

Stumbling Into War

James P. Rubin

A DIPLOMATIC POSTMORTEM

AFTER THE ATTACKS of September 11, 2001, the United States put together a historic, worldwide coalition to overthrow the Taliban in Afghanistan and destroy al Qaeda. China, India, Japan, Pakistan, and Russia all supported the enterprise, as did Europe. The subsequent war may have scattered al Qaeda rather than destroyed it—key operatives remain at large today—but the mission was widely seen as a success.

Eighteen months later, the Bush administration went to war again, this time to overthrow Saddam Hussein. On this occasion, however, most of the same countries that had backed the United States in Afghanistan bluntly opposed the campaign—as, indeed, did most of the world. Washington's failure to muster international support to depose a despised dictator was a stunning diplomatic defeat—a failure that has not only made it harder to attract foreign troop contributions to help stabilize post-Saddam Iraq, but will more generally damage U.S. foreign policy for years to come.

Support for the Bush administration's Iraq policy should not have been so hard to gain. After all, Baghdad was in clear violation of a series of UN Security Council resolutions. And Bill Clinton had also deemed Iraq a substantial threat, both because of its apparent capability to field weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and because of its demonstrated willingness to use them. For those reasons, coupled with Saddam's history of gross human rights violations and

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his refusal to comply with the demands of the international community, the Clinton team had also supported regime change in Iraq.

Of course, an invasion of that country was never going to be an easy sell, even after the attacks of September 11. Legitimizing the use of force and preventing the United States from being seen as an aggressor would have required a comprehensive game plan. And the Bush administration did seem to recognize this fact at first, when, last fall, it managed to unite the world around its demand that Iraq finally disarm. But despite months of subsequent international debate and diplomacy, Washington did not then muster much support for its policy before actually going to war. The United Kingdom and Spain remained stalwart allies, as did most states in central and eastern Europe. But these countries, like Australia, had been on the United States' side from the beginning.

What went wrong? Why, when the leader of the free world went to war with a brutal and hated dictator, did so many countries refuse to take America's side? How much collateral damage was caused in the process? And what lessons can be learned from this debacle? After extensive debriefings of key participants in Europe and at the United Nations, as well as of a number of informed American diplomats, some important lessons from the recent crisis are starting to emerge.

First, the fact that Washington's justification for war seemed to shift as occasion demanded led many outside observers to question the Bush administration's motives and to doubt it would ever accept Iraq's peaceful disarmament. Second, the United States failed to synchronize its military and diplomatic tracks. The deployment of American forces in the Middle East seemed to determine American policy, not the other way around, and diplomatic imperatives were given short shrift. Third, the failure to anticipate Saddam's decision to comply partially with UN demands proved disastrous to Washington's strategy. Fourth, the belated effort to achieve a second Security Council resolution could still have succeeded, had the United States been willing to compromise by extending the deadline by just a few weeks. But such a compromise was not forthcoming, which leads to the last lesson: the Bush administration's rhetoric and style alienated rather than persuaded key officials and foreign constituencies, especially in light of Washington's two-year history of scorn for international institutions and agreements.

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TAKING YES FOR AN ANSWER

ONE OF THE MAIN sources of European skepticism toward the U.S. campaign in Iraq was the sense that Washington was determined to go to war regardless of what Saddam did. Perhaps this suspicion was due to Bush's shifting justifications for war; perhaps it was due to his failure to engage comprehensively and consistently enough with key friends and allies. Whatever the cause, much of the world believed that Washington was so determined to overthrow Saddam that it would never take yes for an answer—even if the Iraqi leader did comply with international ultimatums.

To be fair, the administration had compelling rationales for war beyond the threat of Iraqi WMD. For example, Bush administration officials claimed that toppling Saddam would uphold the sanctity of UN resolutions, eliminate a murderous government that brutalized its citizens, deprive Osama bin Laden of a key ally, and bolster democracy in the Middle East. But each of these arguments, although perhaps otherwise convincing, were undermined by the administration's record or reputation. The claim that Washington sought to enhance the UN's authority clashed with the administration's previous reluctance to support international institutions and international law. Belief in Bush's last-minute Wilsonianism was similarly undermined by his previous scorn for humanitarian intervention, by distrust of his neoconservative aides (whom many regard as enemies of international cooperation who are interested only in strengthening Israel), and by the perception that the United States was not interested in promoting democracy in friendly Middle Eastern regimes such as Saudi Arabia. The allegations of close cooperation between Saddam and bin Laden, if proved, would have been decisive. But the link was never established, only alleged, and no other country accepted it; in fact, foreign intelligence services were told by the CIA that the agency itself doubted these claims.

