



War of Necessity, War of Choice

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If you remember one thing of what I'm going to talk about, remember this: There's little about history that is inevitable. Instead, history is the product more than anything else of people – of men and women and ideas. If we had been having this lunch twenty years ago when the Berlin Wall came down – and this year turns out to be the 20th anniversary of the end of the Cold War – I would hazard to guess that none of us would have predicted or projected that the United States would end up fighting two wars with Iraq and in both cases the presidents would be named George Bush. Or that Iraq would be headed up by Saddam Hussein, and that these two wars would prove to be defining moments in the history of this era. It was just beyond essentially anyone's imagination.

But my point is, it didn't have to be. History is not inevitable. What I've tried to do in this book is capture the impact of people and ideas. On history I'm lucky and, unfortunately, I was one of a handful of people, along with Colin Powell, Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, and Bob Gates who was involved in a relatively senior position in both wars. I was at the White House for the first. I was the senior person on the National Security Council staff with responsibility for this part of the world. I was the one, along with Brent Scowcroft, who was with President Bush [41] when he was told that Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait.

Indeed, the President was getting a massage at the time. He was in the White House sick bay. He was sore from hitting a bucket of golf balls and I was over there after having spent all day at the State Department talking about what, if anything, we might be able to do. I came back and Brent and I were talking with the President about whether it was too late or not to get on the phone to Saddam Hussein in one last bid to try to persuade him that he ought not to invade Kuwait. While we were debating the intricacies given the time difference – it was early Washington time which made it early in the morning Iraq time – about how we might accomplish this task. This is not a country where you can talk to anybody else. Saddam had many patterns of behavior but

delegation was not high among them. The phone rang. It was our ambassador from Kuwait on the phone saying that shots were being heard in the streets of Kuwait.

So, I was there then and in the second war I was at the State Department where I ran the policy planning staff under Colin Powell. The first war was a war of necessity. By that I mean there were vital national interests at stake. When Saddam invaded Kuwait in the summer of 1990 we thought it was vital because, from the energy side, Iraq already [held] 10% of the world's oil. Kuwait was another 10%, and that would give Saddam 20%. If this had been allowed to stand we figured that Saudi Arabia and everybody else would be independent in name only. If Saddam Hussein controlled the world's energy supply it would give him great sway. This is the beginning of the post-Cold War period and if a country could be allowed to get away with attacking and absorbing another country we were worried what kind of patterns this would set in motion in international relations.

So, it was a war of necessity. We tried other options than using force. If you recall, we tried sanctions. We tried the phone scene, and nothing worked. We reached the point where the President was persuaded that unless we moved to save Kuwait there would be no Kuwait and no Kuwaitis left to save. As a result, I think it's fair to call that war a war of necessity. But not everybody agreed with that from the beginning. It's interesting that the first National Security Council meeting of the crisis was one of the less well-organized meetings I'd attended. It teaches you that often at the beginning of a crisis it takes people a little bit of time to get their footing; to understand the enormity and the true nature of events.

I remember after the meeting talking with the President and Brent Scowcroft. None of us were particularly happy. The President felt very strongly, as he said several days later, that this cannot stand. So, it was agreed that at the second NSC meeting, which happened just over a day later, we would try to set things on the rail. But his instinct was that he should say something at the beginning of the meeting. I remember Brent telling him, "You don't want to do that." But once the President says very strongly what he believes it's the rare adviser who will second guess him.

So, instead, what Brent asked is that I write a memo for him and the President laying out the arguments, which I did. The President had a flight out to Aspen, Colorado and came back. At the beginning of the second meeting it was interesting because Scowcroft, Cheney and Larry

Eagleburger, who was the deputy secretary at the time, laid out the arguments of essentially why this had to be resisted by whatever means would ultimately prove adequate. From then on – this was in early August 1990 – it was clear to me that, one way or another, what Saddam Hussein had done was going to be reversed. When George Bush showed up at the White House lawn three days later, he said, “This will not stand.” It was already clear to me that it was only a question of time. I was skeptical that anything short of military force wouldn’t work.

Let me say that it’s not clear to me that anyone else occupying the Oval Office would have come out at the same place. If you think about it, sending 500,000 Americans halfway around the world to defend a country that many people hadn’t heard of was not axiomatic. I truly believe that other Presidents might have come to other decisions, and I believe this was the right decision.

If you recall, Desert Shield was the process by which the United States sent half a million troops to Iraq. At the same time, we organized this massive international coalition with more than a dozen UN resolutions that were passed. We tried to get the Iraqis out of Kuwait with diplomacy and sanctions. That failed, and then in mid-January we transitioned from Desert Shield to Desert Storm, followed by six or seven weeks of bombing and four days of a ground campaign. The Iraqis were routed militarily and a lot of people were saying, “Keep going. Now that you’ve done all that work go on to Baghdad.”

