

# Myths, motivations and ‘misunderestimations’: the Bush administration and Iraq

DAVID HASTINGS DUNN\*

The foreign policy of the Bush administration is widely misunderstood, especially in Europe and particularly in relation to the president's policy towards Iraq. Many myths abound as to the motivations of American policy, and doubts are expressed as to the administration's competence to deal with the international agenda. As president of the United States, George W. Bush is widely underestimated in his abilities and misunderstood in his motivations. In his own inimical word he is 'misunderestimated'. That this is the case has become a particularly divisive issue in transatlantic relations, for the war on terrorism in general and for America's Iraq policy in particular. Before a shot has been fired in this conflict the collateral damage to transatlantic relations, NATO and to the EU itself (as well as its common foreign security policy [CFSP] and security and defence policy [ESDP]) has been immense. Critics, including some in the US but particularly those in Europe, see the administration's policies as likely to accentuate the problems between the developed countries and the Muslim world. An attack on Iraq is widely seen as likely to provoke the use by Iraq of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—something even the CIA admit is likely—to cause instability throughout the entire Middle East, and to encourage further acts of and support for murderous terrorism; it is argued that there is no urgency to act against Iraq as containment and deterrence remain adequate means to manage this threat, and that dealing with Iraq should be a lower priority than dealing with North Korea.

Because the critics view the consequences of an attack as self-evidently apparent, many of them are baffled as to why the US appears to insist on taking this course. Others conclude that US policy must be motivated by something other than the war on terrorism, such as oil, revenge for the president's father, support for Israel, hegemonic control of the Middle East, even just the hubris of the macho Texan cowboy. Or, in the words of the poet laureate, 'elections, money, empire, oil and Dad'.<sup>1</sup> Much of the debate that has taken place, at both

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<sup>1</sup> John Ezard, 'Poet laureate joins doubters over Iraq', *Guardian*, 9 Jan. 2003.

popular and elite levels, has also been unhelpfully vitriolic and unnecessarily public. As one commentator has observed, 'grotesque caricatures of gun-toting cowboys, money-grubbing casino capitalists and oil-grabbing Uncle Sams routinely grace the pages of even serious European newspapers.'<sup>2</sup> There is also the widespread impression in Europe that America's approach represents some dangerous new departure from former policies. These attitudes in part explain the widespread anti-Americanism and contempt for Bush, his administration and his policies. Public opinion polls in France and Germany in particular show widely felt opposition to Bush's policies in Iraq and to his international approach in general.

One of the most commonly held views is that America is motivated by a desire to control or appropriate Iraq's oil wealth. According to a recent Pew Research Center opinion poll, '76% of Russians, 75% of French, 54% of Germans and 44% of British believe the desire to control Iraq's oil lies behind Bush's belligerence.'<sup>3</sup> Nor are such views limited to mass opinion. Former British cabinet minister Mo Mowlam shares this assessment, while Professor Paul Rogers is also of the opinion that 'The bottom line with Iraq is oil ... If Iraq produced rice or oranges instead of oil, there would be no great concern.'<sup>4</sup> While the US is concerned, as Vice-President Cheney has warned, that Iraq might 'seek domination of the entire Middle East' and 'take control of a great portion of the world's energy supplies', this is not the prime motivation behind US policy, and to assume that it is shows a profound misunderstanding of the Bush administration's approach.<sup>5</sup> Although Iraq's oil reserves are the second largest in the world, with a value of \$3,400 billion (at \$25 per barrel), its actual output is relatively small. Iraq has the lowest yield of any major producer, amounting to 0.8 per cent of its potential output, or 3 per cent of global output, due to the geology of the oil fields and the technology available to exploit the resource.<sup>6</sup> Such is the dilapidated state of the Iraq oil industry that years of sustained investment would be necessary before any return was possible. According to industry experts at least \$40 billion would need to be invested to increase production from 2.5 million barrels per day today (which yields \$23 billion a year) to 4.2–6 million barrels per day. Thus significant money would need to be spent before even any relatively modest increases in revenue were possible. Given Iraq's debts of over \$100 billion—not including war reparations due to Iran and Kuwait—and the need for investment in infrastructure and building democracy, this may not be a

<sup>2</sup> Gerard Baker, 'European insults fall on deaf ears in America's heartland', *Financial Times*, 6 Feb. 2003.

<sup>3</sup> J. F. O. McAllister, 'Mad at America', *Time*, 20 Jan. 2003, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> See Melissa Kite, 'Attack "would boost number of terrorists"', *The Times*, 19 Feb. 2003; Paul Rogers, 'Iran: the next target?' 30 Jan. 2003, see [www.opendemocracy.com](http://www.opendemocracy.com). Rogers continues: 'After all the US was not greatly exercised by the Brazilian and Argentinean moves to develop nuclear weapons in the 1980s; still less did they consider going to war with South Africa when that country had actually developed a small nuclear arsenal.' The crucial absence in these examples is not oil but perceived threat to America. If America had feared that these weapons would end up in its cities its response may well have been very different.

<sup>5</sup> David E. Sanger, 'The debate over attacking Iraq heats up', *New York Times*, 1 Nov. 2002.

