

**Observations on U.S. Strategies in the Persian Gulf Region, 1941-2005:
From the Atlantic Charter, the Twin Pillars and Dual Containment,
to the “Axis of Evil” and Beyond**

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Neoconservative supporters of President Bush are supposedly fond of the notion that, while Baghdad is for “men,” “real men” go to Tehran.ⁱⁱ But are there larger implications of this notion beyond the swagger implied? What is the link between the war in Iraq and future US policy toward Iran? Is the war in Iraq perceived in neoconservative -- or “Vulcan” -- circles as a mere stepping stone to a confrontation with Iran?ⁱⁱⁱ Where do Iraq and Iran fit into the larger historical framework of US interests in the Persian Gulf?

The March 2003 invasion of Iraq was a turning point in the history of the United States in the Persian Gulf region. It was the second large-scale military intervention in the region by the United States in 12 years, and those two were the first massive outside interventions since the British and Soviet invasion and partition of Iran in 1941. The consequences of the US invasion and occupation will be felt in the Middle East and beyond for decades to come. On the one hand, the invasion of Iraq seemed a stark confirmation of a more militarist attitude in the United States in the wake of September 11. On the other hand, the very commitment of so many troops has rendered the United States, in Richard Nixon’s once famous lamentation about the slog of Vietnam, a helpless, pitiful, giant. As Fred Kaplan has mused in the *New York Times*, Iraq may teach the United States that it will “find that it can no longer afford a globe-spanning military. The war in Iraq has already stretched America's forces to the limit. In the 1970's and 1980's, when Pentagon strategists spoke of a two-front war, they envisioned having to fight simultaneously in, say, Germany and Korea. Today, they mean Mosul and Falluja.”^{iv} The US has now made significant and longterm commitments of national wealth and manpower to Iraq, but the implications and consequences of this commitment are not at all clear.

The results of the November 2004 elections seemingly reaffirmed the pursuit of the present policy in the Persian Gulf, with a strategy for occupation and longterm domination of Iraq that remains impervious to the vastly changed circumstances of the conflict. But many in the administration, despite their certitude and hubris, may nonetheless be compelled to react to the altered realities around them. Exchanging position papers about the toppling of regimes from Venezuela to North Korea may be a diverting pastime at the American Enterprise Institute and in the pages of the *Weekly Standard*, but actually doing the logistical planning, finding the resources and, most importantly, the manpower, to make such fantasies a reality is another matter altogether, as the ongoing war in Iraq is clearly demonstrating.

Nonetheless, with the departure of Colin Powell and, along with him, the last redoubt of (relative) foreign policy pragmatism in the administration, the second term will be a thoroughly Vulcan affair. Condoleezza Rice, while not belonging to any discernible ideological school, has merely survived by appeasing the neoconservatives. In fact, Rice has advanced to Foggy Bottom precisely because she is perceived as non-threatening to the Vulcan faction, particularly the nexus of power in the administration comprised of Vice President Cheney, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, and the civilian neoconservative advisers in positions of power around them.

Historical Context: From a Test Case of the Atlantic Charter to the Twin Pillars

When assessing United States history in the Persian Gulf region one might begin with President Roosevelt's growing interest in Iran during World War II. Iran had been invaded and partitioned into zones of influence by Britain and the Soviet Union in September 1941. This despite the August 1941 proclamation of the Atlantic Charter, proclaiming the rights of small nations. The British and Soviet occupations were much more brutal and consequential than previously understood. In the British zone, American diplomatic officials warned Washington that the British were deliberately starving the Iranian people into submission through the use of a planned and coordinated famine. The British withheld foodstuffs and arbitrarily arrested Iranian politicians and military officers whom they perceived as obstacles to the pursuit of British interests in Iran.^v

Iran's importance to the United States was underscored in early 1942 when President Roosevelt proclaimed: "I hereby find that the defense of the Government of Iran is vital to the defense of the United States."^{vi} Persuaded by the American Minister in Tehran, Louis Dreyfus, and special presidential envoy General Patrick Hurley, Roosevelt sought to make Iran a "test-case" for the principles of the Atlantic Charter. Despite the brutality of the Anglo-Soviet invasion, Iran would be showcased as an example for the treatment of small nations around the world. Iran would now face a third invasion in only a year, an invasion of US advisors, along with 30,000 U.S. troops.^{vii} "I was rather thrilled with the idea of using Iran as an example of what we could do by an unselfish American policy," Roosevelt wrote to his Secretary of State, Cordell Hull. "We could not take on a more difficult nation than Iran. I would like, however, to have a try at it."^{viii} During World War II Washington's perception of Iran changed profoundly. Herein lies the early origins of what would come to be known as the "twin pillars" approach to the Gulf region, also to include a close relationship with Saudi Arabia. But the United States was coming to see the Gulf as an "American lake" and such an approach was perhaps destined to clash with the aspirations and interests of the regional states themselves.

