

The Road To Babylon

Searching for Targets in Iraq

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Misgovernment is of four kinds, often in combination. They are: 1) tyranny or oppression, of which history provides so many well-known examples that they do not need citing; 2) excessive ambition, such as Athens' attempted conquest of Sicily in the Peloponnesian War, Philip II's of England via the Armada, Germany's twice-attempted rule of Europe by a self-conceived master race, Japan's bid for an empire of Asia; 3) incompetence or decadence, as in the case of the late Roman empire, the last Romanovs and the last imperial dynasty of China; and finally 4) folly or perversity.

— Barbara W. Tuchman

When President George W. Bush in his January State of the Union address pronounced the sentence of doom on Saddam Hussein ("America will do what is necessary to ensure our nation's security. . . . I will not wait on events, while dangers gather"), I assumed that he was striking at a target of rhetorical convenience. The war on terrorism was not going as well as planned (Osama bin Laden still at large, Afghanistan not yet transformed into a Connecticut suburb, bombs exploding every seven or eight days on a bus in Israel), and who better than the tyrant of Baghdad to stand surrogate for all the world's evildoers? The man was undoubtedly a villain, a brutal psychopath who murdered children and poisoned village wells, stored biological weapons in hospitals, subjected his enemies to unspeakable torture, and imprisoned his friends in the cages of perpetual fear. Not a nice fellow. Who would not be glad to learn that he had retired from politics or died in a traffic accident? If Mr. Bush chose to express his disapproval in what he called "the language of right and wrong," who was I to deny him his demagogue's right to issue harebrained threats?

The opinion was not widely shared in New York among people possessed of an historical memory (i.e., by individuals who remembered the CIA's staging of "the glorious march to Havana" in the spring of 1961, or the "light at the end of the tunnel" so often seen by General William C. Westmoreland in the forests of Vietnam), but I held to it throughout the spring and early summer even as Mr. Bush mounted the flag-draped rostra at West Point and the Virginia Military Institute to threaten with the wrath of eagles far-off men of "mad ambitions," declaring null and void "the Cold War doctrines of deterrence and containment," championing the cause of "forward-looking and resolute . . . preemptive action." When asked by worried friends and acquaintances whether the President was borrowing his geopolitical theory from the diaries of Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler, I assured them that the President didn't have the patience to read more than two or three

pages of a Tom Clancy novel. True, the National Security Council was staffed by think-tank ideologues, and yes, some of the policy analysts strolling through the corridors of the White House imagined themselves wearing the uniform of the Bengal Lancers, but no, not even the Bush Administration was so stupid as to take up arms against a figment of its own imagination.

By the second week in August I understood that my assumptions were poorly placed. The spectacle of the American government making preparations for an invasion of Iraq suggested that maybe the Bush Administration was, in fact, stupid enough to call down air strikes on the last four paragraphs of one of the Pentagon's apocalyptic briefing papers. The President was hopping boldly out of golf carts in Texas and Maine to tell the traveling White House press corps that "regime change" was coming soon to downtown Baghdad; in appreciation of the President's enthusiasm and by way of reinforcing his credibility, the Defense Department was supplying the newspapers with documents supposedly top secret that sketched out tactical solutions to the problem of blitzkrieg (the advantages of a simultaneous attack from three directions balanced against the surprise of a swift commando raid, requisitions for 300,000 troops compared to those for only 80,000, something grandiloquent and imperial along the lines of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor as opposed to something stylish and postmodern with parachutes, two divisions of light infantry, and a diffusion of Turkish auxiliaries). Senator Joseph Biden (D., Del.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told a television news camera on August 4 that "there probably will be a war with Iraq. The only question is, is it alone, is it with others, and how long and how costly will it be?" On August 9 a delegation of Iraqi malcontents arrived in Washington to pledge their support of any overthrow of Saddam Hussein that the U.S. Army cared to pay for and arrange. Vice President Dick Cheney spoke to them by video conference from a mountain in Wyoming, reaffirming America's commitment to the principle of regime removal, and Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense, bucked up their spirits with the smiling hope of freedom not far over the military horizon: "Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing if Iraq were similar to Afghanistan, if a bad regime was thrown out, people were liberated, food could come in, borders could be opened, repression could stop, prisons could be opened? I mean, it would be fabulous."