<sup>6</sup> John Tatom, 'Iraqi oil is not America's objective', *Financial Times*, 17 Feb. 2003.

priority.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the cost of the US military action has been estimated at \$140 billion.<sup>8</sup> The costs of rebuilding and policing Iraq are also likely to be considerable. Unlike the 1991 conflict, this time the bill will not be met by Japan, Germany and Saudi Arabia. Washington has also stated that all oil revenue will be used to fund the running of the new Iraq government. The argument that this crisis is 'just about oil' is not persuasive. As Daniel Yergin argues, 'No US administration would launch so momentous a campaign just to facilitate a handful of oil development contracts and a moderate increase in supply—half a decade from now.'<sup>9</sup>

Another popular misconception is that the present crisis is motivated by personal animus or hubris on the part of President Bush. In Germany the polling institute Emnid found that 53 per cent believe George W. Bush to be more dangerous than Saddam Hussein.<sup>10</sup> Andrew Murray, UK chair of the Stop the War Coalition, is also persuaded of this line, asking: 'Who can believe that this has anything to do with weapons of mass destruction, any more than it has to do with terrorism? It has become an exercise in US military-political machismo.'<sup>11</sup> Certainly, mistrust of the American president, and of some of his cabinet, seems a widely held view. To assume, however, that the president, or even his cabinet, could launch America on a military campaign of this scale without having the backing of Congress and the Washington political class more broadly, shows a poor understanding of American politics. That Bush sought and received near-unanimous backing from Congress for his war on terrorism illustrates the extent to which he is acting in concert with the public mood in America. In Congress and among his political opponents within the Democratic Party leadership, a consensus exists on the need to disarm Iraq.<sup>12</sup>

Much of the debate that surrounds the build-up to war with Iraq, especially over the modalities of the disarmament of the country, has taken place at this level of analysis. As a result there is little understanding of the American approach to the war on terrorism, what motivates it, and why it rejects the arguments of its critics. There is also little understanding of the continuities in US foreign policy that this approach represents, or of the fact that it is actually a carefully calculated strategy based on traditional as well as recent American foreign policy experience. It is also an approach which has achieved some remarkable achievements in the war on terrorism in pursuit of its foreign policy goals. In securing the passage of UN Resolution 1441 the US has brought Iraq to the top of the political agenda and forced the international community to address an issue that is both a problem in itself and a threat to the credibility of the UN.

<sup>7</sup> 'All about oil?', *The Economist*, 25 Feb. 2003, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> Tatom, 'Iraqi oil is not America's objective'.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Yergin, 'A crude view of the crisis in Iraq', *Washington Post*, 8 Dec. 2002.

<sup>10</sup> 'Euro polls show little appetite for war', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 Jan. 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Murray, 'No mandate to go to war', *Guardian*, 14 Feb. 2003.

<sup>12</sup> See David Frum, 'Myth no. 3: Bush wants war with Iraq because of a family vendetta', *Daily Telegraph*, 23 Oct. 2002.

This article will explain the intellectual process by which the US decided upon its intended course of action and how Europe's failure to understand this process added to its incomprehension of American policy. It does not argue that Europe's opposition would have been swept aside had Europeans better understood the Bush administration—the central disagreement about the necessity and prudence of military action versus containment remains; but it does argue that such an understanding would have allowed for a better and more focused debate than the one which has got us to this point. Nor does it argue that the Bush administration's approach is necessarily persuasive or justified; just that its case is reasoned and explicable in terms of America's foreign policy traditions. A better understanding of the drivers of US policy might also have allowed for a more informed debate about the general rather than the particular, that is to say, about the role of the US in the post-9/11 international order rather than just about policy towards Iraq in isolation.

This article will explain, interpret and contextualize the Bush administration's approach to its Iraq policy in order to account for its choice of Baghdad as a primary target in its war on terrorism. It will explain that an understanding of these policies is impossible without an appreciation of the centrality of the role of ideas in contemporary US foreign policy. Some of these ideas are as old as the republic (such as American exceptionalism and moral certainty), some developed during the Cold War, and others still derive from the Bush administration's self-identification of itself as 'neo-Reaganite' in both domestic and foreign policy—promoting the values and playing the role that Reagan did in the early 1980s. Another misinterpretation of this administration is to see it as the second Bush administration, spiritually as well as literally, rather than for what it is: neo-Reaganite. For while his father's administration was conservative and protective of the international status quo, George W. Bush's approach is much closer to the foreign policy radicalism of the Reagan years. As Keller has observed, 'the most important similarity of all' between Bush and Reagan is that 'each will be remembered as a risk taker. They each have an impulse for the audacious.'<sup>13</sup>

The article is split into two parts. Part one will look at the drivers of US policy—the ideas that motivated US decision-makers to formulate the approach that they did. In doing this it will explain the role of ideas and of the American foreign policy tradition in shaping America's response to the 9/11 attacks. Part two will apply the 'drivers framework' to the case of Iraq, and in so doing will explain how these ideas led to the current crisis.

### **Part one: the drivers of Bush's foreign policy**

From the outset the Bush administration made known its opposition to the foreign policy priorities of the previous administration, and its doing so came as somewhat of a shock to many foreign observers. For Bush, Clinton's foreign policy

<sup>13</sup> Bill Keller, 'Reagan's son', *New York Times*, 26 Jan. 2003.

lacked coherence, clear priorities and a sense of what was important to US interests. If the Clinton approach was to see the US as the 'indispensable power', as Madeleine Albright famously remarked, then the Bush team's initial view of the US role was decidedly more limited. Rather than pursuing a role in every international conflict or crisis, the Bush administration indicated its intention to reserve US energies for issues that materially affected US interests or else were sufficiently serious to threaten international peace. Given America's relative power in the global system, the new administration clearly viewed unilateral strategies as the best way to pursue those interests. Unilateralism—Washington increasingly seeking its own solutions to its own security—was the unifying theme across many of the foreign policy initiatives undertaken by the new administration. Even before the events of September 11 the Bush administration's world view was one that emphatically rejected the Clintonian premise that geoeconomics were now more important than geopolitics. Instead, the administration is motivated by a more traditional view that sees foreign policy as the management of threats to US national security. This assessment lies behind much of America's new foreign policy under Bush. It is for this reason that while America foreign policy after '9/11' represented a new level of international engagement, it was a policy change arising from new circumstances that was entirely consistent with the previous strategic approach.

