



Behind Bush's Drive to War

by Joaquin Cabrejas

In March 2003, despite unprecedented worldwide protest, President George W. Bush began a preemptive war on Iraq, arguing that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein posed an immediate threat to the security of the United States because he had weapons of mass destruction and ties to al-Qaeda. These claims have come under intense scrutiny with the Bush administration's failure thus far to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the recently released information that the administration lacked solid grounds for war in the first place.

For instance, this past summer the Bush administration declassified portions of the recent National Intelligence Estimate, unwittingly revealing intelligence that significantly weakened the case he had made for war. The possibility that an unprovoked Hussein would launch an attack was deemed unlikely and the report also cast doubt on Bush's assertions that Hussein had ties to al-Qaeda and was seeking to begin a nuclear weapons program.

The longer such deception continues, the more Americans will demand the true reasons the administration went to war. There are possible geopolitical explanations but such pragmatic considerations may have been accompanied by a subtler rationale involving Bush's deep religious beliefs and recent embrace of crucial neoconservative tenets.

Neoconservatism arose during the 1970s when a small group of politicians and intellectuals disagreed with the policy of détente, preferring to challenge the Soviet Union with U.S. power. Neoconservatives reflect this view today by advocating an aggressive projection of American might on foreign dictatorships and otherwise unfriendly regimes. They also stipulate that emerging powers must be dealt with vigorously. For instance, the Project for the New American Century, a neoconservative think tank, bluntly outlines its objectives in its policy paper *Rebuilding America's Defenses*. One section states, "The United States must retain sufficient forces able to rapidly deploy and win multiple simultaneous large-scale wars and also to be able to respond to unanticipated contingencies in regions where it does not maintain forward-based forces."

Neoconservatives also place a high value on religion in society. Irving Kristol, a chief figure in neoconservatism, believes religion should play a much larger role in American society and that the framers of the Constitution made a serious error in emphasizing the separation of church and state. According to journalist Jim Lobe, Kristol's personal views on religion are irrelevant; Kristol believes that religion is necessary to keep social order and that without it society would degenerate into anarchy. This point of view is widespread among neoconservatives because much of their thought is derived from the late philosopher Leo Strauss, an advocate of religion who nonetheless thought of it as a "pious fraud." As Shadia Drury of the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada, puts it, "He agreed with Marx that religion was the opium of the masses. But he believed that the masses need their opium." In order to make war the people must believe in what they're fighting for, and religion provides justifications.

While Bush isn't a neoconservative himself, nor is he simply their puppet, his foreign policy decisions are nonetheless being driven by the neoconservative worldview. A partial reason for this lies in his deep religious faith and the neoconservative view on religion. As Columbia University historian Randall Balmer points out, Bush's Christianity, unlike former President Jimmy Carter's (a fellow evangelical), is deeply rooted in the mores of the more severe Old Testament. In other words, rather than turning the other cheek one must actively fight evil.

There are historical parallels to this kind of messianic thinking. One notorious example is the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which helped fuel westward expansion and was invoked to justify the wars against Mexico and many Native American nations. Then-President James K. Polk was able to cast the Mexican War in messianic terms, since without this doctrine the wars would have been seen as naked land grabs. A war against Catholic Mexico was only a chapter in the westward march of a superior race: New World Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Similarly, pagan natives had to make way for their sophisticated superiors. As Indiana University historian David Pletcher describes it, "Manifest Destiny was a conviction that God intended North America to be under the control of the Americans." Historian Ray Billington adds:

Every patriot who clamored for Mexico's provinces would indignantly deny any desire to exploit a neighbor's territory. The righteous but ill-informed people of that day sincerely believed their democratic institutions were of such magnificent perfection that no boundaries could contain them. Surely a benevolent Creator did not intend such blessings for the few; expansion was a divine-

ly ordered means of extending enlightenment to despot-ridden masses in near-by countries! This was not imperialism, but enforced salvation. So the average American reasoned in the 1840's when the spirit of manifest destiny was in the air.

The first Puritans to settle New England framed their mission in similar terms; a main objective was to Christianize the area's native inhabitants. They left behind a corrupt religion in England to establish a "true" one in the New World. In other words, they had a messianic vision.