Moreover, although many of the United States' declared objectives were individually appealing, their diversity harmed rather than helped the administration's case. Diplomatic consistency was lost when different corners of the American bureaucracy stressed different reasons for the war: the State Department, for example, focused on Iraq's violations of UN resolutions, whereas the Pentagon pushed the al Qaeda link.

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Because the administration lacked the discipline to speak with one voice, a coherent message never emerged.

Especially unhelpful were statements by Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, which skeptical European observers focused on to a remarkable degree. In their public statements, both Cheney and Rumsfeld emphasized the flaws inherent in any UN inspection regime, disparaging the UN's arms inspectors, downplaying the chances of peaceful disarmament, and promoting Washington's military buildup in the Persian Gulf. In mid-September 2002, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, explaining his break with Bush, even cited a Cheney speech from a few weeks earlier, complaining, "it just isn't good enough to learn from the American press about a speech which clearly states 'we are going to do it, no matter what the world or our allies think.'" Bush did later accept that if Saddam complied with the UN's demands, regime change would no longer be necessary (since the regime would, according to Bush, already have "changed"). But the administration's earlier announcements—especially warnings by Cheney and Rumsfeld that the UN process was bound to fail—undercut Bush's pledge and led many foreign observers to doubt whether Washington would be satisfied with anything less than war.

CALIBRATING FORCE AND DIPLOMACY

ABOVE ALL, it was the belief that the military buildup in the Persian Gulf was driving the United States' policy decisions that led many to conclude war was inevitable. The Europeans felt that rather than force's serving American diplomacy, force had become an objective in itself, and Washington was using diplomacy simply to smooth the way for an invasion. High-level officials, including key British policymakers, were frustrated that military timetables seemed to determine rather than support U.S. foreign policy. Some critics even argued that the Bush administration viewed the whole UN exercise as a way to stall for time until America's military force became operational.

At the best of times, synchronizing force and diplomacy is a delicate balancing act, one that requires careful planning. Europeans, mindful of the way that the mobilization of armies rendered diplomacy impotent and fighting inevitable before World War I, are particularly sensitive to

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this process. This is not to suggest that the Europeans failed to recognize the crucial role that force could still play. Continental pundits and officials understood that it was America's willingness to deploy and use force, alone if necessary, that had prompted the Security Council to toughen its posture toward Iraq, demanding the return of UN inspectors with expanded and unconditional access to key facilities. Even French President Jacques Chirac acknowledged that the deployment of U.S. forces had pressured Saddam into agreeing to these measures. Chirac's mistake, however, was to think that he could limit the United States' role to supporting his own favored policy for Iraq: containment through aggressive inspections.

American power did indeed promote effective multilateral action on Iraq. But to maintain international support, the Bush administration should have then shown a willingness to adjust its military timetable to diplomatic realities. A synchronized policy would have had the diplomatic and military tracks converge sometime this fall. All of the key players in Europe now say that they would have been prepared to support or at least sanction force against Iraq if it had not fully disarmed by then. And waiting that long would have demonstrated to all that Washington was prepared to go the extra mile to secure international backing. But the Bush administration showed no such willingness.

No doubt, such a timetable would have entailed serious logistical questions and complications. For example, could military forces have been maintained in the region throughout the summer? Such problems could have been solved, however. The pace of deployment could have been slowed, making it less onerous for the allied armies to wait out the summer. Or, as the British military started to contemplate, materiel could have been left in the region while troops were rotated in and out. London strongly believed that the diplomatic advantages of waiting until the fall far outweighed the technical difficulties. In other words, Washington's most important supporter assigned a high priority to getting a positive vote in the Security Council and garnering international support and was prepared to make the arrangements necessary to ensure those results. The Bush administration, however, was not.

Indeed, the administration would not make even modest adjustments to its military plans, although doing so could have dramatically increased diplomatic support for the war. For example, in the endgame

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of the negotiations over the second resolution, London could not get Washington to acquiesce to several weeks' delay, despite the fact that waiting could have helped secure majority support and that top military officials said such a delay would have no appreciable impact on the conduct of the war. The administration simply did not care very much whether it had international backing or not, and the Europeans knew it.

PLANNING FOR PARTIAL COMPLIANCE

THE AMERICAN government's biggest mistake in the lead-up to the war was its lack of foresight and planning. Critically, no effort was made to lay the groundwork for the possibility that Saddam would partially comply with Resolution 1441. Thus Washington had no strategy to deal with Baghdad's actual response to the UN's demands and the threat of invasion.

