

Dreams of Empire, Eulogies for International Law

By John Gershman | March 25, 2003

With the war in Iraq just under a week old, the jockeying for what comes next has already begun, with implications that will shape the outlines of imperial governance in the post-9/11, post-invasion world. Two related but nevertheless distinct debates—one regarding the occupation and reconstruction of Iraq and the other over whether Iraq is just the first step in a broader and more sustained effort to transform the region—will define a new relationship between the U.S., international organizations like the United Nations, and both formal and informal alliances such as NATO and the “coalition of the willing” that has been cobbled together to support this particular military operation. While 9-11 is often portrayed as if it changed everything, the invasion of Iraq and the fallout could mark a significant turning point in the architecture of U.S. hegemony.

Reconstruction

The debate over reconstruction in Iraq has already begun, even as the bombs continue to fall. Both the ends and the means of reconstruction are up for grabs. In terms of means, the major issue is when and in what capacity will the United Nations be asked to play a role? The main plan at the moment appears to be one of U.S. unilateral control, with a civilian administration headed by retired General Jay Garner under the direct command of the military serving as an occupational government. The civilian administration will be staffed primarily with former U.S. diplomats, and is aimed at ruling for as long as it takes for an interim Iraqi government to be formed—at this point, at least a few months. U.S. companies are already competing for contracts worth roughly \$1 billion to rebuild infrastructure and operate health and education services.

Under the plan, the role for the UN in the immediate aftermath of the conflict will be limited to humanitarian relief. Its role in reconstruction efforts remains unclear, as any major UN role would require authorization by the Security Council. Aid groups are concerned that their humanitarian relief and reconstruction efforts will be branded as part of U.S. military operations.

This plan has sparked concern among members of the administration’s “coalition of the willing” as well as opponents of the war. The joint statement released at the conclusion of the war council meeting in the Azores on the weekend prior to the launch of the war described a central role for the UN in reconstruction efforts. But the current U.S. plans would seem to suggest those were just words. The political battle is currently being waged in the negotiations over a UN Security Council Resolution that would provide the political sanction for post-war operations in Iraq. Last week Britain’s Minister for International Development Clare Short left the U.S. empty-handed, after failing to get agreement on a resolution that would place the UN in charge of reconstruction. British Prime Minister Tony Blair is scheduled to arrive in the next day or two to discuss both the progress of the war as well as the role of the UN in reconstruction.

The debate stretches to control over the funds to be used for reconstruction. The UK has also clashed with the Bush administration over the control of Iraqi assets, which have been frozen since the first Gulf war began 12 years ago. The Bush administration has asked countries who have frozen assets to pool them into a U.S.-controlled fund. The Bush administration has already ordered 17 banks in the



U.S. to hand over \$1.7 billion in frozen Iraqi government money. But Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, has so far refused to turn £200 million Iraqi assets frozen in Britain to an American-controlled account, instead wanting them to go to the UN. White House officials have threatened to prevent foreign banks from doing business in the U.S. if they refused to turn over Iraqi government money and what they called "blood money" belonging to President Saddam Hussein or his associates.

The U.S. plan for reconstruction, with the UN in a subordinate, if not subcontracting role, is the most immediate example of a new world order where the UN has a well-defined, explicitly subordinate position in the architecture of U.S. global hegemony. It suggests an end to rhetorical, if not actual, commitments to collective security based on international law and multilateralism embodied in the UN charter.

Such a vision was outlined in a recent op-ed by Richard Perle, the head of Defense Policy Board and a key intellectual architect of the Bush administration's policy in the Middle East, and is worth quoting at length:

He [Saddam Hussein] will go quickly, but not alone: in a parting irony, he will take the UN down with him. Well, not the whole UN. The "good works" part will survive, the low-risk peace-keeping bureaucracies will remain, the chatterbox on the Hudson will continue to bleat. What will die is the fantasy of the UN as the foundation of a new world order. As we sift the debris, it will be important to preserve, the better to understand, the intellectual wreckage of the liberal conceit of safety through international law administered by international institutions.

