

President George W. Bush and the Politics of the War on Terrorism

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The concept of “necessary and unnecessary wars” has been much discussed during the past year (Mearsheimer). Into which category the March 2003 American war against Iraq is placed depends largely on one’s politics. However, the concept of necessary war brings into focus the larger question of American use of military force throughout its over 230 year history and an examination of how many “necessary wars” it has fought and how many had been simply “wars of choice.” The United States has deployed military forces abroad over 240 times in its history, but if one merely counts the “major wars” it has fought, I suggest the number we should consider is 14: The American Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, The Boxer Rebellion, the Philippine Insurrection, World War I, World War 2, Korean War, Vietnam War, Gulf War I, Afghanistan War and Gulf War 2. How many of these have been wars of choice rather than necessity? While some including the current Iraq War may be controversial, most historians and political scientists would probably agree that only 5 of these 14 have been wars of necessity, i.e. wars that had to be fought because no other choice existed: Civil War, World War 2, Korean War, Gulf War I and the 2002 Afghan War. The rest have been in one major aspect or another, wars that did not have to be fought, but were war of choice.

President George W. Bush and his advisors have argued that the Iraq War was a war of necessity given the events of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Certainly, after Osamu Bin Laden was identified as the architect of the 9-11 terrorist attacks and his bases located in Afghanistan, the necessity to destroy those bases and the government that openly supported them was accepted by nearly everyone. The next step in President Bush’s War on Terrorism was not so clear in the mind of the world or even the American public the United States had to attack and destroy the regime of Saddam Hussein and occupy the nation of Iraq.

The rationale to attack Iraq was based on a new national security doctrine announced by President George W, Bush at his now-famous address at West Point for the graduation of American’s new crop of army officers on June 1, 2002 (Bush 2002). The new national security policy against terrorism was based on the concept of preemptive war to eliminate terrorists and the regimes that support them before they can launch attacks on American targets (National Security Strategy). But, not only did the Bush administration “declare war” on the designers and supporters of the 9-11 attacks, but upon they pledged to “rid the world of every terrorist group of global reach (Bush 2001).”

The Bush Administration’s Justification for the War with Iraq

The Bush administration used a wide range of arguments to justify the desire to destroy the regime of Saddam Hussein (Crawford). One of the most

important was the charge that Saddam Hussein was behind the 9-11 attacks on the United States. This was repeatedly suggested by the President's team including the president and his vice-president, Richard Cheney. It was only long after the war was officially over in the late fall of 2003 that President Bush admitted that he had no direct evidence to link Saddam Hussein to the 9-11 attacks. Even after that remarkable statement, Vice President Cheney continued to link together the 9-11 attacks and Saddam Hussein in the various speeches he gave (Hossenball). Polls of American public opinion revealed that even after the president admitted that there was no linkage, more than half of American believed Saddam Hussein was behind the 9-11 attacks (Milbank).

The second justification for the war on Iraq was the Saddam Hussein regime was in violation of UN resolutions to eliminate his stocks of weapons of mass destruction and thus posed a serious threat not only to his neighboring states, but to the United States as well. Even if Iraq could not deliver such a weapon against the United States, it could give or sell them to terrorist groups who could then use them to attack the United States. Cheney had long argued within the administration that Iraq had these weapons of mass destruction. The American Secretary of State, Collin Powell, presented the administration's case to the United Nations in February, 2003 and it was met largely with disbelief in most of the world, but with growing acceptance in the United States.

A third justification centered around the continuing Arab-Israel conflict and the argument that if one Arab nation in the Middle East could be made into a democracy, it could reshape the history of the region and perhaps move toward a lasting peace in the region. Thomas Friedman, the chief foreign policy editorial columnist for the New York Times was the strongest supporter of this justification even before the war started in March 2003 and after the war, admitted that this was the only justification that was valid in his opinion (Friedman). The democratization of Iraq would require the destruction of the old regime and the elimination of the Iraqi ruling elite. Only a war and subsequent occupation could achieve these goals. It seemed obvious to all the destruction of the Afghanistan Taliban regime was not about to produce such a democratic model in the foreseeable future. The linkage between a possible democratic Iraq and a peace settlement between Israel and its Arab neighbors also may be problematic as well.

Finally, Bush administration sources would talk about the possible external fallouts from a successful challenge to the Hussein regime. The so-called "Axis of Evil" announced by Bush consisted of Iraq, Iran and North Korea. If Iraq could be eliminated as a threat to the world and the United States, in specific, perhaps it could be used as a lever to push Iran and North Korea to exhibit more normal behavior in the international community. By December, 2003, Bush supporters point to the willingness of Iran to open up its nuclear program to international inspection and Libya's declaration of its plans to abandon its weapons of mass destruction programs as proof of the Iraq war success.