The unanimous passage of Resolution 1441 in November of last year had masked a number of major differences among key members of the UN Security Council. Although the vote was a clear diplomatic success, insofar as it represented international support for a tougher stance on Iraqi disarmament, the council had also kicked a number of hard questions down the road. Would, for example, a second resolution be required before military action took place? How would Iraqi compliance be judged? And, most important, how much time would Iraq get to clear up discrepancies in its reported stockpiles of WMD? Unfortunately, no effort was made to resolve these ambiguities once 1441 was passed. Nor did the major powers develop a diplomatic game plan for each of Iraq's four possible responses to the resolution. Instead, as one of the architects of the UN diplomacy put it, all the key players took a "diplomatic holiday."

The first imaginable Iraqi response was capitulation. Facing the prospect of losing power, Saddam might well have complied fully. If he did come clean and give inspectors immediate access to his scientists, documents, and proof of either the existence of his WMD or their destruction, war would have been averted. Although much of the world did not trust the Bush administration to accept such a result, Blair and Bush had agreed that if Iraq really did disarm, war would be avoided.

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The second possible outcome was the “smoking gun” scenario. If Saddam refused to acknowledge having any WMD programs but did provide unconditional access to all relevant sites in Iraq, UN inspectors were expected to find the famous “smoking gun”—that is, unequivocal proof of Saddam’s illegal weapons, such as a Scud missile or a cache of biological agents. Top officials in Washington and London genuinely believed that such evidence would be uncovered. Had the evidence emerged, support for war would have materialized. Russian President Vladimir Putin, for example, told Bush in a private message that he would accept a war if such evidence were found.

The third scenario involved Saddam’s “shooting himself in the foot,” as he did in 1998 and on numerous occasions in the past, starting with his refusal to pull out of Kuwait in 1991. Another such provocation this spring would have again led to widespread support for war. If, for example, Iraq had refused to allow access to suspected weapons sites or did not at least appear to cooperate with UN inspectors, all the key governments would have backed an invasion. Ironically, French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin even made it clear privately that had another power such as Russia or China tried to veto a war under such circumstances, France would have joined the military coalition anyway.

What actually happened, however, was the fourth scenario, one for which Washington was wholly unprepared: partial compliance. Iraq did not accept that it bore the burden of proof of showing that it had disarmed, and it gave the UN a preposterously implausible declaration of its weapons programs (comprised, in part, of previous reports to the UN). But it did allow inspectors unfettered access to suspected sites, and it generally cooperated with them. Iraq granted inspectors access to presidential palaces and other locations that they had been barred from or where they had been harassed in the past, and it destroyed dozens of al Samoud missiles after the UN declared that they exceeded their allowed ranges. Some key scientists were also allowed to be interviewed, and new methods were proposed to prove the past destruction of banned weapons. Washington, however, was caught flat-footed by these developments, and the result was disastrous.

The right way to deal with partial compliance would have been to develop a timetable for completing the verification of Iraq’s disarmament and a way to judge whether Baghdad had actually met it. To achieve

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such an outcome would have required careful multilateral diplomacy. The Bush administration could have approached all the key players at the outset to discuss this method and all the other options. Putin, for example, would have viewed summit-level discussions about how to respond to different scenarios as a sign of respect for Russia and a demonstration of real partnership. According to key Russian officials, he would then have agreed in advance to setting a deadline for Iraq's compliance. French officials similarly claim that Chirac would have gone along with the use of force if a nine-month schedule had been set at the beginning. The swing voters on the council (Angola, Cameroon, Chile, Guinea, Mexico, and Pakistan) would have been satisfied with as little as four months. But no such consultations took place between Bush or Secretary of State Colin Powell and their counterparts.

In fact, the partial compliance scenario was not even seriously examined before or immediately after the passage of Resolution 1441. When Iraq then took such an approach, the United States seemed unprepared. This result may have occurred because of divisions within the administration over what to do in such a case, with hard-liners determined not to respond to anything short of unequivocal compliance. Regardless of the reasons, however, Washington had no plan in place. Not having laid the diplomatic groundwork, the allies waited until February to start scrambling for support of a resolution endorsing war.

MUSTERING A MAJORITY

HAVING DECIDED to seek a second resolution, why couldn't the United States even muster a majority of votes? This failure will be long remembered. The convenient response was to blame Chirac, on the grounds that his veto threat made it impossible for the undecided council members to support a losing cause. But the real story is more complex.

During the negotiation of Resolution 1441 in the fall of 2002, the administration repeatedly argued that a second resolution authorizing force would not be necessary. That remained its view for months, until February 2003, when Blair convinced Bush that he risked losing his leadership of the Labour Party if they did not seek a second resolution. Given Blair's staunch support up until that point, Bush understandably decided to switch his stance to try to help his friend.