Perle's eulogy for the vision of collective security the UN offered is an important illustration of the vision of the future it outlines, a vision that is truly staggering in its ambition, and in its casual rejection of the framework of international law. Perle's alternative is a shifting away from international institutions to one of shifting ad hoc coalitions. As he writes,

The chronic failure of the security council to enforce its own resolutions is unmistakable: it is simply not up to the task. We are left with coalitions of the willing. Far from disparaging them as a threat to a new world order, we should recognize that they are, by default, the best hope for that order, and the true alternative to the anarchy of the abject failure of the UN.

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(In an interesting twist showing the editorial differences of headline writers, the same piece was headlined "Coalitions of the Willing Are Our Best Hope" in Canada's *National Post* while the *Guardian* headlined it as "Thank God for the death of the UN.")

First Baghdad, Then ...

While rejecting the UN Security Council Perle also identifies countries hosting or sponsoring terrorism and possessing weapons of mass destruction as the major threat to international security (without actually naming names). What then is the next step in the Bush administration's security agenda?

One clue is embodied in the statement from a senior British official to *Newsweek* last August: "Everyone wants to go to Baghdad. Real men want to go to Tehran." According to the Israeli paper *Ha'aretz*, in February 2003, Undersecretary of State John Bolton told Israeli officials that after defeating Iraq the United States would "deal with" Iran, Syria, and North Korea.

With North Korean policy in a seeming holding pattern while the war in Iraq continues to unfold, the next steps in the Middle East are already being tabled. Michael Ledeen, another key intellectual in the pantheon of neoconservatives shaping the Bush administration policy, described one such agenda. In a panel at the American Enterprise Institute on March 21st and in the *New York Sun* Ledeen argues for the need to look beyond Iraq and go after other regimes in the region, particularly Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia:

Iraq is not the war. ... the war is a regional war, and we cannot be successful in Iraq if we only do Iraq alone.

Writing in the *New York Sun* on March 19, there is no mistaking the messianic vision of manifest destiny that Ledeen believes the war in Iraq will provide:

Once upon a time, it might have been possible to deal with Iraq alone, without having to face the murderous forces of the other terror masters in Tehran, Damascus, and Riyadh, but that time has passed. ...

The Iranian, Syrian, and Saudi tyrants know that if we win a quick victory in Iraq and then establish a free government in Baghdad, their doom is sealed. It would then be only a matter of time before their peoples would demand the same liberation we brought to Afghanistan and Iraq. Thus, they must do everything in their power to tie us down in Iraq, bleed us on the ground, frustrate our designs, and eventually break our will. ...

It would be a terrible humiliation for America and Britain to fall prey to needless bloodshed because we blinded ourselves to the larger war in which we are now engaged. Iraq is a battle, not a war. We have to win the war, and the only way to do that is to bring down the terror masters, and spread freedom throughout the region.

Rarely has it been possible to see one of history's potential turning points so clearly and so dramatically as it is today. Rarely has a country been given such a glorious opportunity as we have in our hands. But history is full of missed opportunities and embarrassing defeats.

We'll know soon which destiny we will achieve.

The first Persian Gulf War marked the transition to the new post-cold war world. The Second Gulf war will mark the end of the post-cold war world. The history of what comes next remains to be written. But it is clear that the advocates for Empire, for a Pax Americana, are well prepared.

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FOR MORE SEE:

The Road to War . . . and Beyond, AEI Briefing (March 21)

<http://www.aei.org/events/eventID.267/transcript.asp>

Richard Perle, "Coalitions of the Willing Are Our Best Hope" *National Post*

http://www.aei.org/news/newsID.16666/news_detail.asp

Michael Ledeen, "One battle in a Longer, Wider war," *New York Sun*

http://www.aei.org/news/newsID.16618/news_detail.asp

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