client state of Washington.

For instance, in their unseemly haste to reach Baghdad, the advancing American troops did not even pause to cordon off the arms dumps they came across, leaving the task for later. But when they returned to these sites, almost all the weapons and ammunition had been looted by nearby Iraqis who buried them in their fields, gardens, and backyards; so Iraq today is awash with small arms, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, and even surface-to-air missiles.

The failure to prepare adequately for post-war Iraq stemmed from several sources. The most important was the impatience of President Bush and Vice President Cheney, intent as they were on attacking Iraq at the earliest possible moment after 9/11. Following a National Security Council (NSC) meeting at Camp David on September 15, 2001, Bush privately asked Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to prepare a contingency plan for military strikes on Iraq. This led Rumsfeld to examine the top secret Op Plan 1003, devised to overthrow the Iraqi regime, approved in 1996, and updated two years later, but not signed by his predecessor William Cohen.

In his latest book, *Plan of Attack*, the *Washington Post*'s Bob Woodward reveals that even before U.S. forces had captured the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar on December 7, 2001, Bush turned his attention to overthrowing Saddam. On November 21, during a one-on-one meeting with Rumsfeld in a cubbyhole office next to the White House Situation Room, Bush asked what kind of Iraq war plan Rumsfeld had prepared. When the secretary of defense replied that it was "outdated" -- meaning traditional and troop heavy -- the President told him to work on a new one immediately. When the order to prepare a new plan within a week reached Gen. Tommy Franks, the commander of the U.S. Central Command, then in the midst of conducting the Afghanistan campaign, he reportedly said, "Goddamn, what the fuck are they talking about."

The second important reason for rushing into the Iraq war was the rising opposition to it at home in early 2003, with 37% of the American public against the invasion. Lastly, there was the Bush team's uncritical acceptance of the rosy scenarios painted by Iraqi defectors like Ahmad Chalabi of the Iraqi National Congress (INC) as communicated through the Office of Special Plans (OSP) established by Rumsfeld to make an informational end-run around the CIA.

In tandem with the establishment of the OSP went Cheney's and Rumsfeld's strategy of ignoring even official documents that deviated from the overoptimistic scenario that neoconservative hardliners had concocted. In that category fell wide-ranging studies of a post-Saddam Iraq by 17 committees, appointed by the State Department, and summarized in the seventeen-volume *Future of Iraq*. These laid bare many of the snares and snags that would indeed be encountered in post-war Iraq.

The neocons in the Pentagon even suppressed *Reconstructing Iraq*, a monograph written by the Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute because it forecast in detail "possible severe security difficulties" and conflicts among Iraqis that the US forces could "barely comprehend."

Moreover, when the predicted Iraqi welcome of the Anglo-American forces as liberators, and the switching of loyalties by the Iraqi military and police from Saddam to the Pentagon failed to materialize, the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld trio did not critically reexamine the basic assumptions on which they had built their post-war scenario.

But then the trio could not have done so: They had already invested too heavily and too publicly in their version of the New Iraq. This comes through clearly in former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill's description (in Ron Suskind's book *The Price of Loyalty*) of an NSC meeting that took place on February 1, 2001. When Secretary of State Colin Powell initiated the debate on Iraq by explaining the "targeted sanctions" against Baghdad he was proposing, Rumsfeld interrupted him. "What we really want to think about is going after Saddam," he said.

The secretary of defence then launched into an assessment of broader American goals. "Imagine what the region would look like without Saddam and with a regime that's aligned with US interests. It would change everything in the region and beyond. It would demonstrate what US policy is all about." He discussed post-Saddam Iraq, the Kurds in the north, the country's oilfields, and the reconstruction of its economy. Later the Defence Intelligence Agency would circulate among NSC members a document entitled *Foreign Suitors for Iraqi Oilfield Contracts*, showing the nine blocks into which the largely undeveloped southwest of Iraq was divided.

Little wonder that the Bush team pressed ahead with its preconceived plans, endorsed strongly by Chalabi, to dissolve the Iraqi military, police, and security agencies as well as the Baath Party, and to bar Baathists from jobs in the public sector and government. In other words, it created a "Year Zero" scenario with its concomitant total political-administrative vacuum. This was contrary to what the United Nations had done in Bosnia where it applied a gradualist approach to dismantling the old regime.

These actions had catastrophic economic consequences. Under the old regime, one-third of all wage earners had been dependent on the government. With the looting and physical destruction of all the administrative ministries in Baghdad -- except the Oil Ministry -- and the disbandment of the military and police, unemployment quickly soared to 60-75%, with many of the jobless now being former soldiers and policemen.

The Bush team thus sowed the seeds of insurgency, which would sprout soon after.

The Neocons Set the Agenda

Such behavior points to an obsession that is both irrational and longstanding. The prime mover behind this policy was Vice President Cheney, appointed by President-elect Bush in December 2000 to select his top team for administering foreign and defense policies *after* he himself had chosen Colin Powell as his secretary of state and Condoleezza Rice as his national security adviser.

In the words of O'Neill in *The Price of Loyalty*, "Cheney would offer oversight and protection. Rumsfeld would be the point man. Paul Wolfowitz will back Rumsfeld from inside the Pentagon. From the outside, Richard Perle, heading the civilian Defense Policy Advisory Group, would counsel the Pentagon, the White House and the CIA."

