

But directly involved we now were, and thus began a mind-boggling roller-coaster ride that has yet to end. I left the Pentagon in February 1988, as the squabbles in the Persian Gulf continued. By that summer, the USS *Vincennes*, from some accounts operating in violation of international law inside Iranian waters and perhaps attempting to draw the Iranian military into a fight, accidentally shot down a commercial Iranian Airbus, killing hundreds of Iranian civilians.

True to the seesaw traditions of the region, by the summer of 1990, Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait, announcing his intention to annex his former ally. The United States made yet another return to the region, this time readying to fight the same country that it had tilted toward three years earlier. I initially supported President George H.W. Bush's decision to send troops into the region in order to stand down the Iraqis, but I did so with different premises and a different logic from those who were pushing for an immediate war. This was the third time since 1961 that Iraq had moved on Kuwait. One of those moves had been defused diplomatically by the British, the other by the Soviet Union, a friend of both countries. With the right form of diplomacy it seemed predictable that, as with the other two ventures, a deal would be cut between the two countries and Iraq would soon withdraw.

Instead, the diplomatic rhetoric escalated on a daily basis. Kuwait was heavily invested in the British economy, making their government nervous about the instability the invasion had created. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher showed up in Washington, urging President Bush to be firm, as she had been during the Falklands Islands crisis eight years earlier. Bush, criticized for years as a nonassertive aristocrat, drew his now famous "line in the

There is considerable buzz in the intelligence community about the Senate Intelligence Committee "phase 2" report on Iraq released June 5. The mainstream media has focused on the Bush administration taking liberties with the truth to support the march to war. But insiders are more intrigued by whether the neocons were themselves duped, not only by the Iraqi National Congress's Ahmad Chalabi but also by a sometimes comical sting operation of the Iranian government. The oil industry and Israeli interests are often cited as being instrumental in the decision to invade Iraq. Often ignored is the fact that Iran also wanted to see a threatening Saddam Hussein overthrown and replaced by a friendly Shi'ite regime.

The Senate report stated that Pentagon officials obtained fabricated intelligence on Iraq and Iran from several Iranian exiles who could have "been used as agents of a foreign intelligence service ... to reach into and influence the highest levels of the US government." The names of the Iranians redacted from the report are apparently known to the committee's investigators. At least two of them were introduced to American Enterprise Institute scholar Michael Ledeen by Manucher Ghorbanifar, an exiled Iranian arms dealer whom the CIA in 1984 labeled a "fabricator." The revelation suggests that Iran may have manipulated Ledeen, Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith and his Office of Special Plans compatriots, and several like-minded officials in Vice President Dick Cheney's office by feeding them bogus intelligence on Iraq. One of the Iranians Ghorbanifar introduced to Ledeen and Pentagon Iran experts Harold Rhode and Larry Franklin in Rome in 2001 was described as a Revolutionary Guard defector, but both he and his colleague, an Iranian living in Morocco, were almost certainly double agents working for Iran. Ghorbanifar, who wanted the U.S. to invade Iraq, was probably a party to the deception.

Ghorbanifar and his "defectors" established their credibility by providing phony information on Iran as well as Iraq. They outlined on a napkin a proposal requiring \$5 million seed money to bring down the Iranian government by creating a huge vehicle jam around Tehran through "the simultaneous disruption of traffic at key intersections." Similar to Chalabi in the lead-up to Iraq, they also invented hit teams targeting U.S. troops in Afghanistan and described secret tunnel complexes criss-crossing Tehran. In subsequent meetings in 2003, the Iranians described how Saddam's WMD had been secretly moved to Iran. A gullible Ledeen, clearly convinced that the information he was being given was reliable, made sure that it wound up on the desk of his good friend Doug Feith.

The Ghorbanifar meetings were kept secret from CIA, DIA, and the State Department. U.S. ambassador in Rome, Mel Sembler, was allegedly briefed by Ledeen, though judging from the Senate report, he did not inform Washington. Sembler, a supermarket magnate and major Republican fundraiser, is a leading neoconservative who sits on the board of the American Enterprise Institute. He also headed the Scooter Libby Legal Defense Fund and founded Freedom's Watch.