I remember being called into the Oval Office and Bob Gates, who was then Brent Scowcroft’s deputy, got on the phone and said, “Come down to the Oval.” I said, “I can’t. I’m busy working on the speech that the president is going to give whenever he decides to stop the war.” Bob was fairly insistent that I get down there. He said, “You don’t understand. Things are moving fast. Get down here.”

I hustled down to the Oval Office and there was a conversation about when and how to stop the war and this conversation had been going on for some days. Again, there had been a lot of pressure particularly from the outside – interestingly enough from a lot of people who opposed the war in the first place. They said, “Now that things are going so well, why don’t we keep going?” I remember arguing to the President in a memo at the time the experience of the United States in Korea half a century before. Some of you are old enough to remember it, but the North Koreans came across the 38th parallel in June 1950 and the United States and South Koreans were

nearly pushed off the peninsula. McArthur had this very daring, innovative and bold landing at the Port of Inchon. The U.S., South Korea and the international coalition regained the initiative, pushed up north and reached the 38th parallel. Rather than stopping, McArthur and Truman said, “Things are going so well, we’re going to go on and try to liberate the entire country.” So, they went up towards China to the Yellow River. The Chinese weren’t going to have any part of it, and hundreds and thousands of what the Chinese called “volunteers” came across the border. Three years and 30,000 American lives later things were back to a stalemate along the 38th parallel. My argument fifty years later is we don’t want to make the same mistake.

Let’s contrast here to the second Iraqi war, which I call “the war of choice.” The word “choice” is not bad. Let me be as clear about that as I can. The “war of choice” is simply a war in which the interests at stake are not vital and where there are other policy options. In the case of this Iraq war Saddam Hussein hadn’t done anything particularly new. He was not involved in 9/11 and I never saw a scrap of intelligence that made the case that he was involved in 9/11. We did think he had biological and chemical weapons but there was nothing new that I or anybody else was aware of that he was about to break out and do anything with them.

As we now know, he didn’t even have them, but at the time we thought he had them. But still, there wasn’t new evidence that he was about to use them. So why did we make this war choice? It is not because of oil. It was not of some great American bid to take over the world’s oil, though the oil obviously makes this part of the world important. It was not because the Israelis wanted us to, as some books are suggesting. I remember a senior official of the Israeli government at the time coming to see me in Washington because he knew I was skeptical of the war saying, “Why are you guys doing this? You’re taking your eyes off the real problem which is Iran, not Iraq. You guys are going to get distracted.” So, I said, “Why don’t you make that point? They didn’t want to alienate friends of theirs in the U.S. government.

So, why did this war happen? My view is because after 9/11 the President and many of his senior advisers wanted to send a message to the world. To use a phrase of Richard Nixon’s a couple of decades earlier, the United States was not a pitiful helpless giant; the United States was not simply a victim of history. Rather, the United States could still shape history, and liberating Afghanistan from the Taliban who made 9/11 possible wasn’t enough. He wanted to do more than that. They wanted to liberate Iraq. They thought that by liberating Iraq they would not only send a

powerful message to the world that the U.S. could shape history but also that they could then set in motion a chain of events that would lead to the entire Middle East becoming democratic. They wanted to do something very big and bold and thought that they had an opportunity.

What was interesting to me is that they reached this conclusion without serious analysis. There never once was a National Security Council meeting at which this issue was debated from A to Z. The idea that Mr. Bush warrants what became, I believe, the defining action of his presidency without a formal meeting was quite extraordinary. You would never do this in a business – make a decision of significant consequence. Yet this was done without a formal serious situation.

I found out in the summer of 2002, about nine months before, when I was meeting with Condoleeza Rice. I was pushing back against what I sensed was the momentum for war, and she said, “You can save your breathe, Richard. The President’s already made up his mind.” I rushed back to the State Department and told my boss about it. He thought I was exaggerating, but about two days later he said, “You were right.”

When Colin Powell finally had dinner about a month later to talk to the President about this, the issue was not *whether* to go to war but *how* to go to war. Powell said, “If you are going to go to war, you should know it’s not only going to be expensive in a direct sense but it’s going to take,” the phrase he came up with, “the oxygen out of the room of American foreign policy.”

Basically, what he said is, “if you are going to do it, use the Congress, use the international system and essentially do it the same way your father did years before.” As you know, it didn’t particularly happen that way. I myself was against the war; I thought it was not simply a war of choice, but a poor choice; that it was going to prove extraordinarily difficult and expensive and, as a result, distracting and draining at a time in history when I thought the United States had an extraordinary opportunity to shape the world.

I didn’t resign for two reasons. One is that my opposition to the war was muted. I thought the Iraqis did have chemical and biological weapons. Never once in all my years in government had someone suggested to me otherwise. I also thought that I could accomplish some good still within the government in terms of shaping how we went about it. Afterwards, when I learned that the Iraqis didn’t have weapons of mass destruction, I would have resigned. But I don’t believe in

resigning over close calls if you're against something. No organization, including the government, could survive if every time you lost a close decision people walk out. I believe you have a responsibility to stay and try to shape the rest of the policy as best you can. Unfortunately, in my case I couldn't shape much of the rest of the policy either, which is why I ultimately ended up at the Council of Foreign Relations rather than remain in the government.

