

Iran has moved to the forefront of U.S. policy attention and will remain there through the end of the Bush administration.

President Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice have adopted a recommendation from former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger that in effect abandons the “freedom agenda” for Iraq and the Arab Middle East in favor of focusing on Iran as a strategic menace to the entire region. In practical terms, this means that the U.S. will ultimately, during Bush’s remaining months as president, seek to resolve the Iranian nuclear challenge using whatever means are necessary. Kissinger has warned Bush that bringing democratic institutions to Arabs is a work of generations and cannot be accomplished in the near future. Better to deal with Iran as a strategic threat to the Middle East and especially Arab dictatorships such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt that are essential U.S. allies in the region.

Vice President Cheney has successfully argued for retaliatory measures against Iran when an Iranian “smoking gun” can be identified, and the White House has authorized more aggressive steps to capture Iranians who are found inside Iraq, including so-called religious tourists visiting Shi’ite shrines who might be plausibly linked to Tehran. A major incident would permit the initiation of a series of attacks against Iranian military facilities that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has warned would quickly escalate as the Iranians retaliate. As Rice has already capitulated, Gates is the only remaining holdout against the new Iran policy.



No one at the CIA will be punished for 9/11. The Aug. 21 release of a 19-page declassified summary report from the office of the CIA inspector general looking into the failure to counter the threat posed by al-Qaeda from 1998 to 2001 places the blame firmly on the Agency’s leadership. The former director of central intelligence, George Tenet, has frequently claimed that he “declared war” on al-Qaeda after the African embassy bombings of 1998, but Agency insiders have long noted that he failed to back up that declaration by committing any new resources or creating career incentives that would have drawn the best officers into the al-Qaeda task force. The task force eventually consisted of only 19 officers, most of whom were junior-level and lacking the necessary languages. There was a general failure of leadership at the CIA among Deputy Director John McLaughlin, Director of Operations James Pavitt, and Chief of the Counter Terrorism Center Cofer Black.

All of the underperforming former leaders are doing quite well. Tenet recently completed a tour touting his book *At the Center of the Storm*, for which he received a \$4-million advance; McLaughlin is the resident talking head national-security expert on CNN and sits on several defense-contractor boards; Pavitt is a principal with Brent Scowcroft’s consulting firm; and Black now has his own security-services company that has a number of exclusive contracts with the CIA and the Department of Defense. The report recommended disciplinary action against the CIA leadership for its failure to perform adequately, but this advice was rejected by the two CIA directors who succeeded Tenet, Porter Goss and Michael Hayden.

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Moreover, the rapid achievement of battlefield equilibrium made it less likely that either the regional protectors of the Sunnis (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan) or of the Shi’ites (Iran) would become directly involved in internal Iraqi conflict. If anything, the American withdrawal produced incentives for the Saudis, Iranians, and the Turks to convene a Persian Gulf Security Forum (PGSF) to help co-ordinate their response to the situation in Iraq.

The only outside military intervention occurred in June 2008, when the Kurdish military took over Mosul and declared independence, and Turkish troops, after receiving a green light from the PGSF, occupied the Kurdish region. The Turks agreed to withdraw only after the Kurds, during negotiations under American auspices, reversed their decision to declare independence and promised to guarantee the rights of the Turkmen community in exchange for greater political autonomy in a future Iraqi confederation. At the same time, the Sunnis’ decision to accept limited political autonomy and not to form their own republic reflected their recognition that they lacked control of any sources of oil revenue.

Progress will be slow, but extending the American occupation would have only drawn out the civil war and prevented Iran from co-operating with Saudi Arabia and Turkey to bring stability. The agreement reached in Bern helped to formalize the equilibrium among Iraq’s communities and accelerate the evolution of Iraq into three separate, self-governing regions.

Asked to comment on these developments, former Vice President Dick Cheney told CNN’s Wolf Blitzer: “I don’t like to brag, but I predicted five years ago that the insurgency in Iraq was in the last throes.” ■

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Open Fire

The U.S. needlessly inflamed Iraq in the vain hope of sparking a democratic revolution. We got an inferno instead.

By Paul W. Schroeder

I WRITE AS AN HISTORIAN, offering no special expertise on current American politics or the military and political situation in Iraq and promising no new facts or ideas. Trying to say something original about the Iraq imbroglio is like trying to invent new letters for the alphabet—impossible and pointless. I propose instead to present familiar facts in another way, believing that sometimes ideas, individually well known and in the mainstream, in different combinations suggest an unexpected conclusion.

I also assume that history counts, that the prevalent American historical perspectives on this war are inadequate and misleading, and that a sounder sense of history can not only free us from the tyranny of misleading historical analogies but also suggest different and better ones. While the past does not predict the future, and no historian should pretend to be a prophet, one indispensable way to look into the future is to walk carefully back into the past.

That means starting with recent history, inquiring how six years of global war on terror and five years of regular and counterinsurgency war in Iraq leave the U.S. now facing two apparently unquenchable fires of insurgency, terrorism, and civil war—fires that threaten the entire Middle East and adjacent areas, including Pakistan, as well as South Asia, Central Asia, Europe, and North Africa. While taking note of American intentions, aims, motives, and agendas—declared and undeclared—and the

debates over these, I will concentrate, as historians should, more on what the American government actually did in its supposed efforts to prevent and then fight these fires, what its actions objectively constituted within the international system, and what results they produced. In history, especially in international affairs, results count more than intentions, and the most important results are very often the ironic, unintended ones.

PREVENTING THE FIRE

Two major facts must be recognized at the outset: the fire in Iraq (though not Afghanistan) could have been prevented, and the American government deliberately decided against doing so. These are not controversial assertions but undeniable facts. Other questions about preventing fires at this time remain debatable—whether the attacks of 9/11 might have been averted or blunted by better intelligence and quicker action, whether the Clinton administration could have weakened al-Qaeda earlier, whether a more determined campaign in Afghanistan could have destroyed al-Qaeda and prevented further terrorism. But this much is certain: first, the Bush administration, supported by most of the Congress and the American people, decided to treat an alleged potential threat of explosion emanating from Iraq as more imminent and dangerous than the actual fire burning in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and else-

where; and second, it chose against resistance at home and widespread opposition from the international community not to use existing, standard methods of fire prevention.

Much of this—the priority the U.S. gave Iraq over Afghanistan and al-Qaeda and the choice of preventive war—is universally acknowledged. Astonishingly, however, the equally important and undeniable fact that its policy in 2002-03 deliberately rejected international methods for fire prevention in Iraq has still not been squarely faced, much less accepted. This gets ignored or swept aside by disputes over other questions, arguably interesting and important but not central—Saddam Hussein's nature and intentions, Iraq's capabilities, the existence or not of WMD, the motives and aims of America's leaders, the quality and use of American intelligence, the genuine or deceptive character of arguments for military action, and so on.

This shell game, whether it represents a deliberate tactic or not, has led Americans to misunderstand the struggle at the UN that culminated in America's failure to gain a Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq and its decision to proceed without one. The American public has been led to believe that the sole, decisive issue was whether Iraq possessed WMD or active programs to develop them. If so, military action would have automatically been justified and needed. This remains the