It was Perle who had coached Bush on Middle Eastern affairs during the election campaign. "The first time I met Bush 43... two things became clear," Perle later said publicly. "One, he didn't know very much. The other was that he had the confidence to ask questions that revealed that he didn't know very much." Given such a clean slate, Perle imprinted on it his strong Likudnik views.

By then, Perle had shared in the authorship of *A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm* -- the "realm" being Israel -- produced in July 1996. As a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a leading neocon think-tank, Perle led the team that authored the above document for the newly elected Likud Party Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel.

It advised Netanyahu to "make a clean break from the peace process" -- that is, to abrogate the 1993 Oslo Accords and "reassert Israel's claim to its land by rejecting 'land

for peace' as the basis of peace." This meant that Israel should treat all of the former British mandate Palestine as "its land," strengthen Israel's defenses to better confront Syria and Iraq, and forge a new and stronger relationship with the United States based on self-reliance and mutual interest.

In cooperation with Turkey and Jordan, the document suggested, Israel could weaken, contain, or even roll back Syria. "This effort can focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq -- an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right," recommended the authors. (For the full text, visit www.israeleconomy.org/strat1.htm)

The following year, Perle was a key player in the founding of the Project for the New American Century, a pressure group of neocons chaired by William Kristol. On the eve of President Bill Clinton's State of the Union speech in January 1998, these neocons addressed an open letter to him, stating that Saddam's removal from power "needs to become the aim of American foreign policy."

They then lobbied Congress, an endeavor in which Cheney and Rumsfeld -- both of them with illustrious records as leading Republican congressmen -- joined enthusiastically. The result was the passing of the Iraq Liberation Act in October 1998. It empowered Clinton to spend up to \$97 million in military aid to train, equip, and finance an Iraqi opposition army, and authorized the Pentagon to train the insurgents.

The next year Perle, followed by Wolfowitz, then dean of the Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, embraced the thesis in Laurie Mylroie's book, *The War Against America: Saddam Hussein and the World Trade Center Attacks: A Study of Revenge*, published by AEI, that Saddam was behind the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City.

After 9/11, Wolfowitz dispatched James Woolsey, a former CIA director and a Mylroie fan, to Britain to gather additional evidence to support Mylroie's assertion *and* to link hijacker Muhammad Atta as an Iraqi intelligence agent. The Woolsey mission, that infuriated not only Powell but also CIA Director George Tenet, failed.

"No, no to Saddam; No, no to America"

Overall, if there is one bright spot in this Iraq saga for the Bush team, it is the actual conduct of the war. True, the Anglo-American invaders encountered more resistance, offered more resolutely, than they had expected. But the key, highly original element for the Pentagon planners -- "Let us do things that Saddam does not expect us to do" -- worked.

Central to that strategy was a plan to get Iraqi generals to stop doing their jobs. This undeclared non-cooperation was to be won primarily with bribes, and fostered by communications breakdowns between the Iraqi central command and its regional commands, achieved by the Pentagon's hi-tech weaponry -- all combined with relentless propaganda and psychological pressure put on loyal military officers.

Saddam's plan was to overcome the expected communications breakdowns by using a messenger service as he had done during the 1991 Gulf War. What he did not envisage was that many of his generals would go on an undeclared strike in the wake of relentless, ferocious bombing by the world's most powerful and technologically advanced military machine, which impressed on them the hopelessness of trying to defend Baghdad without any air support.

The reason why Saddam did not visualize the "betrayal" scenario was that the first and foremost requirement for promotion in the military was total loyalty to him. Before any Iraqi was considered for a military commission, he was vetted by the Baath Party's security bureau, chaired by Saddam, for his loyalty to the Leader and the Party. To ensure the loyalty of his officers to him, he established Military Security in 1992 with a mandate to maintain internal security within the armed forces. It served him well. Over the next decade, it aborted half a dozen military coup attempts against him.

The collapse of Saddam's regime -- founded on domestic terror, political cunning, and a gargantuan personality cult -- brought immense relief to most Iraqis. But the fact that this release from Saddam and his security-intelligence apparatus was carried out by the United States left them confused. They were suspicious of Washington. After all, it was the U.S. that was primarily responsible for the United Nations sanctions which pauperized them. They also irrevocably linked America with Israel, which had taken away the Palestinian's land and occupied the rump Palestine for 36 years. Many of them were aware, too, that the United States was fast running out of its own oil deposits, which Iraq had in abundance.

This ambivalence, prevalent among Iraqis, at being simultaneously "liberated" and occupied by a superpower they distrusted deeply -- encapsulated in the slogan, "No, no to Saddam; No, no to America" -- has shaped the post-invasion history of Iraq, with the rise of Sunni insurgency followed by an uprising by the partisans of Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr. And it is this phenomenon that has thwarted the Bush team's overarching mission of transforming post-Saddam Iraq into an American client state.

Dilip Hiro is the author of *Iraq: In the Eye of the Storm* (Nation Books). His latest book is **Secrets and Lies: Operation 'Iraqi Freedom' and After**, (Nation Books).