---

*Philip Giraldi, a former CIA Officer, is a fellow at the American Conservative Defense Alliance.*

sand” against Saddam Hussein. His ratings immediately skyrocketed, and so did the rhetoric. Saddam Hussein became the new Hitler. A chorus of intellectuals, led by the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page, began calling for the invasion and occupation of Iraq and the creation of a MacArthur Regency in Baghdad. The war clouds gathered. Those who doubted its logic were accused in some circles of being unpatriotic, even cowards.

The drums beat ever louder, even though the administration was still talking publicly about a possible settlement—in similar fashion to the months leading up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. But this posturing was a relatively fresh technique in 1990. And in October of

**VIETNAM REARED ITS UGLY HEAD, THIS TIME AS A LAUGHING GHOST. MANY WHO HAD SUPPORTED THE VIETNAM WAR WERE LOOKING FOR A WAR TO WIN. MANY WHO HAD OPPOSED IT WERE LOOKING FOR A WAR TO SUPPORT.**

that year, four months before the Gulf War actually began, I learned from a source in the Pentagon that we were already building permanent bases in Saudi Arabia—bases that in the years following the Gulf War would be attacked by terrorists.

It finally became clear to me that the rhetoric balanced with the supposed willingness to negotiate an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait was little more than veneer, a way to spin up the public's emotions and prepare the nation for a war the administration had already decided to fight. And in addition to the permanent bases being built in Saudi Arabia, the pressure for taking out Saddam Hussein and occupying Iraq grew louder by the day. My belief that the United States should not be an occupying power in that part of the world had not changed. I began speaking out.

As Congress considered the ramifications of going to war, I testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee, warning of this danger and also warning that a large-scale war against Iraq brought with it the risk of a significantly empowered Iran.

But the nation was caught up in war fever. In many ways, Vietnam had reared its ugly head again, this time as a laughing ghost. Many who had supported the Vietnam War were looking for a war to win. Many who had opposed it were looking for a war to support.

Luckily for the United States, National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft's steady hand fashioned a United Nations resolution that limited our military objectives to driving the Iraqis out

of Kuwait, rather than unleashing a further ground offensive on Baghdad. But in a period of less than four years we had demonstrated how the most powerful nation in the world could consistently tie itself into pretzels when faced with the unending backroom dramas of the Middle East. We had assisted Kuwait, a friend of the Soviet Union and the main ally of Iraq in the ugly no-win Iraq-Iran War, thus tilting toward Iraq and provoking Iran. We had then watched Iraq invade Kuwait, causing us as a consequence to tilt away from Iraq even though we were not in any way seeking to balance our relations with Iran. And finally, we had fought Iraq on the battlefield of its former ally, Kuwait, in the process installing American bases on the ground in the most volatile section of the world.

When the final sheet was tallied, we had significantly empowered Iran, which itself had been strategically reaching out to Russia and especially to China. One might claim that perhaps we did have an agenda here, something of a counterstrategy to contain Iran's approaches to Russia and China. But at this point, just after the fall of the old Soviet Union, we did not have a strategic approach to either of these large countries. We were pumping billions of dollars into Russia to encourage the formation of a capitalist democracy. And we were failing to connect the strategic dots on China's aggressive courting of many Muslim countries, including Pakistan, which would gain a nuclear capability due to Chinese assistance.

The worst was yet to come. Wars do indeed have other unintended consequences. In America, the extremists who had called for continuing the war into Iraq and setting up a MacArthur Regency in Baghdad screamed betrayal when we ended our offensive at the Kuwaiti border. Instead of celebrating a low-cost victory that was already affecting the dangerous balance in the region, these voices began a decade-long push for a full invasion of Iraq. And in Saudi Arabia, a young Islamic fundamentalist from a wealthy family returned from having supported the Afghan rebels in their fight against the Soviet occupation and became enraged that American military bases were occupying the “sacred soil” of his homeland.