For the Bush administration the response to the terrorist attacks required a reordering of America's international engagement. The nature of the threat was global, and Washington would need to enlist the entire international community in its fight to eradicate this new enemy. It was for this reason that the US Congress was quick to vote its annual dues to the UN while the administration sought a Security Council resolution condemning the attacks on America. While the US became more internationally engaged, however, it did not, as many predicted and expected, become more multilateral in its approach. It certainly stepped up its involvement on the world's stage, but it made it very clear that it was doing so on its terms. This is nowhere more apparent than in George W. Bush's statement immediately after the attacks that 'You are either with us or you are with the terrorists.' In private discussions with his advisers Bush was even more candid in explaining that he did not want other countries setting conditions or stipulating terms for their support, stating that 'At some point, we may be the only ones left. That's okay with me. We are America.'<sup>14</sup> This sentiment is also evident in Bush's address to Congress nine days after the attacks, when he made remarks intended to demonstrate the international nature of the threat. 'What is at stake here,' Bush declared, 'is not just America's freedom. This is the whole world's fight ... We ask every nation *to join us*.'<sup>15</sup> As Lafeber has pointed out, in asking others to 'join us' Bush was also setting the limits of that involvement. 'He did not say the United States intended to consult

<sup>14</sup> *Washington Post*, 31 Jan. 2002, p. A14, cited by Walter Lafeber, 'The Bush Doctrine', *Diplomatic History*, Fall 2002, p. 55.

<sup>15</sup> Text in *Washington Post*, 21 Sept. 2001, p. A 24, emphasis added.

or ally with others ... Instead he made it clear, as he had indicated privately to his advisors, that US strategies were not open to debate.<sup>16</sup> For many commentators the failure of the US fully to use the NATO allies in the war against terrorism, despite the declaration of support under Article 5, was a clear example of this 'don't call us, we'll call you' approach.

This approach is central to an understanding of the administration's policy towards Iraq. US policy under Bush is structured by five key drivers. They underscore all aspects of foreign policy and are clearly evident in US policy towards Iraq. Different levels of support for each of these different motivations can be found among different sections of the administration. Taken together, however, they explain why the Bush administration has rounded on Iraq in the next stage of its war on terrorism.

### *Realist anti-appeasement*

The Bush administration's approach to the world is formed by a concern with traditional security threats—great powers, rogue states, proliferation—rather than 'new threats' such as the environment. In this it has more in common with the Reagan administrations of the 1980s than the Clinton administrations of the 1990s. This approach prioritizes states as the main actors in international politics and dealing with hostile states as a way of reducing threats. It regards international politics as the clash of competing national interests and about the competition for power within the system. It explicitly rejects the Wilsonian liberal internationalism of the Clinton administration and has shown a much greater willingness to take a tougher stance with both China and Russia. Aware of America's power position in the international system, it has sought to redefine these and other relationships on its terms. In prioritizing actors who can do real harm to the US and its interests, the Bush administration believes that its approach is protective of the global order. This approach also explains the way it conceptualises the terrorist threat. As National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice explains, 'the threat of rogue regimes and hostile powers ... [is] increasingly taking the forms of the potential for terrorism and the development of weapons of mass destruction.'<sup>17</sup> In the realist view, terrorists need states to operate from; hence the focus on 'rogue regimes'.

Linked to this traditional realist approach is the salience for the Bush administration of the 'appeasement analogy'—the desire not to be seen to give in to aggressors. This has been a constant theme in American foreign policy since 1945, particularly throughout the Cold War. It was also evident during the 1990–1 Gulf War, when George Bush Senior described Saddam Hussein as 'worse than Hitler'. During the 1940s the threat presented by Stalin was analysed through this conceptual lens, while more recently the detente of the 1970s was criticized by the conservative right as a new appeasement of the Soviet Union. For the

<sup>16</sup> Lafeber, 'The Bush Doctrine', p. 553.

<sup>17</sup> Condoleezza Rice, 'Promoting the national interest', *Foreign Affairs* 79: 1, Jan./Feb. 2000, p. 47.

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present US administration, American policy during the Clinton years is also comparable to the detente period of the 1970s (or, more precisely, to the right wing's construction of detente) as a recent incarnation of appeasement. Bush's criticism of Clinton's policy towards North Korea (the 1994 Framework Agreement) and to China (engagement of Beijing as a 'Strategic Partner') as 'appeasement' was informed by this analogy. Within the Bush administration the realist tradition is most strongly associated with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Vice-President Richard Cheney, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and Presidential Advisor Richard Perle.

### *US providence/American exceptionalism*

Not only does the US regard itself as the indispensable power in the international system, it also believes that the export of its model of government—liberal democratic market capitalism—is a universal good. For the Bush administration this driver of policy is an important source of influence on the way it approaches international affairs. This much is evident from Bush's National Security Strategy document, which is explicit in its universal advocacy of the American formula for social organization. It talks explicitly about their being only one 'single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise', and urges China and Russia to complete their journey towards this goal. For Bush, as he set out in his West Point address in 2002, 'Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, in every place.'

American exceptionalism is also imbued with the sense of optimism and progress associated with the 'Enlightenment project'. It is its sense of divine providence, however, that endows the administration with a sense of moral certainty and lack of self-doubt that renders it somewhat impervious to outside influence. For an administration that believes in 'the inalienable goodness of American power, in the divine goodness of its values',<sup>18</sup> there is little room for compromise.

Within the administration the individuals most strongly associated with these ideas are the president himself and, since 9/11, his National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, who has come to share some of Bush's moralism. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz is most associated with the ideas of the 'democratic imperialists', those who seek to bring liberal, democratic values to the Middle East.