The Cold War made Iran even more important to American policymakers, and had a major impact in Iran. Not only did the first dispute between the US and the Soviet Union at the UN Security Council occur over Iran in 1946, but Iran became the focus of Eisenhower-era regime change in 1953.^{ix} Upheaval in Iraq, where a coup by nationalist officers in 1958 swept away Britain's best laid plans, reinforced Washington's focus on Iran during the late Eisenhower and Kennedy years. The British decision to abandon the Gulf in the late 1960s placed Iran in a crucial strategic position with regard to US interests in the Persian Gulf. The US expected Iran to fill the void left by the 1967 British decision to depart the Gulf region. Iran thus became a focal point of the next three US presidencies. Nixon saw Iran as a key component of his "Nixon Doctrine," even at one point begging the Shah to "protect" him. In Iran, President Jimmy Carter not only allowed major exceptions to his much-touted human rights policy, but he increasingly came to see the US relationship with the Shah as one of the most important from the perspective of American interests. Carter also left the legacy of the "Carter Doctrine" proclaiming that control over the Persian Gulf was vital to the interests of the United States. But the hostage crisis of 1979-80 essentially consumed Carter and his

presidency, and Ronald Reagan's administration also became obsessed with Iran, as the so-called Iran-Contra scandal of 1986-87 nearly destroyed his presidency as well.^x

Dual Containment: The "Twin Pillars" Concept Becomes a One-legged Stool

That the United States has resorted to force or covert actions so often in the Persian Gulf is a demonstration of the failure of its zigzagging and reactive policies there. Take Iran as an example. In the span of only sixty years, the United States has gone from seeing Iran as the centerpiece in Washington's effort to make the Atlantic Charter a reality, to inundating Iran with US advisors who sought to "reform" and "transform" Iranian society and remake Iran in the image of the United States. This was followed by Iran becoming a focal point of the Cold War during the crisis of 1946 over the removal of Soviet forces from northern Iran. Iran was then subjected to a US and British-engineered regime change in 1953 (the second British involvement in toppling an Iranian government in 12 years). Iran next became a focus of the reforming pressures of the Kennedy administration. It then became the centerpiece of the so-called "Nixon Doctrine" and the Nixon-Kissinger scheme for "regional policemen" to carry out US aims in the Middle East. Next came the "Carter Doctrine" (has any region of the world been subject to so many "doctrines" -- including now the so-called "Bush doctrine"?). In response to the revolution in Iran the US tilted toward Iraq, but Iraq's invasion of Kuwait left Washington with the notion of "Dual Containment" -- a stark demonstration of America's frustrations in the Persian Gulf. And now we have the notion of an "axis of evil."^{xi}

The US record in Iraq is not much brighter. In the rigidly-framed perspectives of US policymakers, Saddam Hussein went from being a "bad Arab" in the 1970s because of his Ba'thist origins and close relations with the USSR, to being a "good Arab" due to his attack on Iran in 1980 (at the height of the crisis in US-Iranian relations), and back again -- in the blink of an eye -- to being a "bad Arab" after his invasion of Kuwait. His invasions of Iran (1980) and Kuwait (1990) had remarkable similarities but provoked profoundly different responses from Washington. It is interesting to note that the US attitude toward Iraq in the 1980s was so strongly shaped by the changed circumstances of its relationship with Iran. The altered US-Iranian relationship led Washington to "tilt" toward Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which it did during the long Iran-Iraq war between 1980

to 1988. The winding down of the Cold War opened the possibility that Iraq might emerge in the Middle East as a client of the United States. This certainly appears to have been the policy approach of the latter years of the Reagan and Bush I administrations between the end of the Iran-Iraq War and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990.^{xii}

Iraq's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait ended Washington's hopes that the US might build Saddam Hussein up into a bulwark in support of US interests in the Persian Gulf. Yet matters with Iran were nowhere near improved or repaired. Now, the United States had antagonistic relationships with both states of the northern shore of the Persian Gulf. The "Twin Pillars" had become a one-legged stool consisting only of a wobbly-looking Saudi Arabia. Thus, the "Dual Containment" strategy. That the United States came to call this strategy "Dual Containment" was a demonstration of the essential failure of US policy in the Persian Gulf going back to 1941.