Fabulous for whom? The secretary didn't say; presumably he wasn't referring to the many thousands of people (American soldiers as well as Iraqi civilians) unlucky enough to be killed during the festivities, but none of the Washington correspondents asked why Afghanistan was such a wonderful tourist destination, or when and how it had come to pass that the bandits precariously enthroned in the palace at Kabul exemplified the goodness of free and democratic government. Nor did anybody spoil the upbeat mood of the secretary's press conference with moral or legal questions. Against every precedent in international law, in violation of the United Nations Charter, and without consent of the American Congress, the Bush Administration was proposing to sack a heathen city that had done it no demonstrable harm, and the news media were by and large happy to welcome the event with obedient commentary supportive of the belief that if America allowed Saddam to acquire weapons of mass destruction we would suffer consequences frightful to contemplate and terrible to behold. The lead editorial in *The Economist* on

August 3 summed up the consensus of leading opinion in two sentences: "The honest choices now are to give up and give in, or to remove Mr. Hussein before he gets his bomb. Painful as it is, our vote is for war."

Give up to whom? Give in to what? The government didn't stoop to answer simpleminded questions; neither did the grand viziers of the print and broadcast media, who preferred to discuss the complexities of the logistics rather than the purpose of a policy apparently directed at nothing else except the fear of the future, that always dark and dangerous place, where, in five years or maybe ten, something bad is bound to happen. Competing television networks scheduled different time slots for the Pentagon's forthcoming fireworks display — before and after November's congressional election, in early January when the weather around Baghdad improved, next April because the Air Force needed six months to replenish its inventory of precision bombs. Competing newspaper columnists advanced competing adjectives to characterize the "extreme danger" presented to "the entire civilized world," but none of them offered evidence proving that Saddam possessed weapons likely to harm anybody who didn't happen to be living in Iraq; important military authorities appeared on the Sunday-morning talk shows to endorse policies of "forward deterrence" and "anticipatory self-defense," but none of them could think of a good reason why Saddam would make the mistake of attacking the United States; the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on July 31 and August 1 conducted hearings on the question of Iraq and learned that its expert witnesses couldn't say for certain whether they knew what they were talking about. The few shards of undisputed fact collected over two days of testimony suggested that Saddam doesn't sponsor Al Qaeda (or any of the other terrorist brigades that have asked him for money and explosives over the last eleven years), that the Iraqi army, never formidable, is less dangerous now than when it was routed in the four days of the Gulf War, the Iraqi Air Force of no consequence, the civilian economy too impoverished to support the reconstruction of the nuclear-weapons program dismantled by UNSCOM between 1991 and 1998, and Saddam himself best understood as a small-time thug apt to deploy chemical or biological weapons (if he possesses chemical or biological weapons) only as a last and cowardly defense of his own person.

A government that must hold Senate hearings to discover whether it has a reason to go to war is a government that doesn't know the meaning of war. The inanity of the circumstance accounted for the mock-heroic tone of President Bush's golf-cart communiqués ("I call upon all nations to do everything they can to stop these terrorist killers. Thank you. Now watch this drive") as well as for the sublime complacency of the innumerable spokesmen testifying to the certainties of America's virtue, truth, justice, and power. Consistent with the latter set of assumptions, two of the statements presented to Senator Biden's committee invite lengthy quotation because they speak to the character of a government in the state of decadence. Thus, the heroics of Lieutenant General Thomas McInerney (retired), former assistant vice chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force:

Thank you for this special opportunity to discuss a war of liberation to remove Saddam's regime from Iraq.

I will not dwell on the merits of why he should be removed. Suffice it to say we must preempt threats such as those posed by Saddam Hussein. . . .

I will now focus on the way to do it very expeditiously and with minimum loss of life in both the coalition forces, the Iraqi military and people themselves, and at the same time maintain a relatively small footprint in the region. . . . Our immediate objective will be the following: help Iraqi people liberate Iraq and remove Saddam Hussein and his regime, eliminate weapons of mass destruction and production facilities, complete military operations as soon as possible, protect economic infrastructure targets, identify and terminate terrorism connections, establish an interim government as soon as possible. Our longer term objectives will be to bring a democratic government to Iraq using our post World War II experiences with Germany, Japan and Italy that will influence the region significantly.