### *Assertive unilateralism*

The Bush administration's willingness to put its national interests ahead of the consideration of international norms and institutions is well documented. Its willingness to exercise American power in this way is also a reflection of its loss

<sup>18</sup> Michael Hirsh, 'America's mission', *Newsweek*, Dec. 2002–Feb. 2003, p. 10.

of faith in such traditional instruments of diplomacy as deterrence, sanctions, containment and engagement. However, the administration has adopted this new approach more because it feels that it needs to than simply because it can. The Bush administration's self-identification as neo-Reaganite is informative of how it sees its role. US policy during the Clinton years is viewed as characterized by weakness and neglect of US interests. For the Bush administration, Reaganite measures are necessary so that the US can once again negotiate from strength, break out of treaty obligations that shackle its ability to defend itself, and reverse appeasement by re-establishing US credibility. Just as Reagan denounced SALT II in 1981 as 'fatally flawed', so too Bush denounced the ABM Treaty, the Biological Weapons Convention, the International Criminal Court, and the Kyoto Protocols in 2001.

These ideas inform the Bush approach generally. In recalibrating its relationship with Russia, it has proved very successful in gaining Moscow's acquiescence over missile defence, NATO expansion and the war on terrorism in exchange for very little in return. Like that of the first Reagan administration, it is a policy approach that is resistant to an acceptance of the status quo and prepared to take risks in the belief that it can achieve better results. Bush's radical views on deep nuclear cuts and missile defence deployments are one example of this approach; his domestic tax cuts are another. The Bush administration rejects the label 'unilateralist', preferring to see its actions as those of a leader—in exercise of a leadership role that it sees as vital for the interest of America, but also the international system. As Rice argues, 'America's pursuit of the national interest will create conditions that promote freedom, markets and peace.'<sup>19</sup> This approach has wide-ranging support within the senior ranks of the administration.

### *Willingness to fight and fighting to win*

The United States rejects the idea that resort to the use of force or even war represents the failure of policy. For France's President Chirac war may be 'always the admission of defeat, and ... always the worst solution'; for President Bush it is not.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, since the end of the Cold War the utility of force has increased in America's estimation. Following US success in the Gulf War, Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan, there is now, according to Philip Gordon, 'a profound optimism that we can do it—we can invade a country halfway round the world and bring about a reasonable settlement'.<sup>21</sup> However, the administration also realizes the limitations to the threat or use of force. What separates America's approach to Iraq from its approach to North Korea is the calculation that Pyongyang has the military capability to deter the US. America wants to disarm Iraq before it reaches that state.

<sup>19</sup> Rice, 'Promoting the national interest', p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> 'Nos amis, the French', editorial, *Wall Street Journal*, 24 Jan. 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Philip Gordon, cited by Gerard Baker, 'Missing in action', *Financial Times*, 1–2 Feb. 2003.



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Because of America's view of the utility of coercive diplomacy and measures beyond, it has been argued that the US has a militarized approach to foreign policy as a whole; that it has a tendency to conceptualize political problems in military terms to suit the available means—the most powerful military in history. This is often expressed as: 'When you see yourself as a hammer everything looks like a nail.' Thus, during the Cold War and after, the US has been more willing to use force more quickly than other powers often think necessary, prudent or legitimate, for example in Libya (1986), Panama (1989) and Kosovo (1999).

Related to this approach is the fact that when the US commits itself to the use of force, the American way of warfare is to fight to win massively and quickly. The way in which the US has approached all wars since Vietnam (as opposed to all displays of strength for the purposes of coercive diplomacy) is with the use of overwhelming decisive force. This was the model used for the invasion of Grenada in 1983, Panama in 1989 and the 1991 Gulf War. The administration official most associated with this position is Secretary of State Colin Powell, who elevated these ideas to the level of principle in the 'Powell Doctrine'.

### *Threat inflation and conflation*

Throughout the Cold War the United States attributed to the Soviet Union potential capabilities and intentions based on the worst possible outcomes in order to guard against strategic surprise and disadvantage. America's history of invulnerability and its fear of surprise attack (both before Pearl Harbor and after—Bomber Gap, Missile Gap, Cuban Missile Crisis; the 'window of vulnerability' and remedies to deal with this through SDI and NMD) added to this tendency towards threat inflation.<sup>22</sup> A related practice was the conflation of disparate potential threats. Throughout the Cold War the US attributed the blame for any and all hostile acts against it to the forces of global communism. Thus Reagan announced in 1981 that 'without the Soviet Union there would be no hot spots in the world.' Moscow was also blamed for international terrorism by the Reagan administration—Secretary of State Haig accused the USSR of 'training, funding and equipping international terrorism'.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, all communist states or socialist national liberation movements were regarded as working under central direction and were treated as such. As a consequence, this approach often became a self-fulfilling prophecy. This rather simplified view, exemplified by Bush's 'with us or against us' remark, is the centrepiece of his national security policy and is widely held within the Bush administration. It is partly a view informed by America's view of itself as morally set apart: there is no room for ambiguity, and even if enemies are not working in league, they will be regarded as part of the same obstacle to Washington's will.

<sup>22</sup> See David Hastings Dunn, *The politics of threat* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> Jerry Sanders, *Peddlers of crisis* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), p. 291.

## Part two: applying the drivers—the case of Iraq

These five foreign policy drivers are useful in arriving at an understanding of the policies of the Bush administration in general. They provide an insight into the war on terrorism and the way that the administration has pursued its enemies in Afghanistan and elsewhere. They are particularly useful, however, in separating the motivations from the myths in America's Iraq policy.

### *Realist anti-appeasement*

The Bush administration's realist approach to international politics has been one factor leading it to focus on Iraq in its war against terrorism. Although the links between Baghdad and al-Qaeda remain tenuous at best, the Bush administration has concluded that during a war with a hostile terrorist network that is seeking WMD it can no longer tolerate the shenanigans of this rogue regime and its failure to disarm. Realism focuses on states as the main actors in international relations, and thus as the primary source of threats. The Bush administration has also concluded that the type of terrorism that it fears most—'superterrorism', using chemical, biological or nuclear weapons—could probably be brought about only using the capacity of a state.<sup>24</sup> The administration's view is that Iraq is a hostile state bent on acquiring weapons of mass destruction and on using them for hostile purposes. As a result it has lowered its threat assessment threshold for Iraq, concluding that it is necessary and prudent to confront Baghdad now, before it reaches that stage.