His name was Osama bin Laden. Thus was formed al-Qaeda. The rest, as they say, is history. ■

---

*James Webb is a U.S. senator from Virginia. This essay is taken from the book *A Time to Fight* by Jim Webb, Copyright ©2008 by James Webb, published by Broadway Books, a division of Random House, Inc. Reprinted with permission.*

# Obama's Blues

Despite enormous structural advantages for Democrats in fundraising, voter registration, and party identification, national polling and Electoral College projections

continue to show that Barack Obama would eke out only the narrowest of wins over John McCain if the general election were held today. Following a brief blip of increased support after wrapping up the Democratic nomination, Obama's meager three- to four-point lead in both the Gallup and Rasmussen tracking polls has returned. Obama consistently runs behind and McCain runs far ahead of their respective parties in the generic presidential polls.

The distribution of Obama's support in the Electoral College gives McCain a chance at victory in November, as the candidate who famously attacked "red" and "blue" political divisions in his 2004 convention speech has become identified completely with the culture of "blue" America in ways that turn his popular antiwar position into a liability.

According to the Electoral College map at RealClearPolitics.com, 110 electoral votes come from states considered toss-ups, but when these states are assigned to the candidates that narrowly lead in recent polling, Obama wins by just 32 electoral votes, 285-253. But that possible Obama victory depends heavily on success in Ohio, where Obama encountered some of the stiffest resistance to his candidacy and where, despite the 2006 electoral devastation of the state Republican Party, McCain has either led or remained within striking distance in most polling. Contrary to the Obama campaign's hope of using its significant fundraising advantage to "scramble" the electoral map, the two parties' coalitions in presidential voting remain impressively stable.

More strikingly, despite the enduring opposition of two-thirds of the public to the war in Iraq and his position as the major party antiwar candidate, Obama so far seems unable to build a coalition larger than those organized around Gore and Kerry in their close defeats. Thanks to the fiction created and maintained by mainstream journalists, McCain has been able to identify himself almost entirely with every major policy of the Bush administration yet retain the public persona of a rebellious and independent-minded reformer. At the same time, on the war itself, the public continues to have greater confidence in McCain than Obama. According to Rasmussen, 49 percent trust McCain more on the war, compared to just 37 percent for Obama. On the signature issue of his campaign and the policy that has done more than any other to destroy the GOP electorally, Obama cannot translate the public's war weariness into support because of this question of trust.

McCain does not seem to be weighed down by his uncompromising defense of one of the worst foreign-policy blunders of the last 40 years. Rather, he is rewarded for having given the same stock answer to every military situation for the last decade: send additional troops. When the air war against Yugoslavia was dragging on, McCain urged President Clinton to prepare to send ground forces; by early 2004, he was demanding an increased presence in Iraq; and again in early 2007, he supported the party line on the surge. Escalation has been McCain's default

response for every engagement since he started running for president in 1999.

By repeating his "more soldiers" mantra at every turn, McCain has somehow won credibility as an expert on national security. He avoids much sustained criticism of the substance of his policy views, or lack thereof, by alluding to his military service and mentioning his hatred of war, both of which sway public emotion more than Obama's cerebral critique of bad strategy. These allusions have combined with fawning media attention to make McCain strangely untouchable on crucial matters of war and peace. Against such manufactured credibility, Obama's actual prescience about the folly of invading Iraq does not have much of a chance of winning over a public skeptical about his very real lack of national-security experience.

Open presidential elections held immediately after or during deeply unpopular wars, such as the 1920 and 1952 elections, have typically been unmitigated disasters for the candidate representing the incumbent party. But as in so many other ways, the 2008 election does not seem to be following established patterns. One of the reasons for the difference is that there has never been an open election in American history held during the fifth year of a foreign war, and there has never been a wartime open election following eight years of the same administration, so the victories by Harding and Eisenhower make for poor precedents. Under these circumstances, McCain's military service, reflexive hawkishness, and unabashed Americanism make for a powerful combination that appeals viscerally to many voters who might otherwise rally to the candidate who represents their views on the war. ■