Other Justifications for the War: The Critics Respond

Critics of the American war against Iraq have argued that the Bush decision to go to war must be considered separately from the specific aspects of the War on Terrorism declared after 9-11 (Albright). They have argued the administration had other motives for the war that were quite different from those found in the major speeches of the president and his staff. Among the alternative explanations or justifications are the American desire to control the bulk of Middle East oil supplies, domestic political considerations focused on the 2002 and 2004 American elections, revenge desires to resurrect the Bush family legacy and an excuse to establish an American hegemony over the world.

The United States government has been obsessed with Middle East oil supplies since the early part of World War II. Clearly, in the latter half of the Twentieth Century, oil has been the most important strategic commodity in terms of political and military power. American policy toward the Middle East has through its various manifestations been concerned with the security and access to its oil and denying it to America's enemies. The great threat of Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait in 1990 was the concentration of over 20 percent of the world's oil supplies in the hands of the dictator and the power that he would derive from that resource. Yergin (1991) in his important study of the politics of oil calls that one of the most significant threats to the United States in the post-war era. "Iraq would be the planet's dominant oil power." He also posed a clear threat to Saudi oil supplies as President Bush argued the Iraqi army was not posed to invade the lightly defended Saudi Arabia and take still another part of the world's oil supplies. That threat was ended in the 1991 Gulf War that destroyed much of the Iraqi army, but still left Saddam Hussein in control of Iraq.

On the other hand, much has changed since the end of the First Gulf War. After the Second Gulf War in 2003, the United States finds itself in a very advantageous position in terms of its influence over oil supplies and production as well as the placement of American military forces in the region. It now has military bases in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Turkey and several of the former Soviet states on the northern borders of Iraq and Afghanistan as well as a huge naval fleet operating in the Arabian Gulf. The United States has in a mere decade become the dominant military force in the region. It is the military protector of the most of world's largest oil producers and reserves (except for Russia): Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait and Qatar. It is in position to bring stability and access to the region and to deny its oil to any potential enemies. The critics of the Bush policy to attack Iraq suggest that this outcome is not an unintended outcome of the war, but the former oilmen (Bush and Cheney) knew exactly what they were doing in March 2003.

Other critics focus on American domestic politics as important motivations for understanding the actions of the Bush administration. It is significant to remember how fragile the Bush administration's political foundation was just before 9-11. Bush had secured his presidency by a narrow 5-4 vote by the United States Supreme Court that stopped vote recounting in

Florida and gave that state's crucial electoral votes to the Bush ticket. More than half of the nation's 2000 voters had voted for Gore, not Bush and approximately half the nation still thought Bush to be a somewhat illegitimate president (Harpers 2003). The events of 9-11 changed all that as many political writers had suggested. After Bush's anti-terrorist speeches in New York and before a joint session of Congress immediately after the attacks, Bush's popularity soared in the polls as the American public rallied to support America and its political leader. About a year later, the 2002 congressional elections were to be contested and they were crucial to the success of the Bush administration. Republicans had a slim majority in the House of Representatives (221-212) and had lost control of the Senate by a 51-49 margin. Karl Rove, Bush's political advisor, structured the Republican congressional campaign around the message that a successful War on Terrorism required a Republican Congress to support the president. A well coordinated campaign stayed on message and the visits of President Bush to several key states in the final weeks of the campaign resulted in the continuation of the Republican House majorities and the capturing of the Senate by a thin 51-48-1 margin. The Senate victory was built by winning a Senate seat in Georgia held by Max Cleland, a disabled, former Viet Nam veteran, Democrat who was defeated by a campaign that argued he was insufficiently committed to the War on Terrorism. It was a very successful political strategy that cemented Republican political power in the federal government and set the stage for later Bush legislative successes such as three major tax cuts. Without the campaign focus on the War on Terrorism and the then upcoming war with Iraq, such a Republican congressional victory was probably unlikely and thus critics contend, the shift in focus to Iraq just prior to the 2002 elections was very useful of Bush and his party. The critics contend this "Bait and Switch" tactic of transforming the War on Terrorism into a war against Iraq and Saddam Hussein was a political decision and actually harmful to the successful War on Terrorism since it allocated forces from Afghanistan and anti-terrorist efforts at key moment of its development.