The Notion of an Axis of Evil: A Slogan in Search of a Policy

"Dual Containment" did not sit well with the restless Vulcans who populated the new US administration after the disputed 2000 elections. Their myriad links to the defense contractors and conservative think tanks, their notions of American military supremacy, and their contempt for international law and institutions of any sort would have caused a radical turn in US Middle East policy even without the opportunism following the events of September 11.^{xiii} Yet, the more one examines the slogan "axis of evil" the more it appears to have been the creation of a speechwriter (apparently David Frum) searching for rhetorical gimmicks to uplift an often less-than-articulate president.^{xiv} When assessing the slogan in the context of its impact on actual decision making, it seems to be a slogan in search of a policy. The use of the slogan "axis of evil" was driven by electoral calculations, seeking to reinvent the president while making him seem larger than life through the repetitious rebranding of him as a "war president." There was thus the desperate need to put flesh on the notion "axis of evil."^{xv} Slogans such as "axis of evil" have been used to mobilize the domestic population in the United States and to instill fear in the American people to embrace the notion that the American "homeland" is being protected by an interventionist and even preemptive foreign policy.

The national security doctrine of the Bush administration, announced to the world in September 2002, thus placed preemptive war at its center.^{xvi}

Nonetheless, while the proclamation of an “axis of evil” may have soothed some of the psychological needs of the neoconservatives, it will present less ideologically-driven policymakers with problems. While this kind of sloganeering may aid the administration in stirring fears among the US population, such rhetoric also creates a foreign policy straight jacket, limiting future options and closing off dialogue of any sort.^{xvii}

Neoconservative Dreams; Global Nightmares

The ascendancy of the neoconservatives is a phenomenon of the end of the Cold War, the disappearance of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of a United States seeking hegemony in an increasingly unipolar world. Many of them seem to believe that the United States now stands so omnipotent, that it can use its military power to achieve aims that once required coordination with softer options such as diplomacy and economic power. Yet the Vulcans are by no means a recent phenomenon in American life. There has been much recent scholarship about their origins and professional paths. Some of them are even former Democrats who became disillusioned during the party’s takeover by McGovernites in the latter years of the Vietnam War. Many of them hitched their ambitions to the neoconservative Democratic Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson of Washington. When Jackson flamed out in the 1976 Democratic Presidential Primaries against Jimmy Carter, many of them began moving into the orbit of Ronald Reagan, who was also running an ultimately failed bid to topple Gerald Ford that year.^{xviii}

Furthermore, Vulcans were often previously subordinated to more pragmatic superiors and colleagues in past administrations. While Wolfowitz, Perle, Libby, Feith et al. served in the Reagan and Bush I administrations, they had to contend with more pragmatic figures such as Schultz, Baker, Powell, Scowcroft, and the first President Bush himself. In the Bush I administration, Dick Cheney was often the odd man out. In Bush II, he reigns supreme, in part because an uncertain and uncurious president has allowed neoconservative notions a free run since 2001. Furthermore, the real powers of the administration, Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld are sincere nurturers of the Vulcan creed.

The Vulcans tend to be strong advocates of neocolonialism, but their emergence also signals the breakup of the older foreign policy consensus.^{xi} Officials such as John Bolton, David Wurmser, Michael Rubin, Michael Leeden, and their associates in the neoconservative foundations and publications are dedicated ideologues committed to utilizing American military power. They are driven to redeem America from past defeats, humiliations, and slights; some real, some imaginary. Some have argued that their views comprise a “Bush doctrine.” But their notions, taken together, cannot really be called a doctrine. A doctrine has to have a much closer relationship between the stated aims of the doctrine and the likelihood of their achievement. In other words, there has to be some relationship between conceptualization and application. The Vulcans are famous for their messianic aims (conceptualization), less so for actually doing the hard planning and logistics and, most importantly, obtaining the public support, that might give some of their notions a chance to succeed and have a lasting impact. One need look no further than Iraq for a stark demonstration of the disparity between Vulcan dreams and grim realities.^{xx}

There has already been much debate about the influence of Leo Strauss on the neoconservatives. But this seems more an effort to lend them a philosophical pedigree of some sort, some semblance of genuine intellectual antecedents.^{xxi} Rather than adhere to a genuine philosophical consistency, what really binds them are common misperceptions about what US military power can achieve. Thus, Dick Cheney, rather than Strauss, may be their more appropriate godfather. His 1992 “Defense Planning Guidance Draft” was the template for the more unilateral and aggressive approach to the world taken by this administration. The 1992 paper sought to make the case that the US should rely exclusively upon its military power and act unilaterally without cumbersome alliances.^{xxii} Nevertheless, neoconservatism doesn’t so much constitute a world view as a jumble of notions based upon very speculative notions of how the Vulcans themselves very much want the world to be.^{xxiii}