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About the same time, the French also reversed their position. After insisting from the beginning that war would require a second vote to authorize it, suddenly Paris began scrambling to avoid a showdown with the United States. France's ambassador in Washington, Jean-David Levitte, told Cheney in February that Washington and Paris should simply "agree to disagree." Through other diplomatic channels, the French advised the Americans to bypass the council entirely. "Your interpretation [of 1441] is sufficient [to justify war]," they counseled Washington, and "you should rely on your interpretation."

Despite this turnaround, however, Washington and London decided to seek another resolution. British diplomats insist that domestic politics was not the only reason for this decision; they also wanted to avert a UN resolution condemning military action, which British government lawyers feared might make their participation in the campaign illegal. Blair himself, however, was never advised that the second resolution was likely not to pass. On the contrary, he assumed, as did most observers, that once the White House got behind the effort, it would be determined enough to win.

But then Berlin, Moscow, and Paris joined forces, insisting that the Iraqi threat did not justify an American-led invasion and claiming that the inspections were serving their purpose: Iraq was no longer in a position to develop a militarily significant arsenal of biological or chemical weapons. With the emergence of this new alignment, London's hopes for passage of a second resolution were crushed.

All along, most observers had assumed that Washington was quietly wooing Moscow. The strategy seemed obvious: once a nine-vote majority for the resolution was secured, Putin would be convinced to abstain in order to preserve good relations with the United States. France, isolated, might not risk using its veto alone.

But Washington never succeeded in winning over Putin, a continuing source of bitterness for British officials. Having gone along with NATO expansion, the deployment of U.S. military forces across Central Asia, and the termination of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, Putin felt he had little to show for his cooperation with Bush. With the Russian economy improving, Moscow was no longer playing such a weak hand. One Russian described Washington's attempts to appease them, such as by offering to repeal the famous Cold War-era Jackson-Vanik

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Amendment, as “peanuts.” Moscow wanted respect, or at least a serious discussion of protecting Russia’s interests in Iraq. Neither was offered.

Despite the formation of a Moscow-Paris-Berlin axis, however, it would still have been possible to secure a majority on the Security Council. But the White House failed even to line up the support of the Africans or the Latin Americans on the council. Officials across Europe are still puzzled that the vaunted power of the U.S. president—not to mention the threats made and the incentives offered—was not enough to accomplish this feat.

In attempting to understand Washington’s failure, much has been made of the fact that Powell did not visit the key undecided nations. Powell’s refusal to travel did indeed harm U.S. diplomacy, but another, bigger problem was that multilateral diplomacy requires compromise and subtlety, which the Bush administration, with all its bullying and inflexibility, notably lacked.

Effective U.S. diplomacy at the United Nations requires an impartial validator, since other countries prefer to be seen as responding to neutral voices rather than bowing to Washington’s will. Hans Blix, the chief UN weapons inspector, could have played such a

role and should therefore have been handled more skillfully. Regardless of whether he was too easy on Iraq ten years ago, as some in the administration complained, this was not a time for settling scores. Blix had an important job, and his judgments had influence on undecided countries. But instead of embracing him, working with him, and showing him that Washington and the UN inspectors were both tough-minded, top U.S. officials tried to bully him and even resorted to ridicule.

The worst example of the administration’s pressure tactics occurred when Blix and Muhammad ElBaradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, met with Vice President Cheney. Cheney warned that if his administration found fault with Blix’s judgments, “we will not hesitate to discredit you.” In a separate meeting, Paul Wolfowitz, deputy secretary of defense, ridiculed the inspectors’ caution, telling them, “You do know they have weapons of mass destruction, don’t you?”

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Such tactics were amateurish and unseemly. Blix, a stubborn Swedish bureaucrat, made a point of telling others that he intended to stand up to Washington, and was infuriated by the treatment he received. The British government was forced to do extensive repair work. And the cutting personal remarks look particularly unfortunate in light of the administration's own subsequent difficulty in discovering Iraqi WMD—despite the fact that the U.S. military now controls all the real estate in Iraq and has key scientists in custody.

To secure a second resolution would have also required some compromise on substance, especially the question of timing. London was willing to endorse such an approach, but Washington was not. Had the Bush administration shown some flexibility in early March, however, it would have been France that ended up on the losing side of the tally, not the United States. In fact, a compromise text did emerge that would have had the tacit backing of Blix and the support of ten countries. This resolution would have entailed the following elements: the establishment of benchmarks for compliance (which would have included accounting for vx gas and anthrax, the destruction of al Samoud and other illegal missiles, allowing scientists to be interviewed abroad, and resolving the issue of long-range drones); the setting of a mid-April deadline for Iraq to meet the established tests; and, finally, a presumption that failure to comply would constitute a material breach and thus trigger the use of force.

