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THE WAR IN IRAQ

Hail America

The battle is not chiefly about disarming Saddam Hussein, but rather a massively ambitious bid to reshape the world

By Anders Stephanson

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Because he thinks he can change the world, George W. Bush has chosen to go to war against Iraq. What began in the wake of Sept. 11, 2001, as a diffuse "war on terrorism" now has escalated into a massively ambitious campaign to reshape the strategic landscape of the world in the forthright interest of the United States. The president has embarked on the greatest shift in U.S. foreign policy since Harry S Truman announced the Cold War in March 1947.

Gone are the attempts of the 1990s to lead the world by dint of economic ordering, by culture and diplomacy. The Bush administration thinks this is a unique chance to show the world that no threat or even competition is exempt from the forceful exposure to unadulterated U.S. power. If power always combines force and persuasion, the Bush gamble relies starkly on the former.

The current war is not chiefly about "disarming" Iraq. It is even less about preventing terrorism, the threat of which is in fact more likely to increase. The war is about "regime change," not only in Iraq but in the entire region. It is also, more important, about making sure that others understand in no uncertain terms the full force of the U.S. claim to global rights of intervention. The self-professed idea of pre-emption is nothing but the reproduction on a much vaster canvas of the old U.S. right to police Latin America, a right claimed (in the Monroe Doctrine, let us recall) in the name of democracy and liberty for everyone.

Such pieties apart, the Bush gamble is framed in the language of messianic Protestantism: The United States is chosen, in fact obliged, by higher authority (certainly higher than the United Nations) to redeem anywhere and everywhere. As the president declared in January, "We are called to defend the safety of our people and the hopes of all mankind." In carrying out this obligation he would take "whatever action is required, whenever action is necessary." His source of authorization is quite clear, for the freedom at stake "is God's gift to humanity." America, Bush has said, has "been called to a unique role in human events."

Such a calling assumes an absolute distinction and difference between the United States and the rest of the world. This conviction explains why the administration has so consistently refused any international treaties that could possibly restrict the absolute U.S. right to sovereign control.

The administration, as Americans have tended to do throughout their history, sees the United States as a crystallization of the world as it ought to be. The real, outside world is inherently inferior, a space to be acted upon. Other places, no matter how close and similar to the United States, can never become equal. Like ancient Rome, the United States is thus a world empire.

The degraded outside world, consequently, can have no right to judge the United States. It makes perfect sense that the United States should have the universal right to act when the world is in need of discipline and punishment.

All of which, not surprisingly, is a source of considerable worry for those potentially on the receiving end. And there is reason to worry. For one thing, there is now an enormous disparity in military power between the United States and the rest of the world. The United States is more important to the outside world than the outside world is to the United States, or so it seems. Like Desert Storm in 1991, this war against Iraq will be watched as a spectator sport. At home, Americans will experience few fundamental changes in their ordinary lives. Terrorism notwithstanding, war for the United States is something that happens elsewhere.

Why then call this a gamble? I am not thinking of the fact that war always involves unpredictable friction, but rather of the chances that George W. Bush's Monroe Doctrine for the world might work in the manner the president intends.

Only if the war is a blindingly spectacular success - meaning few U.S. casualties; the rapid collapse of the Iraqi regime without extensive destruction and civilian suffering; the discovery of a large presence of weapons of mass destruction; the installation of a decent government that keeps the country together without unending, massive occupation; the continued stability and even liberalization of the hitherto "friendly" Islamic oil states, and a forceful attempt to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian issue - would Bush (and British Prime Minister Tony Blair) emerge strengthened and capable of moving on, perhaps, to the next target. The quarrelsome French and Germans would then slowly fall back in line; the Russians and the Chinese would find economic reasons to do likewise.

But the odds for that kind of resounding success are not that great. What would happen then? Let us leave the scenario of disaster aside. A merely middling victory would maintain U.S. interests in the region for the foreseeable future, though the long-term effects are hard to discern. The damage to the larger international order, however, would be serious.

The administration's messianic unilateralism already has generated a strong counterreaction in the diplomatic game that has been conducted over the Iraqi question since last fall. Secretary of State Colin Powell, probably, managed to convince the administration to acknowledge, if only tactically, the legitimating force of the UN. This posture has now been discarded completely. The international goodwill that persisted through the Afghan campaign has evaporated along with it. The administration claims, to be sure, legal authority for the war in UN resolutions; but it is now Iraq, oddly, that could bring the attack to the Security Council as a war of aggression.

More important, anything short of full success would give a great boost to the ingenious attempt (mainly French) to make the UN the strategic counterweight to the new U.S. world order. That design has strong underpinnings. The UN is unwieldy and often ineffective. It encapsulates, however, the idea of law and legitimacy. In the 1990s, when geopolitical conflict waned, there was an enormous expansion of law or law-like procedure on an international scale. The United States has always advocated this in principle. But in reality, the United States accepts no potential infringements by the lesser lights of this world and goes along only if the outcome is favorable.

France, Germany and perhaps Russia, in focusing on the UN, would be in a position to form a wide political coalition against U.S. supremacy. The United States, by contrast, would have to rely on bribes, cajolery and threats. As shown by the extravagant attempted payoff to the Turks recently in exchange for U.S. troop bases, this is not an economical way of doing things.

Beyond this, messianic unilateralism, even with a band of assorted auxiliaries eager to curry favor, would undermine the struggle against terrorism. The French have been highly effective in terms of intelligence gathering and prevention, the two capabilities one needs above all others to be successful against terrorists. Here the United States needs as much cooperation across borders as it possibly can get - not less.

George W. Bush is apparently convinced that there will be no security for the United States until evil

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everywhere has been rooted out and that he has the right to act accordingly wherever and whenever he thinks fit. The war against Iraq shows that he is serious about his unlimited form of imperial rule. He may well succeed in Iraq. But much of the world is now more worried about what Bush might do than about Saddam Hussein's whereabouts. At no time since the end of the Vietnam war has the world been more politically at loggerheads with the United States. That is not a recipe for security.

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