Critics of the Bush administration also point to how the Iraq War is being used as a foundation for the Bush re-election campaign in 2004. In the late summer of 2003, President Bush visited an American aircraft carrier returning from the Iraq war and while he was outfitted in a military flight suit, the message of "Mission Accomplished" was displayed on the superstructure of the carrier. The "war hero" president later appeared repeatedly at American military bases before cheering crowds of service men and women and also at a Thanksgiving Day dinner in Iraq. Since the 2004 republican presidential nominating convention has been scheduled for New York City around the 9-11 date, the Bush re-election campaign is very likely to be orchestrated around the president as the war leader leading America to security by confronting and destroying terrorist groups and nations that support them.

After Bush had mobilized the reserves and sent over 200,000 troops to the Middle East in late fall 2002 and winter 2003, critics noted that he was so committed to the use of military force to end the Iraq confrontation that he had

no other options in resolving the crisis. Military commentators as well as political figures all noted that once the forces were sent, they had to be used otherwise, no other nation would ever believe American threats to use military forces if “we backed down and sent the forces home.”

When Saddam Hussein was captured by American forces in December, 2003, some 9 months after the American military attack on Iraq, the glee of the Bush family and supporters was quite difficult to hide. Some critics suggested that the shift in focus from the Taliban to Saddam Hussein was at least partly explained as a desire for a form of revenge by the Bush family on the man who survived President H.W. Bush after Gulf War I. As President Bush had once noted, “Well, he (Saddam Hussein) did try to kill my father.” The capture of Saddam Hussein gave the Bush family a chance to rewrite the Bush family legacy.

Finally, another form of “bait and switch” argument suggests that the American economy’s recession following 9-11 was a serious problem to the legacy of the Bush administration. Democrats point out the economy has suffered a net loss of jobs during the Bush administration, an outcome no other president since the 1920s has experienced. The critics point out that shifting attention away from a “soft economy” and especially the unemployment statistics to a victorious campaign against the terrorists responsible for the events of 9-11 is a wonderful political strategy.

The Bush Administration and the Creation of the National Security State in America

What should be the proper governmental response to the events of 9-11? This question came to dominate American political discourse during the years immediately after the terrorist attacks. The balance between traditional American freedoms and liberties and the demands associated with the building of a more secure society facing a significant terrorist threat was the central issue of this debate. Quite simply stated, what were acceptable costs to try to achieve greater security? Two newspaper political cartoons of the time cleverly summarized the dangers inherent in this question. Auth, the political cartoonist for the Philadelphia Inquirer drew a human sacrifice scene with the young women being sacrificed labeled as “the rule of law” and the priest holding the sacrificial knife labeled as US Attorney-General John Ashcroft saying, “In the war on terrorism, sometimes sacrifice is necessary.” The second cartoon by Clay Bennett has letters cut out from the words freedom, liberty, justice, and equality spelling out the word “security.” In both these cases, the cartoonists have summarized the concerns of those who see the costs of constructing a national security state as being too great.

In a Freedom Forum Poll conducted in 2002, the results from the sample of the American public are as follows:

- 49% believe that the First Amendment of the Constitution (Freedom of Speech and the Press) gives Americans “too much freedom.”
- 50% said the government should have greater power to monitor religious groups (Muslims) in the interests of security.

- 40% feel that academic freedom should be limited and professors prohibited from criticizing the military.
- 50% feel the press has been too aggressive in investigating the war on terrorism.

In this and other similar polls, a picture of the American public emerged. It was terrified and shocked by the 9-11 terrorist attacks and willing to give up 200 years of freedoms and liberties if there was a chance of great security from possible terrorist attacks. Karen Tumltly (2003), the national political writer for Time magazine calls it, "Make me safe, whatever it takes." A terrified public thinks little of costs in such a situation.

The Bush administration had key personnel who have long felt the nation enjoyed too much individual liberty and insufficient concern for security. Bush's Attorney-General, Thomas Ashcroft, took quick steps to enact new tools for the government to pursue terrorists inside the United States. In November, 2001, the US Patriots Act was passed by Congress and quickly signed into law by President Bush. The Patriots Act gave the federal government significant new legal powers to fight terrorists and, as expected by many, it has been used by law enforcement officials against a wide range of criminal activities including local money laundering cases. By the summer of 2003, the Justice Department was also planning a Patriot Act II to give the government additional powers to fight terrorism.

The Congress has not proven to be an effective check on the demands of the Bush administration for a wide range of powers in the name of the war against terrorists. Senate Joint resolution 23 authorized.

the use of the United States armed forces against those responsible for the recent attacks against the United States and its citizens ... The President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001 or harbored such organizations or persons in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States.