Now I would like to broadly discuss the combined campaign to achieve these objectives using what I will call blitz warfare to simplify the discussion. Blitz warfare is an intensive 24-hour, seven days a week precision air-centric campaign supported by fast moving ground forces composed of a mixture of heavy, light, airborne, amphibious, special, covert operations working with opposition forces that all use effects-based base operations for their target set and correlate their timing of forces for a devastating violent impact. . . .

Using the Global Strike Task Force and Naval Strike Forces composed of over 1,000 land- and sea-based aircraft plus a wide array of air and sea launch Cruise missiles, this will be the most massive precision air campaign in history, achieving rapid dominance in the first 72 hours of combat. . . . [A]ll the Iraqi military forces will be told through the opposition forces in our information operations campaign that they have two choices: either help us change regime leadership and build the democracy, or be destroyed. In addition, commanders and men in weapons of mass destruction forces will be told that they will be tried as war criminals if they use their weapons against coalition forces or other nations.

I can understand the general being sensitive to the question of who is, and who is not, a war criminal. On the same day that he was fitting the First Amendment principle of free speech to the requirement of his information operations campaign (help us build democracy or be destroyed), the United States was demanding immunity from any and all judgments of the International Criminal Court that might find American soldiers guilty of crimes against humanity, which, given the collateral damage soon to be inflicted on the civilian population of Iraq, was a precaution both necessary and wise.

Other points in the general's testimony didn't seem as nicely judged. How does it happen that the "most massive precision air campaign in history" leaves but "a relatively small footprint in the region"? Even if one discounts the devastation of Baghdad as a minor and scarcely noticeable loss, what is to prevent the conflagration likely to erupt in the nearby countries of Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Iran once the U.S. Air Force has lit up the entire Muslim world with the purifying fires of civil and religious war? Who prevents Ariel Sharon from upgrading with nuclear weapons the Israeli program of "preemptive assassination," and, in the relatively sizable footprint of an oil price marked up to \$50 or \$70 a barrel, what happens to the economies of London, Paris, and New York?

The general revealed his plan for waste removal on the first day of the committee hearings, and on the second day Caspar Weinberger, a secretary of defense during the Reagan Administration, matched the general's notion of swift military victory in the desert with an equally fatuous theory of instant political rehabilitation. Observing that in Washington it was always easy to find excuses for inaction, Weinberger reminded the senators of the miraculous American descent on the Caribbean island of Grenada in April 1983:

We went into Grenada with more troops than everybody thought we needed. And we had a very successful operation. And prevented the kidnapping and detention of American students. And we got out. And we got out in something under a month. And a couple of months after that, there was a free election. And we have not been back.

Not having kept up with events on Grenada, I have no reason to doubt Weinberger's happy news, and I'm sure that if Fidel Castro were to send another invisible flotilla of gunboats, the U.S. Navy would defend the island against another invisible horde of savage Marxists. Elsewhere in the world, the record of American diplomatic achievement over the last thirty years doesn't inspire a similar degree of confidence. We're good with slogans, but we don't have much talent for fostering the construction of exemplary democracies; we tend to betray our allies, dishonor our treaties, and avoid the waging of difficult or extensive wars. Count through the list of foreign adventures since our hurried departure from Vietnam in April 1975, and we proceed, in random and unseemly sequence, to the exit from Iran and the flight from Lebanon, the pointless assault on Panama, the shutting down of the Gulf War without decisive victory, the abandonment of the Kurds in northern Iraq, the escape from Somalia, the refusal to intrude upon the killing in Rwanda or the Balkans. Drawn to despots whom we hire to represent our freedom-loving commercial interests (Dien, the Shah of Shahs, Somoza, Thieu, Marcos, Jonas Savimbi, Noriega, Saddam Hussein, King Fahd, Arafat, Mobutu Sese Seko, Ariel Sharon), we pretend that our new ally stands as a pillar of democracy in one or another of the world's poorer latitudes, and for however many years the arrangement lasts we send F-16's and messages of humanitarian concern. But then something goes amiss with the band music or the tin mines; the despot's palace guard doesn't know how to fire the machine guns, or fires them at the wrong people, and the prime minister's brother appropriates the traffic in cocaine. We decide that our virtue has been compromised, or that we no longer can afford the cost of the parliament, and we leave by helicopter from the roof of the embassy. The incoherence of our current policy in the Middle East (Saudi