Blair and his diplomats worked hard to craft this compromise plan, but Washington's inflexibility doomed the effort. Instead, either because of the military timetable or because he was frustrated with the diplomatic process, Bush offered a one-week extension to mid-March—no compromise at all, since that was when military operations ultimately commenced anyway. Merely offering several more weeks would likely have yielded ten votes for the British resolution, but Bush refused. Obtaining a majority simply was not a high priority for the White House, which believed that it would be vindicated by military success. So long as Blair believed a good faith effort to compromise had been made, the Americans considered that good enough.

As for the French, until the very end of the process they feared ending up in the minority. They desperately wanted to avoid using their veto and thus being excluded from any role in a post-Saddam Iraq.

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This is why de Villepin went on his infamous trip to Africa to line up opposition to the United States and why, at the 11th hour, even after his explicit veto threat, Chirac proposed a 30-day timetable based on a weaker version of the British benchmarks.

But from the White House's perspective, Chirac had already crossed the line. In a phone call with Bush, Chirac told him, "I am convinced there is no immediate or urgent threat," but Bush insisted that Iraq "threatens the American people." Rightly or wrongly, the administration believed that vital U.S. interests were at stake and thus regarded Chirac's veto threat as profoundly unfriendly.

It is true, then, that France's opposition made passage of a second resolution impossible. But it is also true that the United States' failure to lay the diplomatic groundwork and offer modest compromises made achieving even a moral majority on the council impossible.

THE POWER OF PAYBACK

THE PUBLIC STRUGGLE in the Security Council over the second resolution was about more than just Iraq. The opponents of the American and British resolution say they were fighting a White House that they believed threatened to undermine international order.

Above all, it was the so-called preemptive strike doctrine, published in last September's National Security Strategy, that harmed America's diplomatic cause. Viewed through this lens, the war in Iraq looked less like a way to uphold UN Security Council resolutions than like the manifestation of a new American approach. Whichever U.S. officials decided to include the now-infamous language about preemptive strikes and the primacy of American power in the annual document, and then singled them out as marking a new U.S. doctrine, either did not consider or did not care how it would affect the debate.

Whatever the explanation, the result was that every time U.S. officials insisted their goal was to enforce UN resolutions on Iraq, they ran up against a wall of skepticism. Is Iraq the first in a series of preemptive attacks? they were asked. Who decides when an existing threat justifies preemptive action? How can the UN endorse an unprovoked attack on another country? What will happen if other countries, such as India, Pakistan, Russia, or China, insist on their right to attack preemptively

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whenever they see a threat? Much of the world became determined to prevent the Security Council from rubber-stamping American decisions to conduct preemptive strikes. If gaining support for action against Iraq was truly Washington's highest priority in the fall of 2002, it is hard to imagine a more counterproductive step than to initiate a debate over whether the United States has the right to attack whomever it wants, whenever it deems it necessary.

Having said that, the controversy over preemptive strikes might, by itself, have been manageable. But international relations are a lot like interpersonal relations. Every country has a certain amount of goodwill on deposit with others. Unfortunately, by last fall, the United States' goodwill account had been exhausted. The president seemed to have forgotten the tenet he had articulated so well as a candidate: "It's important to be friends with people when you don't need each other, so that when you do, there's a strong bond of friendship."

One reason Washington's goodwill reserve had all but vanished is that European countries pay a lot of attention to treaties. Their foreign ministers meet, week after week, in a rolling discussion of how to modify and improve the treaties that form the European Union, and these ministers regard international law and formal accords as the primary currency of foreign policy. Nonetheless, early in its term, the Bush administration declared war on all outstanding international treaties. First he repudiated the Kyoto Protocol on the environment. Then came Washington's withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, its rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and its repudiation of the protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention.

Just as unpopular was the U.S. policy on the International Criminal Court. The ICC accord may have its flaws, but the Bush team broke new legal ground when it declared Clinton's signature of the treaty null and void (a gratuitous step, since the agreement had never been ratified by Congress). In order to weaken the ICC further, Bush also provoked a bitter battle over the court with the entire EU, demanding that every country sign a special waiver to exempt American citizens and soldiers from the court's jurisdiction. This step was overkill; the idea that the ICC would ever have forced a European country to imprison an American citizen over the objections of the U.S. government is not only hypothetical in the extreme, but also politically unthinkable.

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Next, the matter of the prisoners held on Guantánamo may have actually marked the beginning of the end of European sympathy for and solidarity with the United States after September 11. Europeans across the political spectrum reacted with shock and condemnation when Rumsfeld brusquely dismissed the applicability of the Geneva Conventions to these prisoners on January 16, 2002, saying he didn't have "the slightest concern" about how they would be treated in light of their organizations' attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Even the normally pro-American weekly *The Economist* called this view "unworthy of a nation which has cherished the rule of law from its birth."