The fact that this is an American-initiated change of policy rather than a response to any new Iraqi misdemeanours is partly responsible for the controversy that surrounds the Bush administration's approach. For the White House, however, this change of policy is justified because the terrorist attacks altered fundamentally the context in which the Iraqi threat must be judged. What was previously viewed as a regional threat has in the aftermath of September 11th taken on global implications. Washington regards itself as being at war, and Iraq's actions and potential make it the prime target state for US action. Dealing with Iraq before it gets WMD is preferred over dealing with a state like North Korea which cannot be coerced because of its non-conventional capabilities. Not only is Iraq a potential threat because of its failure to disarm; as Sanger argues, its 'efforts to inflame the Israeli-Palestinian fight reverberate in America's extremely delicate relationships in the Middle East, and those relationships are critical to its ability to secure aid and sympathy in its war on terrorism'.<sup>25</sup> Further, Iraq's 'decade of defiance' of the UN is also viewed as a bad example of getting away with it to other potential miscreants. The administration thus sees Iraq as a means to restoring the credibility of US deterrence in the face of other security threats.

<sup>24</sup> See Lawrence Freedman, 'The Third World War?', *Survival* 43: 4, Winter 2001, p. 73.

<sup>25</sup> Sanger, 'The debate over attacking Iraq heats up'.

The appeasement analogy is to the forefront of the administration's thinking. For the White House, Clinton's policies are comparable to the detente period of the 1970s and are seen as a pitiful episode of appeasement. Indeed, some of the same arguments are being made by the same people. In 1979 Richard Perle wrote an article entitled 'Echoes of the 1930s' about the Soviet Union; in 2000 he was using the same arguments in 'Iraq: Saddam unbound'.<sup>26</sup> Even the rhetoric is similar: in the 1970s we had the 'arc of crisis' and the 'decade of neglect'; now we have the 'axis of evil' and the 'decade of defiance'). This reference is also part of the Bush administration's self identification as neo-Reaganite. The parallels are explicitly drawn. Clinton is portrayed as the appeaser of North Korea, Iraq and Osama bin Laden in his failure to confront these threats to American interests directly and decisively and his preference instead for negotiation and threat management. Even before 9/11 the new administration indicated its willingness to adopt a tougher approach to these threats to US national interests. Since the attacks the influence of the appeasement analogy is even more apparent, especially in relation to Iraq. America's former failure to confront bin Laden is used to justify action against Iraq. As Perle argues, 'the Continental powers waited until Hitler invaded Poland in 1939 and America waited until after September 11 to go after Osama bin Laden ... what risks do we run if Saddam is left in power and continues to build his [WMD] arsenal?'<sup>27</sup>

The parallels between Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936 and Saddam's failure to disarm after Resolutions 678 and 1441 are also strongly made. In both cases the issue revolved around the dictators' failure to observe internationally agreed conditions relating to behaviour on their own territories. In both cases these were conditions which were accepted as part of the cessation of hostilities in the previous conflict. Further still, the international community was split on both occasions, with at least some countries implicitly believing that the target state had suffered enough as a result of the previous settlement and that war must be avoided at all costs for fear of the consequences. For the US, Britain's failure to act in 1936 and to prevent the development of Hitlerism is a mistake that they are not willing to repeat. The 1940s are also instructive to the Bush administration in another way, in that comparison is made with the situation in 1941. Then, although it was Japan that attacked Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt realized the need to defeat Germany first; hence the need now to defeat Iraq.

The credibility of the UN has been drawn in to the issue on this subject. Will it fail as the League of Nations failed in the 1930s, or will it rise to the challenge and re-establish itself as the mechanism through which the great powers preserve international order? If the UN does fail, this in itself will reinforce the US sense of a need to act. For if the international body is seen to be impotent and inadequate in the face of a direct challenge, then the parallels from the 1930s

<sup>26</sup> Richard Perle, 'Iraq: Saddam unbound', in Robert Kagan and William Kristol, eds, *Present dangers* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Richard Perle, 'Why the West must strike first against Saddam Hussein', *Daily Telegraph*, 9 Aug. 2002.

suggest that things will only get worse unless individual nations act to preserve world order. As Bush himself ineloquently articulated, 'If the Security Council were to allow a dictator to lie and deceive, the Security Council will be weak.'<sup>28</sup>

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For the Bush administration, out of the tragedy of 9/11 comes the opportunity for the reform of the Arab/Muslim world on a liberal basis. Having previously held back in advancing its values in the Gulf, this new US administration now believes it right and necessary to reverse this trend. The 'liberation' of Baghdad and the establishment of a 'democratizing' Iraq will help facilitate that process. In the same way that Woodrow Wilson entered the First World War 'to make the world safe for democracy', democracy and modernity will be brought to the Middle East to make the world safe for the US and all who follow its example. In a profound way, removing Saddam is not just an end in itself but a means to a larger end, the 'liberation of the Middle East'. In this scenario Iraq is 'the cork in the bottle' to Middle East reform.<sup>29</sup> With Saddam in Iraq, it is argued, Iran is prevented from developing further towards its velvet revolution. With Iraq liberated, Iran could be the first to feel the benefits of a post-Saddam Gulf and these benefits will then spread to others, including Saudi Arabia—where 70 per cent of the population are under thirty and dissatisfaction with the prevailing regime is high. The removal of Iraqi support for the suicide bombers in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict could also pave the way for a settlement there. Henry Kissinger has long advanced the argument that 'the road to Jerusalem goes through Baghdad.' The comparison drawn is the reform brought to the communist regimes of eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War. Enfranchised politically and economically, it is argued, the Middle East could develop, prosper and fully participate in the modern world. The argument put forward is that while the spread of democracy would not destroy terrorism overnight it provides the best hope that the world has for doing so.