Conclusions and Speculations on the Consequences of the War in Iraq: Gulliver’s Dilemma

Developments in Iraq will continue to have consequences for broader US policy in the Persian Gulf region and beyond. The US occupation has faced far more

difficulties and challenges than the advocates of the war ever anticipated. It's not merely the ongoing resistance and anarchy that undermines American goals in Iraq. One major problem the United States has faced in Iraq is its inability to comprehend the centrality of the question of legitimacy. Those Iraqis who can demonstrate some semblance of public support the US has viewed with much suspicion. The US prefers to work with more pliant Iraqis. But the problem with the pliant Iraqis is that they do not attract much public support. In fact, the United States seems intent upon provoking a kind of "Saigon syndrome" in Iraq, establishing a regime that will prove to be dependent on the United States for years to come and thus create rationales for U.S. intervention in the region into the future.^{xxiv} The recent outcome of the elections in Iraq will also have huge consequences for United States policy in the Persian Gulf. One might speculate that, given their track record, many of the Vulcans might see the outcome of the elections as a rationale for further confrontation toward Iran.^{xxv}

The first Bush term was riven with conflicts between neoconservatives and more traditional pragmatists. While the Vulcans clearly possessed most of the advantages, these divisions helped to account for much of the confusion and erratic nature of many of Bush's initiatives, from the decision to go to the UN Security Council over Iraq in the Autumn of 2002; to the embrace of, and subsequent distancing from, UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi in April 2004; to statements -- such as "axis of evil" -- which were announced with great fanfare, and then never adequately explained.^{xxvi} Such divisions will be fewer in the second term. The neoconservatives will seek to define Bush's narrow victory as a vindication of their world view. But the fact remains that their notions about Iraq and the broader Middle East and Gulf region have been proven wrong. They may continue to fantasize about military conquests and reordering the map of the world to suit their notions of order and power, but the world remains a more complex place than such notions allow.

With the outcome in Iraq still very much in doubt, the Vulcans will be looking for their vindication in the second term. If they cannot obtain it in the complexities of Iraq, they may seek it elsewhere. But the very complexity of the ongoing crisis in Iraq will continue to confound rigid notions of world order and may serve as a brake on their ambitions. Although the certitude and hubris which has been such a persistent feature

of this administration will remain undiminished, global realities often have a way of thwarting the aims of even the most convinced ideologues.

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Research for this paper was supported by the Jordanian-American Fulbright Commission for Educational Exchange, and the Centre for International Studies at the London School of Economics. The views expressed are the author’s.

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The neoconservatives’ obsession with notions of American “manhood” and “manliness” are explored in Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

iii Laura Rozen, “Still Dreaming of Tehran: The Neocons Haven’t Given Up on ‘Regime Change’ in Iran. Don’t Count Them Out,” *The Nation*, April 12, 2004.

iv Fred Kaplan, "China Expands, Europe Rises, and the United States . . . ?" The New York Times, December 26, 2004.

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During the war, US diplomatic officials in Tehran grew increasingly alarmed at the prospect of famine in Iran, warning Washington that the British were "intransigent" about the possibility of famine and instead blamed the Iranians themselves. The British resisted criticism of their culpability. They instead blamed Iranian "hoarders." But both the British and Soviets had "borrowed" thousands of tons of Iranian wheat when they invaded. Dreyfus to Hull, July 17, 1942, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 142-143.

vi Roosevelt to Stettinius, March 10, 1942, FRUS, 289.

vii General Patrick Hurley to President Roosevelt, December 21, 1943, President's Secretary's File, Box 3, Great Britain, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

viii Roosevelt to Hull, January 12, 1944, FRUS, 420.

ix Mark Gasiorowski, "U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Iran During the Mussadiq Period," in The Middle East and the United States, David W. Lesch, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2003), 51-65.

x Gary Sick, "The United States in the Persian Gulf: From Twin Pillars to Dual Containment," in The Middle East and the United States, David W. Lesch, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2003), 291-307.

xi Jack Spencer, "Do Iraq, Iran, and North Korea Truly Constitute an Axis of Evil," USA Today Magazine, May 1, 2002.

xii Charles Tripp, A History of Iraq, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 239-240, 248-251; Amatzia Baran, "U.S. Input into Iraqi Decision Making," in The Middle East and the United States, David W. Lesch, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2003), 328-356.

xiii Robert Dreyfuss, "Just the Beginning: Is Iraq the Opening Salvo in a War to Remake the World?" The American Prospect, April 1, 2003.

