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OK, President Bush, what if...?

The Bush administration paints a rosy scenario for the upcoming war against Iraq. It is a vision deriving from Likud-oriented members of the President's team--particularly Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, and Douglas Feith. All of them penned, in the early and mid-1990s, memoranda describing why Saddam had to go and how, thereafter, the rest of the Middle East could be politically re-engineered to make it more "Israel-friendly." Perle, along with Feith and others, authored the "Clean Break" memorandum submitted to Likud's Prime-Minister-elect Netanyahu in 1996 (in which the drafters use phrases like "We in Israel...", so why is he serving in a high position in an American administration?). Perle recently explained to Arab journalists how the toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq will be only the first in a long series of regime changes that will purge the Middle East of all Israel's enemies: the governments of Syria, Iran, Libya, and others.

Missing from the Likudniks' scheme is any consideration that things might not go as planned. Yet as everyone knows, where war is involved, events almost never go as planned. Before the U.S. embarks on this war, which is mainly in Likud's interest rather than our own, we owe it to ourselves as Americans to consider some of the things that might go wrong--because it is the U.S. that will have to deal with such unintended consequences, if they happen. We, after all, are choosing to start this war.

Let us begin with the attack on Iraq itself. No doubt U.S. forces can quickly overwhelm Iraq's regular armies. But suppose that the Pentagon's "Shock and Awe" campaign causes gargantuan civilian casualties in Baghdad, and pictures of dead children and mothers air on the evening news? Might not revulsion at our premeditated overkill seriously undermine domestic support for the war, and earn us universal condemnation abroad?

What if, contrary to the Likudniks' fantasies, Iraqis do not welcome the U.S. forces as "liberators," but rather see us mainly as enemy occupiers and the architects of "Shock and Awe?" As the hated foreigners whose sanctions over the past ten years have impoverished everyone and killed a half-million Iraqi civilians? As the same enemy who, in the 1991 war, slaughtered a hundred thousand retreating Iraqi soldiers? This is a lot of grieving families. Even removing the hated Saddam will not exonerate us of those crimes in their eyes.

What if no unified Iraqi opposition materializes--none has materialized yet--to take over post-Saddam Iraq? What if Baghdad becomes not the placid seat of a model Arab democracy, but a lethal quagmire of sniping and booby-traps and seat of a draconian American military government? What if, in response to Kurdish noises about independence, the Turkish army invades northern Iraq to quash it? What if Iran, seeing us pinned down in Iraq, and tiring of it, moves to annex the oil-rich Shi'ite provinces of south-eastern Iraq (perhaps by orchestrating popular support for it)? Will we be willing to dispatch another quarter-million American soldiers to pacify a fragmented Iraq spiraling toward civil war? Our record in Bosnia, Somalia and Afghanistan does not give much cause for optimism on this score: our government seems to be much more enthusiastic about military intervention than about the peace-keeping that must follow.

What if the Likud government in Israel uses the distraction of an American war on Iraq to implement its long-cherished dream of expelling all Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza? (This is not unlikely: a memo circulated last fall by a long list of Israeli academicians warned that the Sharon government was

contemplating just this.) Will the U.S. let this ethnic cleansing of Palestinians happen? What troops would we use to stop it? Suppose opposition to the war or to Israeli expansionism in Palestine causes the fall of Middle Eastern governments generally friendly to us--Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey--and their replacement by overtly hostile regimes? Will the U.S. be willing, and able, to dispatch additional forces to restore the situation in such places, and with what claim to legitimacy? Despite Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's braggadocio, it is easy to see how we could become overextended militarily. What if China is tempted to follow Israel's lead, exploiting our preoccupation with Iraq to re-take Taiwan? What if Pakistan or India--both nuclear powers--is tempted by our inattention to push its claim in Kashmir?

Of course, none of these things may happen. But any of them could happen if we open this Pandora's box, and we need to have a clear sense of their likelihood and how to deal with such challenges if they arise. Unfortunately, President Bush seems to prefer denial, for he has offered no hint that it is even aware of them. He prefers the Likud's rose-colored glasses.

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