A clear assumption of this policy is that the status quo in the Middle East is unsustainable and that regime change in Iraq will be a positive catalyst for change. The administration has also consistently argued that it is clearly in the interests of the Iraqi people to be liberated. It points to the self-governing Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq as evidence of what is possible. As Wolfowitz contends, 'It is hard to believe that the liberation of the talented people of one of the most important Arab countries in the world from the grip of one of the world's worst tyrants will not be an opportunity for Americans and Arabs and other people of goodwill to begin to move forward on the task that the President has described as "building a just and peaceful world beyond the war on terror".'<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Richard Beeston, 'Bush ratchets up diplomatic pressure on UN', *The Times*, 8 Feb. 2003.

<sup>29</sup> 'Preparing for action', editorial, *Sunday Times*, 2 Feb. 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Wolfowitz, 'United on the risks of a war with Iraq', *Washington Post*, 23 December 2002.

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Moralist rhetoric is also a constant theme of Bush administration speeches, such as the president's remark in the 2003 State of the Union address that 'The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity.'<sup>31</sup> Although intended to allay concern that the US was set to impose its values on the world, arguing that these are in fact universal values, it is also revealing of the mission upon which the Bush administration is embarked. In bringing these universal values to the Middle East it genuinely believes that it is doing God's work: 'We have found our moment and we have found our missions,' as Bush remarked after 9/11. Given such conviction, its refusal to be swayed by international opinion is understandable.

### *Assertive unilateralism*

For the Bush administration the containment regime imposed on Iraq has failed to stop Saddam's secret weapons development, and failed to uphold the credibility of the UN. As a policy, it has also failed to stop Saddam funding Palestinian terrorists and being a source of instability in the region more generally. The administration points out that Saddam Hussein is in breach of seventeen resolutions passed by the UN since the Gulf War. Critics of containment also point out that the UNSCOM inspection failed to find substantial parts of Iraq's WMD programmes in their original phase of inspections. About to conclude its work in 1995, UNSCOM was reportedly shocked at the scale of the biological and nuclear weapons programmes disclosed by the defector Hussein Kamel, Saddam Hussein's son-in-law. Millions of pages of documents were revealed about the multiple routes the regime had pursued to enrich uranium and about Iraq's extensive and previously undiscovered biological weapons programme; and, crucially, significant gaps were identified in the information that had been revealed about the programmes.<sup>32</sup> It is for this reason that the Bush administration has no confidence that inspectors *qua* detectives, as opposed to inspectors *qua* verifiers of disarmament, can contain Iraq's proliferation efforts. It is as a result of this episode that Resolution 1441 puts the onus on Iraq to provide evidence of what it has done with its WMD stocks. Iraq's failure to provide evidence or explanation of what has become of these stocks is for Washington indicative of deception. As Powell explained to the UN, 'We haven't accounted for the anthrax, we haven't accounted for the botulinum, VX, both biological agents, growth media, 30,000 chemical and biological munitions ... We have not had a complete, accurate declaration.'<sup>33</sup> The declaration that Iraq did produce was described by Rice as 'a 12,200 page lie'.<sup>34</sup> Even were many more inspectors

<sup>31</sup> The State of the Union address, *New York Times*, 29 Jan. 2003. The quotation continues: 'We do not know—we do not claim to know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life, and all of history.'

<sup>32</sup> See 'Spying on Saddam: a defector's revelations', at [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/unscom/defectors.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/unscom/defectors.html), accessed 14 Feb. 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Powell's UN statement, repr. in *The Times*, 15 Feb. 2003.

<sup>34</sup> Condoleezza Rice, 'Why we know Iraq is lying', *New York Times*, 23 Feb. 2003.

and unlimited time committed to the task, the Bush administration believes that Iraq could still deceive the UN, much as UNSCOM was 'duped' between 1991 and 1995. For Bush, a new game of hide-and-seek would be a 're-run of a bad movie' which he had no interest in seeing.

The Bush administration has also lost faith with the sanctions regime as a means of containing Iraq. This policy instrument began to unravel after the UNSCOM inspectors left in 1998. By 2000 oil exports from Iraq had regained their pre-Gulf War levels, and the goods and services flowing into the country went way beyond those allowed by the UN for humanitarian purposes.<sup>35</sup> More than a dozen countries had restarted scheduled airline flights into the country, in defiance of a UN ban, and the regime was importing many items to restore its military infrastructure, including a fibre-optic communications network for the regime supplied by the Chinese.<sup>36</sup> It was recognition of these failings which prompted the administration to seek to install a new 'smart sanctions' regime on Iraq, an effort which failed due to opposition from France, Russia and China, which were eager to exploit the commercial benefits that would follow from the removal of sanctions altogether.<sup>37</sup> The way in which Saddam's regime targeted the effects of the international sanctions to starve his own people also robbed this policy instrument of its utility and its legitimacy. Continuing a policy of containment using such instruments does not appear viable to the White House.

America's confidence in its ability to continue to deter Iraq has also been reassessed after 9/11. While Saddam is regarded as having acted rationally and having been successfully deterred from using WMD during the Gulf War, America has reassessed the way it views the Iraqi dictator. Now that the stakes include the physical security of the United States, Saddam Hussein is viewed as too dangerous to be left to deterrence alone. His decision to invade Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990, to fight in 1991, and to threaten Kuwait again in 1994 are seen by Pollack as evidence that he is 'an inveterate gambler and risk-taker who regularly twists his calculation of the odds to suit his preferred course of action'.<sup>38</sup> Further, his ability to act rationally is limited by the fact that he is a solitary decision-maker who relies little on advice from others; his intelligence services tell him what they think he wants to hear, and he has little information about sources outside Iraq.<sup>39</sup> While America was prepared to rely on a strategy of containment in the pre 9/11 environment, the calculation has now changed. As Bush has observed, 'After September 11, the doctrine of containment just doesn't hold any water, as far as I am concerned.'<sup>40</sup>

What is true with regard to the containment of Iraq is also the case with regard to America's strategy towards the Middle East as a whole. America's traditional tolerance of illiberal regimes is seen to have failed to protect the US from radical

<sup>35</sup> Perle, 'Iraq unbound', p. 101.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, 'Next stop Baghdad', *Foreign Affairs* 81: 2, March–April 2002, p. 34.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> James Bone, 'Ministers united over Saddam's defiance', *The Times*, 7 Feb. 2003.