Arabia perceived by the Pentagon as our mortal enemy and by the White House as our dearest friend, President Bush committed on Tuesday to the establishment of a Palestinian state, on Thursday to the everlasting kingdom of Zion) suggests that the Washington travel agents have begun considering various estimated times of departure on the assumption that if we can run another "very successful operation" in and out "in something under a month," maybe Oliver North can get everybody to the roof of an embassy to watch the free election.

Fortunately for the republic, both Lieutenant General McInerney and Mr. Weinberger have retired from government service; not so fortunately, they retain the habit of mind that has guided the making of American diplomatic and military policy for the last thirty years. As stupefied as Dick Cheney or Donald Rumsfeld by the romance of imperial power, they speak from within a dream as old as the walls of Troy, and watching them bestow the favor of their prophecies on the Senate committee (to divine Saddam's plans, Senator Biden had said, "is like reading the entrails of goats"), it occurred to me that maybe the time had come to reread Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Much of the story I'd long forgotten, but I remembered that Athens corrupted its democracy and brought about the ruin of its empire by foolishly attempting the conquest of Sicily, and when I found the relevant chapters (the debate in the Athenian assembly prior to sending a fleet westward into the Ionian Sea), it was as if I were reading the front page of that morning's *New York Times* or the Pentagon's Defense Planning Guidance discussed on page 76 in this issue of *Harper's Magazine*.

Athens in the winter of 415 b.c. stands alone as the preeminent hegemon of Greece. Sparta for the moment has lost its appetite for war, and the Athenians wish to extend their sovereignty over what was then the whole of the known world, not only as far as Sicily but also beyond Carthage to the Pillars of Hercules. Sophists sit around in the wrestling schools sketching with sticks in the sand the map of the Libyan coastline; old men in wine shops babble of victories promised by Egyptian oracles. Ambassadors arrive from Sicily in late March with news of trouble and a request for military assistance. The city of Syracuse threatens to seize the Athenian colony of Segesta, and how can the heirs of noble Pericles stomach so brazen an insult to their pride? What if the Syracusans took it into their heads to attack the glory of Athens?

Uproar and loud shouts of defiance. The impetuous Alcibiades presents the case for "forward deterrence" and "anticipatory self-defense," saying that it is in the nature of Athens to do great deeds. As certain as Lieutenant General McInerney of the city's military power, he assures the assembly that Syracuse is easy prey, weak and badly governed.

One does not only defend oneself against a superior power when one is attacked; one takes measures in advance to prevent the attack materializing. And it is not possible for us to calculate, like housekeepers, exactly how much empire we want to have.

More uproar. Louder shouts of defiance. The Athenians know as little about Sicily as Senator Biden knows about Iraq ("For the most part ignorant of the size of the island and of the numbers of its inhabitants," says Thucydides, "they did not realize that they were taking on a war of almost the same magnitude as their war against the Peloponnesians"), but they are not the kind of men who stoop to count a crowd of mere barbarians.

Prudent Nicias thinks the Athenians too reckless in their enthusiasm. Like Alcibiades a general, but older and not as eager in his ambition, Nicias raises doubts similar to the ones released in the newspapers during the third week of August by several senior Republican statesmen (among them House Majority Leader Dick Armey and Brent Scowcroft, a former national security adviser) clearly worried both by President Bush's simplistic notions of geopolitics and by the absence of allies, either Arab or European, willing to join the American march on Baghdad. They employed a modern vocabulary, but the substance of their advice they could have borrowed from the speech that Thucydides assigns to Nicias:

In going to Sicily you are leaving many enemies behind you, and you apparently want to make new ones there and have them also on your hands. . . . [E]ven if we did conquer the Sicilians, there are so many of them and they live so far off that it would be very difficult to govern them. It is senseless to go against people who, even if conquered, could not be controlled, while failure would leave us much worse off than we were before we made the attempt. . . . [T]he next best thing is to make a demonstration of our power and then, after a short time, go away again. We all know that what is most admired is what is farthest off and least liable to have its reputation put to the test. . . . The right thing is that we should spend our new gains at home and on ourselves instead of on these exiles who are begging for assistance and whose interest it is to tell lies and make us believe them, who have nothing to contribute themselves except speeches, who leave all the danger to others and, if they are successful, will not be properly grateful, while if they fail in any way they will involve their friends in their own ruin.