Then as now, religion was invoked to justify aggression. English settlers went to war with the Pequot Indian tribe in the mid-1600s. In that war, Puritan soldiers sometimes used religion to justify questionable tactics. One soldier declared that he had "sufficient light from the Word of God for our proceedings." Another soothed his conscience by writing that God had already condemned the "heathen" Pequots, according to Charles Segal and David Stineback, authors of *Puritans, Indians, and Manifest Destiny*.

Today, neoconservatives have taken on an almost mythic aura: they're the men in the ominous dark suits prodding the president on his seemingly obsessive crusades. Bureaucrats recycled from the Reagan administration's infamous Central American adventures fill many Bush administration posts, among them Elliot Abrams, former undersecretary of state for Latin American affairs. Other neoconservatives in the administration include Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, and Arms Control Undersecretary John Bolton. The neoconservative *Weekly Standard* is reportedly required reading for Vice-President Dick Cheney's aides. And the journal's editor, Bill Kristol, is Kristol's son. Wolfowitz, along with a fellow administration neoconservative, Office of Special Plans Director Abram Shulsky, studied under Strauss.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, gave weight to neoconservative arguments and colored Bush's thinking. Despite its status as the world's preeminent power, the United States wasn't invulnerable. Although Bush's absolutist rhetoric may have made the war in Afghanistan more likely, the Taliban did admit to harboring al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and refused to unconditionally release him to U.S. authorities.

Iraq was different. In hindsight it seems to many that the war on Iraq was justified on the flimsiest premises and patently false claims of collusion between secular Iraq and the fundamentalist al-Qaeda. Even then it was difficult to believe that Hussein, burdened by twelve years of United Nations (UN) sanctions and wise to the consequences of threatening U.S.

interests, could muster the resolve to launch a suicidal attack on the U.S. mainland.

Yet neoconservatives had been pushing for Hussein's ouster long before 9/11. He had already exhausted his usefulness as a weapon against Iran's anti-American mullahs. His control of and willingness to destroy large amounts of crude oil were well documented and undoubtedly didn't sit well with the neo-conservative clique. Former President George H. W. Bush, who headed the Central Intelligence Agency before being elected president, stopped short of removing Hussein in 1991, which infuriated neo-conservatives. His inexperienced son was another story, however, and ripe for influencing.

There are other dictators in the world, so why target Hussein? The answer is that Bush combines his Old Testament severity with pragmatic geopolitical considerations. Bush won't attack North Korea because it would be too costly—both to his ally to the south and U.S. forces. Africa's many tyrants simply don't count because Africa isn't immediately important to U.S. interests. Iraq, on the other hand, is in the Middle East, which is important to U.S. interests—and, as it turned out, easy to conquer (if not easy to occupy).

Consortium News founder Robert Parry agrees:

Bush apparently sees his mission in messianic terms, believing that he is the instrument of God as he strikes at Saddam Hussein and other U.S. adversaries. In a profile of Bush at war, *USA Today* cited Commerce Secretary Don Evans, one of Bush's closest friends, describing Bush's belief that he was called on by God to do what he's doing.

Indeed, Bush's propensity to starkly delineate the world into good and evil made him more likely to embrace the idea of a just war. Even before his now-sullied attempt to declare Iraq an imminent threat to the United States, Bush called Hussein "evil" and declared his country a charter member of the "axis of evil." On the subject of Hussein's use of chemical weapons, Bush said in his 2002 State of the Union speech, "If this is not evil, then evil has no meaning." As the *Montreal Gazette* points out, political parlance didn't involve the extensive use of *evil* until the Bush administration. "But the very concept of evil is problematic. When it becomes used as part of political rhetoric it silences conversation. That's the real problem. Once you've defined something that way, the only policy option is to destroy the evil," adds Tony Lang of the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs.

Hussein also made it easy to couch an attack on him in moral terms. In the event that weapons of mass destruction wouldn't be uncovered, the administration could fall back on a moral rationale for war. No

one denied that Hussein was a tyrant. For one, Amnesty International's annual human rights reports detailed Hussein's routine savagery. And in the absence of Iraqi chemical and biological weapons stockpiles, several U.S. officials have indeed suggested that Hussein's tyranny was justification enough for a preemptive war. Even worse, the American public seems to agree—that their president lied to them about the primary justification for war doesn't seem to trouble them as much as it should.