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Islam. That fifteen of the nineteen hijackers of 9/11 came from a state (Saudi Arabia) that has enjoyed US military protection and high standing in Washington is seen in America as an indictment of that policy. Similarly, traditional methods like public diplomacy are also seen as inadequate instruments of influence against state-run broadcasters transmitting anti-American propaganda to the masses.<sup>41</sup> As a result, the preferred option in seeking a solution to these problems is the Reaganite option: to transcend containment by bringing about regime change in Iraq.

*Willingness to fight and fighting to win*

Both the Bush administration and the American people consider themselves at war against terrorism. This colours how they view the imminent conflict with Iraq. They have been encouraged by the successful use of force in Afghanistan and the successful toppling of the Taleban regime. An important consideration in the administration's approach to Iraq is the calculation that it can win, win quickly and decisively, and do so at little risk to the US from Iraq or its associates. As Rumsfeld has indicated, the expectation is that the war 'could last six days, six weeks, I doubt six months'.<sup>42</sup> The fact that Iraq's armed forces are a third of what they were in 1991 and have not been updated in the period, while improvements in America's military have been considerable over that time, is also often cited.<sup>43</sup> The administration views the use of force against Saddam Hussein's regime as rather like the lancing of a boil on the Persian Gulf: bloody, painful, but necessary and therapeutic. The US tradition of fighting its enemies on foreign shores is also a factor here. Rather than wait to defend itself against a terrorist threat, which concedes the initiative to the attacker, the Bush administration has made it clear that it will take the fight to the enemy, which includes Iraq. As Rumsfeld has argued, 'You can't defend at every place at every time against every technique. You just can't do it, because they keep changing techniques, times and you just have to go after 'em.'<sup>44</sup>

While the prospects of attacking Iraq are worrying for many European observers, the American desire to take the fight to their enemies has led the Bush administration to conclude that the risks of not acting against a broad range of 'terrorist threats' such as Iraq are worse than those of taking action. 'Liberating' Iraq and thus setting in train the reform of the whole Middle East is for the US a kind of military problem-solving, tackling the terrorist threat at its roots. The analogy used is that if you are going to kill mosquitoes (terrorists) it is better not to do it one at a time, but to drain the swamp (the swamp being not just Iraq, but the whole Persian Gulf/Middle East). The administration's willingness to push the issue to the point of conflict and beyond if necessary also reflects the

<sup>41</sup> See David Hoffman, 'The problem with propaganda', *Foreign Affairs* 81: 2, March–April 2002, pp. 83–95.

<sup>42</sup> Beeston, 'Bush ratchets up diplomatic pressure on UN'.

<sup>43</sup> See Perle, 'Why the West'.

<sup>44</sup> Dan Balz and Bob Woodward, 'Bush awaits history's judgment', *Washington Post*, 3 Feb. 2002.

tradition of brinkmanship in US foreign policy. The willingness to threaten force, to go to the very 'brink of war', in order to gain concessions has been a staple of American foreign policy since at least 1945. The progress that the US has made in making Saddam's defiance of the UN's authority a live issue again is rightly viewed by the administration as a vindication of this stance.

The Bush administration's approach has also been characterized by a desire to meet threats head-on rather than to manage them. As Bush said in his 2003 State of the Union address, to 'defend the safety of our people ... America's purpose is more than to follow a process—it is to achieve a result; the end of terrible threats to the civilized world.' While this approach can be criticized for not taking account of the overall political affects of such action, the American approach is to deal with the immediate threats first and then to address the political issues. An illustrative example of this was seen in Afghanistan in 2001, when Britain's chief of the defence staff criticized America's 'single-minded aim' of destroying bin Laden in a 'high tech wild west' operation at the expense, in his view, of the more important task of rebuilding Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup> From the outset the Bush administration has made it clear that in this conflict, unlike Korea and Vietnam, the US will fight to win. In confronting Iraq, the president explained, 'we will act with the full power of the United States military ... We will act with allies at our side. And we will prevail.'<sup>46</sup> What is true militarily is also seen to be the case politically. As one senior White House adviser commented, 'The way to win international acceptance is to win. That's diplomacy: winning.'<sup>47</sup>

The way in which the US has constructed its response to 9/11 as the 'war on terrorism' has also had an impact in its decision to prioritize Iraq. In identifying 'terrorism' as the enemy, the US embarked upon a policy which could be seized upon by others as a justification for their own policy purposes. Israeli Prime Minister Sharon did precisely this in justifying his continued crackdown on the Palestinians as part of the global war on terrorism. For the Bush administration to have been overly critical of this approach would, as Crockatt argues, 'have been to place a question mark over its own war on terror'.<sup>48</sup> It was partly for this reason, following the logic of its own strategy, that the administration refused to work with the present Palestinian leadership in the resolution of the Middle East conflict. Progress on this issue thus denied, the Bush administration sought progress in its war on terror on another front.

### *Threat inflation and conflation*

The application of worst-case thinking to the war on terrorism has lowered Washington's tolerance of Iraq. The potential production and distribution to terrorists of WMD by Iraq is now considered grounds for pre-emptive attack.

<sup>45</sup> See Richard Crockatt, *America embattled* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 152.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in William Schneider, 'In war the mission matters', *National Journal*, 19 Oct. 2002.