Unfortunately, Guantánamo became a rallying point for anti-Americanism. The fact that the United States would not even accept the Geneva Conventions in this case, critics argued, showed that the Bush administration really did see itself as above the law of nations. A more careful diplomat than Rumsfeld would, in answer to a question about the convention's applicability to the prisoners, have simply said, "of course we will apply the principles of the Geneva Conventions to any prisoners we are holding"—and then gone on to explain that government lawyers were considering how to apply those principles in this unprecedented situation. Indeed, this is precisely what the U.S. government ended up doing, but by then the damage had been done.

Washington had also alienated Europe through its approach to NATO. Top NATO officials have been stewing ever since the alliance's offer of help after September 11 was spurned. Although the now-famous invocation of Article V (the mutual self-defense clause) of NATO's founding treaty was more of a political act than a prescription for joint military operations, the Pentagon's subsequent, disparaging attitude toward a NATO role in Afghanistan stung Brussels deeply. NATO had long been the United States' favorite multilateral forum; but Washington's recent "don't call us, we'll call you" message led many Europeans to conclude that even NATO was no longer valued by the Americans.

A final reason for the loss of goodwill toward the United States was the White House's approach to peace in the Middle East. Although most of the world recognizes how difficult stopping Arab-Israeli violence will be, they expect the U.S. government to try. Bush's across-the-board support for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon,

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therefore, and his administration's lack of high-level engagement in the peace process prior to this summer made it hard for Washington to attract support for its war in Iraq. Blair, at least, understood this problem and pushed Bush hard to commit political capital to getting both the Palestinians and the Israelis to compromise. Although the White House did begin to move in this direction right before the invasion of Iraq began, its effort was too little and too late to repair the damage done by its two years of studied avoidance of this critical issue.

IN THE COURT OF WORLD OPINION

AFTER THE diplomatic failure in New York, it became fashionable to ask why the United States should have had to try to win support in the first place from African countries such as Angola, Cameroon, or Guinea, or Latin American nations such as Chile and Mexico. Many wondered why these smaller countries should play such an important role in deciding whether international action is legitimate or not.

The truth, however, is that the UN system worked. The nonpermanent council members took positions that did, in fact, reflect the views of their regional groups. The three African countries, for example, accurately represented Africa's overwhelming opposition to the war. So did Mexico and Chile for Latin America. The Europeans on the council also acted in accordance with the views of most of their neighbors. Bulgaria represented the sense of solidarity with the United States felt by central and eastern European countries and their opposition to Saddam. And the split between France and Germany on one side and Spain and the United Kingdom on the other fairly represented the split among governments in Western Europe. The lack of support in the council for the American and British position, therefore, was not a systemic failure but a reflection of international reality.

That China and the countries of the Middle East and Africa would oppose the war in Iraq could have been predicted. The real surprise was that the world's democracies did not see the importance of upholding UN disarmament demands or ending the misery of the Iraqi people. One explanation is that Bush's emphasis on personal diplomacy between leaders was not enough to win him support in democratic countries, where governments cannot simply act in complete defiance

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of public opinion. The United States should have deployed public diplomacy to help fill this gap, but the Bush administration's efforts on this front were lackluster. True, Powell made an impressive presentation on the evils of Saddam's regime to the Security Council in New York, but that performance was a one-off, not part of a campaign. Moreover, Powell did not provide an irrefutable case. He cited communications intercepts that suggested Iraq was hiding something and was afraid of what the UN inspectors might find. But what exactly that "something" was could only be speculated about, not identified with certainty. This is not to diminish Powell's efforts or Blair's, since both men were genuinely convinced that WMD existed in Iraq. Uncertainty is inevitable in intelligence work when investigating closed societies. But in the absence of diplomatic backing and trust from other countries, the United States needed proof beyond a shadow of a doubt. Powell's case was strong, but not strong enough.

As mentioned above, another problem was the shifting rationales for war. The evolution of the administration's arguments—from the threat of WMD, to the link to al Qaeda, to the Wilsonian claims about human rights abuses and democracy in the Middle East—convinced many that the American president was determined to invade no matter what. Of all of these claims, the Wilsonian argument especially might have been effective had it been argued consistently from the beginning.

The lack of coordination between the State and Defense Departments was a further problem. American diplomats emphasized the WMD argument because that allowed war to be justified in terms of Iraqi violations of mandatory UN resolutions. Meanwhile, Defense Department officials too often played up the al Qaeda link, which did not resonate anywhere outside the United States.