This congressional authorization of action by the Bush administration is so vague to allow the president to do almost anything he wants as long as he frames it within the broad and ambiguous war on terrorism. Defenders of the administration point to the fact that there has not been another terrorist attack on the United States in the following two years after 9-11 and that alone justifies any of the sacrifices and costs of the building of the new American national security state. Critics counter with the question of how do we know that the American security efforts have had anything to do with the lack of terrorist attacks? Most terrorist experts note that while the government's efforts may have made some types of terrorist attacks more difficult (such as using airliners to attack major building), there are so many ill-defended or non-defended potential targets in the United States, that the lack of attacks seems to

be by choice rather than by prevention. It was somewhat ironic that within two weeks of the capture of Saddam Hussein in December, 2003 the terrorist threat level had to be raised to the second highest level of "serious" given indications of possible threats attacks on various targets in the United States.

A huge new security bureaucracy has been constructed in the United States centered on the gigantic new Department of Homeland Security. Under its determined administrator, former Governor Tom Ridge, it has come of impact nearly every part of American society from immigration rules to banking procedures as well as the obvious manifestation such as the federalization of all airport security personnel.

The question of proportionality has been raised by critics of the administration. They point to the fact that 18 terrorists using box cutters had hijacked three airplanes that hit three buildings and killed nearly 3,000 people. It has been estimated that the costs to the terrorist organization to launch these attacks was about \$250,000. In response, the Bush administration has spent hundreds of billions of dollars in the two wars (Afghanistan and Iraq), related security measures and the rebuilding of the two states it has conquered. Normal American life has been severely disrupted by the security measures that have also negatively impact millions of other people around the world. In just one example, visitors to the United States are now required to have face-to-face interviews at US consulates or embassies around the world before such visitor visas will be granted. Additionally, thousands of students and researchers have been prevented from coming to the United States due to these new security rules that apply to foreigners regardless of possible threats to the United States. Japanese and Australians, two of our allies in Iraq, have to follow the same rules as citizens from dangerous parts of the world. The potential cost of this war on terrorism may run into the trillions of dollars and not be effective in dealing with the overall terrorist threat. When the American governmental response to the terrorist attacks is evaluated in a rational cost-benefit manner excluding the fear/security factor, the response appears to be disproportional.

Many of the critics of the administration's response worry that a war against terrorism will be an endless war. Bush declared war on all terrorists and no rational person assumes that terrorism can be erased in the near or even far future (Cirincione). Therefore, the concern is the "war rules and security necessities" will be permanent restrictions on American society. The 18 hijackers may have died on September 11, 2001, but their legacy will remain for decades.

The Rise of the New American Empire.

While Americans will argue the United States has never been a colonial nation and, of course, could never have an empire since it is a democracy, some political scientists, historians and media have written about the rise of the

New American Empire in the post 9-11 world (Ferguson 2003). A reasonable case can be made for the existence of an Old American Empire based on the territorial expansion of the original 13 states on the Atlantic coast across the North American continent following land purchases from France and Spain and huge land gains after the Mexican War in the 1840s. It ventured into overseas possessions with the securing of the Hawaiian Islands and other Pacific Ocean islands in the late 1800s. The colonial empire appeared as an outcome of the Spanish American War of 1898 when the United States added the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico as well as effective control over Cuba for decades. Americans would argue this “empire” is different than those of the old colonial powers since we were always committed to self-government of these possessions when appropriate (Kagan).

Media declarations of the existence of the New Empire have appeared in the New York Times in the following forms: “American Empire, Not ‘If’, but What Kind?” and “like it or not, the power and reach of the US has already turned it into an empire. The real debate is not whether to have an empire, but what kind?”(2003a;2003b). Such evaluations stress the point that the New Empire is not so based on colonial occupation of territory, but on American control of much of the world’s supplies of essential oil and overwhelming military power as well as economic and financial resources superior to any other nation or group of nations(Chomsky). Bush and his advisors have clearly adopted a doctrine of using this American power to promote a world that is more modern, moral, capitalist and democratic.

The politics of the Bush administration and the Second Gulf War have profound implications for the future of politics inside the United States and around the world. The American responses to the events of 9-11 are of such a fundamental change in past American policies that they threaten long standing American freedoms and liberties and the historic order of the international system. The Bush presidency that looked like a status quo operation in its first year took advantage of the opportunities offered by the terrorists attacks to implement a radical new agenda with profound domestic and international implications(Daalder). The magnitude of the impact of these policies is unknown at this time, but they will unfold in the coming years and they will be studied by many around the world.

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