<sup>47</sup> Johanna McCreary, '6 reasons why so many allies want Bush to slow down', *Time*, 3 Feb. 2003, p. 27.

<sup>48</sup> Crockatt, *America embattled*, p. 156.



Iraq's failure to obey UN instructions to disarm provides the trigger mechanism for this action to take place. The mere existence of a hostile rogue state that is actively seeking WMD brings Iraq to the top of America's target list. It differs from North Korea in that it has not yet reached the point where it can effectively deter the US from acting. It is seen as a threat that is both credible and manageable. While such action may be damaging to America's desire to win hearts and minds, not to take it, in the administration's view, is potentially catastrophic; and therefore the action becomes the priority. The conflation of the disparate threats that Washington faces which is central to the whole concept of the war on terrorism is considered only prudent given the danger that must be accounted for in worst-case thinking.

Eliminating threats to American security is the prime focus of worst-case thinking. Bush himself has declared that 'We will not wait for the authors of mass murder to gain the weapons of destruction. We act now because we must lift this dark threat from our age and save generations to come.'<sup>49</sup> It is for this reason that Iraq's *potential* capability to build WMD and its *potential* to supply them to terrorists are seen as justification for its high threat status in Washington. How 'cogently probable the threat from Iraq' is, is seen less of an issue than the need to reduce that threat to Americans. Richard Perle is candid in his answer to this question. 'We cannot know for sure,' he reasons. 'But on which side would it be better to err? How would a decision to do nothing now and hope for the best look when Saddam has nuclear weapons and he makes another run at Kuwait or succeeds Afghanistan as terrorist headquarters of the world?'<sup>50</sup> The standards of 'non-threat' that Iraq must demonstrate as a state hostile to the US are set high by Washington. Thus, in his 2003 State of the Union address, Bush asserted that 'Saddam Hussein has gone to elaborate lengths, spent enormous sums, taken great risks to build and keep weapons of mass destruction. But why? The only possible explanation, the only possible use he could have for those weapons, is to intimidate, or attack.' The possibility that he wanted these weapons to deter or repulse an attack from the US is presumably discounted on the assumption that without such weapons he would have nothing to fear from the US. That the US sees no contradiction in applying these stringent criteria to others and yet sees no grounds for others to view its own defence policy in this way illustrates the limitations of this approach to national security policy.

## **Conclusion**

The motivations of the Bush administration in its policy towards Iraq have been much misunderstood. In part, this is because of the contrast between the present situation and that when the US last squared up to Iraq following the invasion of Kuwait. In 1990–1 the provocation could not have been clearer—the unprovoked annexation of a sovereign member of the United Nations—and as a

<sup>49</sup> Anton La Guardia, 'Time for all nations to act', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 Nov. 2001.

<sup>50</sup> Perle, 'Why the West'.

result America enjoyed wide support. Today, by contrast, the American case against Iraq has been inconsistently and poorly presented by the Bush administration. When the debate began in the US as to whether the events of 9/11 demanded a reassessment of the threat presented by Iraq, the case was made largely on the basis of Saddam Hussein's suspected links to the 9/11 attacks, the subsequent anthrax attacks, Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda and terrorism in general. Only when these linkages proved to be an unconvincing justification for targeting Iraq did the Bush administration focus on the longstanding refusal of Saddam Hussein to meet his UN-mandated disarmament obligations. In uniting the world community in the passage of UN Resolution 1441 the administration was enormously successful in generating international support for a higher level of compliance from Baghdad than had been demanded since 1998. Bush's speech to the UN on 12 September 2001 was masterful in presenting Iraqi compliance as a test of UN credibility. However, the threat that the US would disarm Iraq unilaterally if the UN route failed to do so heightened suspicions that the Bush administration was more interested in regime change than in disarmament in itself. Certainly the logic of the case being presented by Mr Bush was that with Saddam Hussein in power there will be no such thing as a safe Iraq. The wider objectives of Bush administration policy-makers to use regime change in Iraq as the catalyst for reform of the whole region provided further substance to the concern that there was more to American policy than the *prima facie* explanations emanating from the White House. The apparent impatience of the Bush administration with the UN inspection process has been a further cause of scepticism towards its argument that the US concern is about disarming Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction. The subsequent suspicion that other motivations lie behind Washington's haste to attack Iraq follow in part from this shifting set of explanations.

That so many outlandish explanations could gain such wide currency, however, especially in Europe, is due to something more profound. First, it demonstrates that many Europeans and Americans think about international politics in different ways and on certain key issues profoundly misunderstand the motivations of the other. Second, it also demonstrates a total breakdown among European opinion in trust in the capacity of the American administration to act in a reasonable and prudential manner. It is not just a breakdown in trust in the American ability to lead and to earn the right to be followed. It is a lack of trust that the US will not act recklessly as to put at risk the safety and security of the entire developed world. It is a lack of trust as to the limits of American action—symbolized by the comment of one British government minister on Donald Rumsfeld: 'He frightens me.'<sup>51</sup> The preceding unilateralist policies of the Bush administration, particularly in repudiating the hard-won efforts of the Kyoto Protocols while offering nothing to put in their place, and the abandonment of treaty commitments from the ABM Treaty to the WTO, were instrumental in priming

<sup>51</sup> Patrick Wintour, 'Blair gambles political future on quick political victory', *Guardian*, 14 Feb. 2003.

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international opinion to distrust American motives. That much of the subsequent suspicion results from a poor understanding of the logic and reasoning of the America case does not disguise the seriousness of the damage that has been done to transatlantic relations by this current crisis. That other distrust of American policy results from an informed understanding of the five drivers of US foreign policy under the Bush administration and the world view that they collectively represent suggests that disagreements between America and its principle allies are likely to continue.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> See David Hastings Dunn, 'United States foreign policy after September 11th', *USA and Canada* (London: Europa Books, 2003).