There are lots of lessons in all of this and I'll mention a few. One is that process matters. It's very hard to get good results from bad policy processes. Formal meetings and the rest where ideas are carefully vetted matter. The difference between the two administrations could not be greater. I say this as an aside. The best example of decision-making in the second Bush administration and Bush 43 came over debate a couple of years ago over the so-called "surge." When things were going bad in Iraq and things were unraveling, the decision about whether to add more troops and change the strategy was taken after very careful examination of all alternatives. While I was out of government at the time, I regret that the initial decision was not taken with anything like a systematic review of the options.

The second thing is how policy design is often no better than policy implementation and execution. So if you are going to go to war you really need to think hard about how many troops you have and how you use them. If the second Iraq war was a terrible decision, the lack of planning for the aftermath was scandalous. I think things could have turned out much better than they did – but they didn't. Assumptions matter. What's interesting is how often people are wrong, including the person speaking to you today. In the first war, we didn't think until the last minute that Saddam Hussein was actually going to invade Kuwait. We thought he was just bluffing – trying to get the Kuwaitis to reduce their production of oil so the price would go up.

It's what we call in the business a "false negative." We miss something. What's so interesting is that the second Iraq war was in part premised on a false positive: we thought Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. For those of you who are doctors you know at times that diagnoses can be heavily influenced by what it is you're looking for. What we've seen in both of these cases is how governments and intelligence communities badly misread situations in part because of the assumptions they had in their heads. Everything was interpreted through these assumptions. It obviously is the case for creating systems in which you guard against the tyranny of assumptions.

Another conclusion I drew from it is that local knowledge matters. By that I mean it's really a bad idea to go to war in a place you don't understand deeply and fully. It was one of the fundamental lessons of Vietnam. I don't know how many of you have read a book called *Fire on the Lake*. The argument was that the U.S. went to war with a country, Vietnam, and didn't understand the culture. I believe we did the same thing with Iraq – we went to war in Iraq and did not understand the various schisms and fault lines within the society and the real nature of Iraqi political culture; what Iraqi history had gone through; Iraqi society. People were talking about how American troops were going to be met by children throwing candies – well, they were half right. They were met by Iraqi children throwing things, but it wasn't candy. It began with rocks and ended up with grenades. We didn't understand the society we thought we were going to transform.

As I said, wars of choice are not per se bad. Right now we're in something of a war of choice in Afghanistan. Historically, wars of choice have been ill-advised, like Vietnam. But some of you may have thought what we did in the Balkans in the '90s was a good idea. Well, that was a war of choice. Some of you may regret the U.S. didn't do more in Rwanda or Darfur. Those would have been wars of choice. Wars of choice are not per se good or bad. But I believe, because they are discretionary, you have to make sure the likely benefits will outweigh the likely costs of using military force. You'd also better make sure that if you are going to use military force the likely benefits and costs of doing so look better than what would result using other policies. It's a higher standard than the wars of necessity simply because you do, in fact, have a choice.

Lastly, I think these two Iraqi wars are so interesting because they represent the totality of what you might call the most important and enduring debate about American foreign policy. Let me end with this thought: there have been, for more than a century, battles time and time again fought about American foreign policy: what is our purpose in the end? One school of thought says that the purpose of American foreign policy is to shape the foreign policies and behaviors of others. This is called the realist rule.

The second competing school of thought says the business or purpose of American foreign policy is to shape the internal nature of others – their societies, to turn them into democracies, etc. It was originally the idea of someone like Woodrow Wilson, and was very much picked up by George W. Bush. The reason, I believe, is for moral reasons but also practical reasons. They believe that governments that treat their own people well are more likely to treat their neighbors well. It's not

wrong but it just turns out that it's awfully hard to do – to transform other societies turns out to be the most difficult thing you can try.

Also, you often don't have the luxury of waiting for transformation to happen because in the meantime you may have to deal with other governments, be it either China or Russia or anyone else, with other pressing problems. You don't have the luxury of not dealing with China or Russia, say about climate change or Iran or whatever, until they become democracies, as many of them may never. What's so interesting about the Iraq wars is that Bush 41, George Herbert Walker Bush, represented the first war – the so-called “realist” school of limited goals for foreign policy. This goal was not so much to transform Iraq as to liberate Kuwait and set rules for international relations.

His son was an embodiment of the second school, a much more ambitious school of American foreign policy. This fault line is actually the basic fault line of what it is we are trying to do in the world. I believe there are a lot of lessons from this, and I would simply say that often the United States would be wiser to stick with a less ambitious approach to the world. If we do try to change everybody to be more like us – however admirable this may be as a goal – we potentially set ourselves up for failure and we ignore all the many things that we can and should be doing. Like all good case studies this is not simply a book about two Iraq wars; it's really about what I believe is the most fundamental thing that continues to shape American foreign policy and what this country does in the world.

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