xiv Neocon obsessions with Churchill are explained in James Mann, Rise of the Vulcans: A History of Bush's War Cabinet (London: Penguin, 2004), 27, 294, 300, 312-13, 321.

xv Anna Quindlan, "The Axis of Re-election: Evil Empire Redux: Nothing Like the Specter of Foreign Enemies to Mute Domestic Woes," Newsweek, March 4, 2002.

xvi A closer examination of where the administration thought preemption might be employed exposed a notion much closer to neoconservative hearts: this doctrine was not about preemptive war but presumptive war. To define an intervention as “preemptive” or even “preventive” implies that there must be some sort of impending threat. Without such a credible threat, as in the case of Iraq, the intervention is merely “presumptive.”

xvii Why was Iran included in the “axis of evil”? Melani McAlister has argued that Iran is often employed as a surrogate for Vietnam. McAlister argues that for a generation with no memory of Vietnam, Iran serves as a touchstone for American failure, and that Iran-bashing is an attempt to “redeem” the United States for past weakness and moral failings. See Melani McAlister, Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 225-226.

xviii James Mann, Rise of the Vulcans: A History of Bush’s War Cabinet (London: Penguin, 2004), 32. It is interesting that both Cheney and Rumsfeld were on the side of the Ford forces that year.

xix Karl E. Meyer, “Return to Empire,” The American Prospect, April 1, 2004.

xx Robert Dreyfuss, “Just the Beginning: Is Iraq the Opening Salvo in a War to Remake the World?” The American Prospect, April 1, 2003.

xxi “While it is true that Strauss was opposed to communism,” writes Mark Lilla, “spoke of virtue, and was concerned with educational excellence, there is not a word in his works about such topics as welfare, affirmative action, feminism, and the like. Not a word . . . Why, then, do so many of his disciples act as if the political implications of his thought point them in one partisan direction? Why is it that his European readers, who study his books but have no connection with the pedagogical tradition Strauss began in America, find no such partisan drift?” Mark Lilla, “The Closing of the Straussian Mind,” The New York Review of Books, November 4, 2004.

xxii Stanley Hoffman, “The High and the Mighty: Bush’s National Security Strategy and the New American Hubris,” The American Prospect, January 13, 2003; Bruce Cumings, “Bush Will Have Trouble in the Long Run Selling the Axis of Evil and Other Myths,” The Nation, March 4, 2002. The Vulcans appear to be united by common fantasies rooted in popular culture and historical myths -- of Sharon and Bush as the neocon neo-Churchills, for example -- and fantasies of themselves as players in a grand historical epic. Yet, paradoxically, they are also distinctive for their lack of military service of any sort. These contradictions may very well be masked by this noxious blend of hubris, nostalgic Anglophilia, and militaristic chauvinism. This may explain why

neoconservatism seems to share with other extremist or authoritarian mindsets a view of the world unclouded by doubt or reason.

xxiii Where they have proven most effective is in the exploitation of a unique confluence of factors: an uncertain president, a confused domestic opinion, and a passive press and political opposition. When there is drift, sometimes those with the strongest opinions prevail, no matter how absurd or unrealistic such opinions may be. See Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “The Making of a Mess,” The New York Review of Books, November 4, 2004. Ultimately, the Vulcans and groups like Al Queda need each other. In his review of the BBC film “Nightmares,” Jonathan Raban noted that “Chronicling the simultaneous rise of militant Islamism and American neoconservatism, Curtis represents the two movements as each other's doppelgängers, both powered by disgust with the moral degeneracy of the liberal West, each under the spell of a founding godfather. As Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), the Egyptian literary critic and author of the primer of modern jihad, *Milestones*, inspired the Islamists, so Leo Strauss (1899–1973) inspired the . . . idea of the noble fiction, or useful lie . . . it was the sinister Strauss, according to Curtis, who taught the neocons how to cynically manufacture myths to persuade the American people that they were on the side of goodness in the perpetual Manichaeian struggle against the all-enveloping forces of evil.”

xxiv Mark Mazzetti, “Two for One: The End of the Two-War Doctrine,” The New Republic, April 5, 2004.

xxv Andrew Killgore, “Neocons Battle Against U.S. Rapprochement with Iran,” Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, May 1, 2004; Laura Rozen, “Still Dreaming of Tehran: The Neocons Haven’t Given Up on ‘Regime Change’ in Iran. Don’t Count Them Out,” The Nation, April 12, 2004.

xxvi Robert Dreyfuss, “Just the Beginning: Is Iraq the Opening Salvo in a War to Remake the World?” The American Prospect, April 1, 2003.