Religious Americans were more likely to support the war on Iraq than their secular counterparts. A Gallup poll revealed that 60 percent of people self-identified as religious supported the invasion while less than 50 percent of nonreligious people did. Furthermore, over 70 percent of white evangelicals thought God had protected the United States throughout its history, as opposed to only 48 percent of Americans outside this demographic who thought the same. This suggests a significant level of messianic thinking among people like Bush. National Association of Evangelicals President Ted Haggard expounds on this aspect of the evangelical worldview: "Evangelicals believe there is a purpose for our nation: to be good, to give, to help the oppressed, to strive for equality." However, the enactment of these noble ideals is open to interpretation.

Along with Strauss's utilitarian view of religion, he also believed philosophers sometimes had to lie to political leaders to lead them on the correct path. In the run-up to the 2000 presidential elections, Bush said he had no interest in nation building. Why the change in direction since 9/11? But his thought was changed. From the neoconservative stance it is sensible to use knowledge of a religious person's deeply held beliefs in order to effect persuasion.

New Yorker investigative reporter Seymour Hersh points to evidence suggesting that neoconservatives manipulated intelligence about Iraq. Unnamed Bush administration officials allege that Wolfowitz and Shulsky, among other neoconservatives, teamed up to shape U.S. foreign policy by disseminating information based on the intelligence of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), an anti-Hussein exile group, and selective intelligence from other agencies. Furthermore, Wolfowitz personally knew INC head Ahmed Chalabi. Chalabi's connections soon included other administration neoconservatives, including Cheney underling Lewis Libby.

Wolfowitz purportedly devised an operation for the newly created Office of Special Plans, headed by fellow Strauss disciple Shulsky. According to Hersh's unnamed Pentagon source, when the CIA was unable to find unassailable evidence that Hussein continued to possess weapons of mass destruction or ever had ties to al-Qaeda, the Special Plans operation took it

upon itself to find the “overlooked” evidence Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz were sure existed. In other words, the purpose of Shulsky’s office was to make the case for war by any means necessary.

This is problematic for an overarching reason: major foreign intelligence initiatives are supposed to fall under the CIA’s jurisdiction. Given the Office of Special Plans’ ideology and its primary source of information—the politically motivated INC—it isn’t surprising that the office concluded that war with Iraq was necessary. Hersh reports, however, that the CIA’s intelligence frequently contradicted that of the Office of Special Plans.

Shortly after 9/11, the INC furiously disseminated stories of Iraqi dissidents claiming a Hussein connection to al-Qaeda. One dissident, Sabah Khodada, claimed he saw a commercial jet parked in a terrorist training camp near Baghdad, Iraq. The CIA flatly rejected the claim. The location in question was actually a counter-terrorism training camp; during the Iran-Iraq war it had provided counter-terrorism training to the Iraqi military to help it thwart pro-Iranian airplane hijackings. Another dissident who the Pentagon claimed had trained at an al-Qaeda camp in Iraq told CIA officials he had never done such a thing—he had trained at a nonterrorist Fedayeen camp.

Claims that Hussein continued to possess weapons of mass destruction were similarly discredited; the now-murdered defector Hussein Kamal, formerly a general in the Iraqi army, admitted Hussein had produced weapons of mass destruction, but Chalabi’s neoconservative allies neglected to mention that he also said they were destroyed after the 1991 Gulf War. An anonymous ex-intelligence official told Hersh, “One of the reasons I left was my sense that they [the neoconservatives in the Pentagon] were using the intelligence from the CIA and other agencies only when it fit their agenda. They didn’t like the intelligence they were getting. . . . They were so crazed and so far out and so difficult to reason with. . . . Dogmatic, as if they were on a mission from God.”

But neoconservatives aren’t necessarily reli-

gious; they simply believe in religion’s utilitarian value. “The whole story is complicated by Strauss’s idea—actually Plato’s—that philosophers need to tell noble lies not only to the people at large but also to powerful politicians,” says New York University law professor Stephen Holmes.