In fact, Rumsfeld's frequent public appearances harmed rather than helped his country's case in the court of world opinion. His blunt language may have won him a few laughs in domestic settings, but his every gaffe and insult was greeted with disgust throughout Europe. Public diplomacy is supposed to persuade, not infuriate. German officials still cannot forgive Rumsfeld's rhetorical lumping together of Germany with countries such as Cuba on the grounds that all refused to support the war. Overcoming Germany's postwar pacifism would not have been easy in the best of circumstances, but

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challenging Germany's core democratic values by comparing it to dictatorships only caused its diplomats to dig in their heels.

Rumsfeld's reputed disdain for NATO, the UN, and any force other than the American military rendered him particularly unsuitable to pushing Washington's case in Europe. Yet, to the dismay of many American and British officials alike, he persisted throughout the crisis in accepting interview requests and maintaining the highest possible profile. The most candid quote of the whole failed diplomatic effort came from Spain's normally reticent prime minister, Jose Maria Aznar, a crucial Bush ally, who broke precedent by complaining that in order to build a coalition, "we need a lot of Powell and not much of Rumsfeld."

Even Rumsfeld, however, cannot be blamed for the diplomatic disaster in Turkey, where parliament voted on March 1 to block the deployment of U.S. troops and thereby prevented them from opening a northern front against Saddam. Fault for that debacle lies with the whole Bush administration. Despite their professed admiration for Turkish democracy, American diplomats were just not prepared

The real surprise was that the world's democracies did not see the value of upholding UN demands.

to deal with the inexperienced and rowdy Turkish legislature. Moreover, almost nothing was done to try and turn around the Turkish public, which staunchly opposed the war. Instead, the Turkish press ran frequent reports of bullying by and insults from U.S. officials, as well as their attempts to bluff Turkey with phony deadlines. At the beginning of the crisis, Wolfowitz boasted that

Turkish support for the deployment of American troops was "assured." But when things began to get dicey, rather than insisting that Powell travel to Ankara to persuade key Turkish legislators one by one, both the Pentagon and the State Department relied on the Turkish military to assure a victory. Given that the measure ultimately lost by a mere handful of votes, it seems obvious that providing some personal care and attention would have made the difference. But the Bush administration failed to do this. The subsequent Turkish vote not only undercut U.S. military operations, but also emboldened smaller countries to stand up to U.S. pressure on the Security Council.

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American diplomats have since lamented the fact that no serious public diplomacy strategy existed to persuade key foreign publics or at least reduce opposition. It is hard to overstate how important this failure was. Crucial votes were lost in democratic countries such as Chile and Mexico. No matter how close their personal ties to Bush were, Presidents Ricardo Lagos and Vicente Fox simply could not sell a matter of war and peace to their constituents by saying that they did not want to upset the White House or risk trade retaliation. Similarly, had public opinion not been so overwhelmingly antiwar in France and throughout Europe, it seems fair to assume that even Chirac's opposition would not have been so rigid.

The problem, in sum, was that the United States did not approach its prewar diplomacy with a coherent and comprehensive strategy. Although the use of decisive and overwhelming military force may have been his signature at the Pentagon, Powell did not convince the Bush administration to adopt a similar approach to diplomacy. Perhaps that was because Cheney and Rumsfeld would not support such a strategy. Or perhaps the administration as a whole just did not think securing international legitimacy for the war was particularly important. Whether the reason was incompetence or ideology, however, Washington's failure to maintain diplomatic consistency on its justification for war, to synchronize force and diplomacy, to plan for partial compliance by Iraq, to lay the groundwork for a second resolution, and to win over international opinion constituted a diplomatic defeat of the highest order for American foreign policy.

TRUE LIES

MANY IN the Bush administration apparently view the diplomatic failure as a minor setback and assume that the military victory is all that will be remembered. And to a certain extent, such officials are right. The United States did send a powerful message to dictators and supporters of terrorism, and the Iraqi people were liberated from tyranny. Stability in the region has improved now that its most pernicious government has been eliminated. If some form of representative government eventually takes charge in Baghdad, democratic values may finally start to spread through the Middle

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East, the one region of the world from which they have remained conspicuously absent until now.

Nonetheless, all of these worthy goals could and should have been achieved with international support. Americans should be worried that so many around the world hoped that they would fail in Iraq, that Saddam would put up greater resistance, killing more U.S. soldiers and dragging out the conflict. Some of the United States' moral authority has also been lost, along with its cherished reputation as a superpower reluctant to use military might.