The argument fails to make an impression. So excessive is the enthusiasm of the majority, says Thucydides, "that the few who actually were opposed to the expedition were afraid of being thought unpatriotic if they voted against it, and therefore kept quiet." The assembly declares for war, and over the next several months Athens musters an invasion fleet conforming to the current Pentagon doctrine of "overwhelming force" (134 triremes, expensively gilded; impressive numbers of archers, slingers, and javelin throwers; merchant vessels stocked with soothsayers and cavalry horses), and on a sunny day in July 415 b.c., trumpets blow, priests pour wine into golden bowls, and "by far the most costly and splendid" expedition "ever sent out by a single city" sails to its appointment with destruction.

During the last weeks of August 2002, it was hard to miss the newspaper reports of a splendid and costly American force gathering in the Middle East — merchant vessels

putting to sea loaded with armored vehicles, helicopters, large stores of ammunition; the air base at Qatar upgraded with a runway convenient to heavy bombers and equipped with tents capable of housing 3,800 troops; a premium of \$2 a barrel added to the price of Arabian oil to meet any sudden shift of supply or demand. Speaking to a battery of press cameras in Crawford, Texas, President Bush said that yes, he was aware of questions about the wisdom of invading Iraq (the doubts expressed both by members of his own party and, increasingly, in various alarmed sectors of the national news media), and yes, he would "listen very carefully" to what other people had to say, but no, he didn't think it necessary to complicate the decision with too much extraneous discussion. "America needs to know," he said, "I'll be making up my mind based upon the latest intelligence and how best to protect our own country plus our friends and allies."

Unwilling to expose "the latest intelligence" to the vulgar, democratic light of day, the President reserves the right to do what he, and he alone ("forward-looking and resolute," as brave as Alcibiades, disinclined to "wait on events, while dangers gather"), deems just. Taken together with the proven incompetence of the American intelligence agencies and the delusions of military grandeur cherished by the secretary of defense, the President's belated assurance that he would "continue to consult" ("When I say I'm a patient man, I mean I'm a patient man . . .") sounded both grudging and false. He had been shaking the fist of war at Iraq for two years, talking up the prospect of "regime change" to audiences both foreign and domestic, and how could the noble heir to the throne of Teddy Roosevelt retreat from his promise of retribution frightful to contemplate and terrible to behold?

The question was framed not by the President himself but by several Washington operatives closely allied with the administration and currently serving on the Pentagon's Defense Review Board. James Schlesinger, former secretary of defense, spoke for the jingoist majority: "Given all we have said as a leading world power about the necessity of regime change in Iraq means that our credibility would be badly damaged if that regime change did not take place."

The ancient Greeks at least had a prize in view — the harbors of Sicily and the wealth of Carthage; the Bush Administration erases the distinction between the reasons of state and the uses of publicity, and if we invade Iraq apparently we'll be doing so to make credible the President's boyish and theatrical saber-rattling with a blurb from the U.S. Air Force.

As a form of misgovernment that satisfies all the definitions set forth at the head of this essay in the epigraph borrowed from Barbara Tuchman's book *The March of Folly*, I can think of none more disastrous than the failure to distinguish fiction from fact, to substitute for the waging of war the making of war movies. Mark Twain remarked on the stupidity in 1905 during the American occupation of the Philippines. Objecting to the fraudulent piety of statesmen who don't know what they're saying, Twain wrote a story, "The War Prayer," in which an "aged stranger" enters a church where the congregation has been listening to an heroic sermon about the glory to be won in battle by young patriots armed with the love of God. Motioning the startled minister to stand aside, the

aged stranger improvises a bitter peroration that makes clear the true meaning of the prayer:

O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun flames of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it — for our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet! We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.

The story didn't see the light of print until 1923, thirteen years after Twain's death. The editors to whom he tendered the manuscript thought it "unsuitable" for publication at a moment of high and patriotic feeling.

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