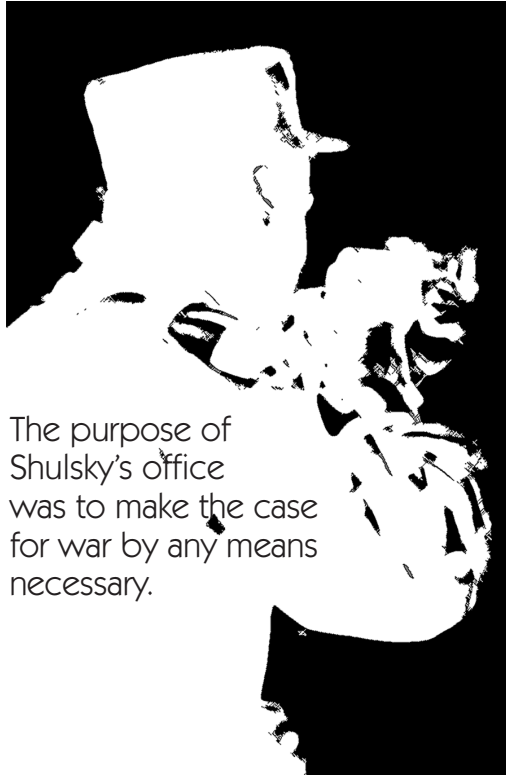
Ha’aretz, Israel’s foremost newspaper, reported in late June 2003 that Bush told Palestinian Prime

Minister Mahmoud Abbas that God told him to invade Iraq. The White House later denied the statement. Whatever the truth, however, the claim itself is revealing: Bush’s deep faith in the supernatural is widely known to inordinately influence his rhetoric and thinking—as a result, a story like this becomes instantly believable. In this context, it’s difficult to accept that Paul Wolfowitz, heavily influenced by Strauss, didn’t once utter a “noble lie” in office—especially in order to influence a receptive and powerful decision maker on a course neo-conservatives had long thought essential. And one of the methods of deception would likely have been religious in nature, since the presi-

dent’s deep faith is well known.

This theory gains merit when the recent war on Iraq is compared to the 1991 Gulf War: President George H. W. Bush routed the Iraqi army in Kuwait and faced a relatively easy path to Baghdad. What stopped him from entering the capital? Was it that Hussein had stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. Or was it more likely the senior Bush’s belief that UN-imposed sanctions and inspections would weaken any remaining capability Hussein possessed to threaten U.S. oil reserves. Nor did the senior Bush aid the Kurdish and Shiite insurgencies—rather, he provided no-fly zones in the north and south after the fact. Right or wrong, his thinking was primarily pragmatic. And his brand of moderate Episcopalianism is less likely to accept certain arguments than his son’s more fervent evangelical brand of Christianity.

Simply put, the purpose of neoconservatism is to maintain the United States’ unprecedented position



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on the global stage despite the terrible costs it may inflict on others. The consuming fear of challengers—an increasingly powerful China, for instance—is a hallmark of this worldview. As Paul Wolfowitz put it—according to John Ikenberry in the September/October 2003 issue of *Foreign Affairs*—maintaining U.S. power means using military force, if necessary, to prevent the rise of any “peer competitors” on the world stage. By intimidating anti-American regimes and creating regimes friendly to U.S. interests, the challengers’ potential allies can be held in check and the *Pax Americana* preserved.

Nonetheless, although neoconservatives wield tremendous influence with Bush, it is important to remember that they are only one breed and have come into conflict with more traditional conservatives. *Washington Post* White House correspondent Dana Milbank revealed this clash within the Bush administration. Traditional conservatives—including the senior Bush—also influence the current Bush White House, favoring a more multilateral, less hawkish foreign policy. Even Donald Devine, considered a father of neoconservatism and former Reagan administration official, is dismayed by the junior Bush’s neoconservatism. In a May 2003 memo, Devine griped that traditional conservatism had been replaced in the Bush

administration by a big-spending “national greatness” ideology. Nonetheless, Milbank writes, the neoconservative view won out: *Weekly Standard* publisher Bill Kristol beamed over National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice’s conversion, saying, “She’s moved over to our side. My view is she’s a Scowcroft [an important traditional conservative] protégé who’s educated herself.”

Although George W. Bush earlier pledged he had no interest in nation building—implying a traditionally conservative bent—the neoconservatives likely pounced on the momentum of the war in Afghanistan in order to convince him to finish what his father didn’t. Saddled with an expensive promise to rebuild Afghanistan—which did have a palpable connection to 9/11—Bush nevertheless added the responsibility of Iraq. The seemingly pragmatic arguments of his neoconservative advisers appear to have been the primary influence behind Bush’s decision to preemptively invade Iraq. But invoking the biblical duty to combat evil just might have been the clincher.

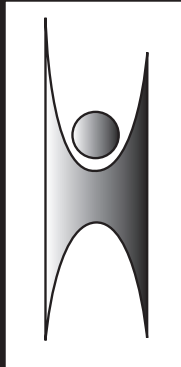
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