The most concrete consequences of Washington's failure will be felt the next time a dangerous regime starts developing WMD. Stopping the proliferation of such weapons has become the United States' top national security priority. Winning that battle will require more than just American resolve and military power, however; it will require cooperation from countries around the world. Unfortunately, the diplomatic debacle over Iraq has harmed the international system that monitors, controls, and responds to WMD threats; the whole concept of coercive disarmament has been discredited. Even the Bush administration has now recognized that dealing with North Korea and Iran requires the UN system. But what will happen the next time coercive disarmament is attempted by the UN? Washington's recent attacks on the UN inspectors' efficacy will make it harder to rely on their judgments in the future.

Even more worrisome is how the failure to actually find WMD in Iraq is playing out. By basing the decision for war on American intelligence and threat assessments, rather than the collective will of the UN, the United States placed its credibility on the line. Unfortunately, to justify early action, Washington appears to have exaggerated the near-term threat. Ironically, most of the underlying information that led most intelligence agencies to conclude Iraq had and was hiding chemical and biological weapons originally came from UN inspectors. That information alone would have been sufficient to justify military action, although perhaps not as quickly as the Bush administration wanted. Thus U.S. officials decided to play up the alleged imminent threat. The most egregious example of this was Cheney's argument that Iraq had "reconstituted nuclear weapons." The United States is still paying the price for those false claims.

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The administration should have focused attention on Iraqi non-compliance, not U.S. intelligence. No country doubted that Iraq was failing to cooperate with the UN inspectors. Had war been launched later—after Blix had concluded and a majority of the Security Council had accepted that Iraq was never going to disarm fully—the search for WMD would never have become the kind of international spectacle it has. A war with greater legitimacy would have kept the spotlight on Iraq, not the United States.

Tragically, the truth about Saddam's WMD may never be known. Apparently, little effort was made to secure and protect potential Iraqi WMD sites. It remains a mystery why the Pentagon reportedly did not make securing such sites one of its highest wartime priorities, especially given that materials looted and stolen may now be sold to criminal groups or terrorist organizations.

In the future, stopping WMD proliferation will require the United States to consider interdicting supplies on the high seas or possibly attacking nuclear facilities. To gain international support for such measures, Washington will need the international community to trust its information and motives—a proposition now unlikely at best. It is worth recalling the events of 1962, when John F. Kennedy sent former Secretary of State Dean Acheson to brief Charles de Gaulle about the Soviet deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba. Acheson offered de Gaulle a full intelligence briefing, but the French president told him it wasn't necessary, saying he trusted Kennedy never to risk war unless he was sure of his facts. After the diplomatic debacle over Iraq, it is hard to imagine a similar level of trust today.

Already the failure to find WMD is being noted closely in Paris. One key French official acknowledged that if significant quantities of chemical or biological weapons were found, "we would be dead." But there have not yet been such findings. Still, although Chirac seems to have been right in his assessment of the limited nature of Saddam's WMD capabilities, France's interests have suffered too. French officials wince at the memory of de Villepin's "delusions of grandeur," which marked

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France's dramatic but fruitless opposition to war. As a result of Paris' position, many Iraqis continue to associate France with the hated Saddam regime, and throughout the Arab world, France is now perceived as impotent for having failed to stop or slow America's invasion. Furthermore, France's most cherished international institution—the United Nations—has been weakened and sidelined. And Chirac's intemperate attack on the United States' eastern European backers ("They should learn to shut up") will be remembered in Europe long after Iraq is forgotten. Finally, Chirac also appears to have seriously misjudged how long American anger toward him would last. The political and business elite in Paris now feel that he went too far, and the majority of officials in the French foreign ministry who argued for abstention rather than opposition at the Security Council no doubt feel vindicated.

A war with greater legitimacy would have also minimized the resentment toward American forces in Iraq. With a UN blessing, it would have been much easier to recruit peacekeepers from around the world to serve under American command, helping to share the burden and growing risk of policing chaotic Iraq and building new institutions there. When it comes to occupying a country, there is simply no substitute for a UN stamp of approval. Past peace operations in Bosnia and Kosovo show that U.S. troops operating under a UN mandate are far less likely to be regarded as invaders by the local population.

Had Washington considered the diplomatic consequences of war as carefully as the military components, much of the collateral damage could have been avoided. The Bush administration deserves credit for mustering the international will to end Iraq's ten-year defiance of the UN. America's willingness to exercise its power alone if need be convinced the world last fall to finally confront the Iraqi dictatorship. But exercising power without careful diplomacy has left the United States' reputation in tatters.

Next time—if there is a next time—the United States must more carefully calibrate force and diplomacy, remembering that these tools are complementary and are best used together. Just as U.S. military planners so often apply the Powell Doctrine of overwhelming and decisive force, so must American diplomatic strategists bring to bear all of the nations' extensive persuasive powers. Only then will the world believe that America's cause is just. 🌍