

As War Approaches

Both the Iraqi and American governments now regard war as inevitable. President Bush has said that even the destruction of all remaining prohibited or questionable weapons by Iraq will not deter him; only Saddam Husain's removal might. On Iraq's part, Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz told me in a two-hour meeting I had with him in Baghdad that his government would continue to do all in its power to comply with United Nations resolutions but that it did not intend either to flee the country or to commit suicide. "America has long since decided to attack Iraq," he said, "and nothing Iraq could do would prevent it."

In a visit to Washington, I found knowledgeable people split into two camps so divergent from one another that they seem to be seeing different worlds. The U.S. Government position, well reported in the press and shown hourly on television, portrays an Iraq hell-bent on the destruction of America through the use of its store of chemical, biological and even nuclear weapons. Secretary of State Colin Powell provided the U.N. Security Council on February 5 with what President Bush said was "irrefutable and undeniable" proof of Iraqi deadly capacity and determination to wage war against America in concert with Usama bin Ladin's *al-Qaida*.

Much of that "proof" has been disputed by former and current State Department and CIA officials. One senior CIA officer, who declined to be named, even categorized the evidence as worthless "garbage." Worse, some allege that the pro-war officials knew that they had no worthwhile evidence but withheld that knowledge from the public. Critics pointed out to me that the evidence rested on two foundations: what defectors reportedly said and what satellite photos allegedly showed.

The most important defector, Lt. General Husain Kamil, (Saddam's son-in-law whom he executed for treason in 1996) was reported by Newsweek on February 24 as actually having said the opposite of what the American government quoted him as saying. He said, "All weapons – biological, chemical, missile, nuclear – were destroyed" but was quoted as saying that Iraq had hidden them.

The British government's contribution to the evidence, purportedly based on secret intelligence sources and described by Secretary of State Power to the Security Council as sophisticated and accurate, was laughed out of court when it was shown to have been based on an essay by a university student from Baltimore who had never visited Iraq and some several-years-old articles published in the English press.

At best, these briefing leave much in doubt. Doubts about them have not been reported extensively in the major American media, but they have occasioned a flurry of e-mails and speeches all over America, England and Europe.

Apart from the sensational reports, critics of the pro-war American government policy point out that Iraq is a small, poorly-armed country, isolated by distance and surrounded by far-stronger neighbors, unable to harm America today but, if attacked, potentially the source of a new generation of America-hating terrorists.

But they too agree that war is almost inevitable.

What are we to make of the divergent views of the Bush-Blair camp, the highly experienced diplomatic and intelligence experts and officials of Iraq and other Arab states?

As a historian and former planner of American policy, I have been trying to

understand three things: first, is war really inevitable? Second, if America attacks Iraq, what is likely to happen? And, third, what are the long-term consequences?

Although these questions are of fundamental importance not only to Iraq but also to the health and well-being of Europeans and Americans, they are rarely asked. Many people in both Baghdad and Washington have told me that it is too late even to ask them. To the contrary, we should have learned from the Vietnam War that we will spend years, perhaps decades, wishing we had answered them. Here are some of my answers.

War is almost certain; indeed it has begun. Knowledgeable Americans in close touch with the White House and Pentagon even put a date on the major campaign: the third or fourth week of March. Journalists have discovered, and the American military has admitted, that not only is the move toward the frontiers of Iraq of sufficient forces nearly complete but that special troops and undercover espionage agents are already operating in Iraq authorized to kill Saddam and to overthrow the regime. British and American aircraft started three weeks ago to bomb Iraqi anti-aircraft installations in the south of Iraq. Unannounced, war has actually started.

The “wild card” in what many see as a game of high-stakes poker is what the Turkish government will do. Until last night (March 2) the American government assumed that the Turkish parliament would agree to let American forces operate from Turkish territory (in return for a payment of roughly \$30 billion and a free hand in Kurdistan). It had already positioned supply ships off the main southern Turkish port ready to equip an American division. And it had warned its terrified Kurdish allies that it was dumping them. The Americans were stunned when the Turkish Parliament voted down the proposal. If the Turkish parliament cannot be persuaded to change its vote, the planned campaign against Iraq will have to undergo a fundamental revision.

In Baghdad, despite having said that doing so was a virtual “death warrant” for his regime, Saddam began yesterday the destruction of Iraq’s medium range missiles. His act was purely symbolic, Tariq Aziz told me. Iraqis knew it would not stop an attack. “The only reason the inspectors are here,” he said, “is to give an excuse for what American has already decided to do. The war will come. We will not run away. But America may find a nasty surprise.”

Aziz would not elaborate that “nasty surprise.” So consider my second question, what is likely to happen when America attacks.

The small group of men identified as advisers to whom President Bush listens say that Iraqis so hate Saddam that they will be out in the streets, even in front of their demolished houses, waving American flags when the troops arrive.

The Baghdadis of all walks of life know war as few Europeans or Americans – and certainly neither Bush nor Blair who have never heard a shot fired in anger -- do. Realists, Iraqis know that buried under demolished houses will be the bodies of mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, husbands and wives and many children. And they know that they can do almost nothing to protect themselves. Stunned by reports of hundreds of missiles, thousands of “smart bombs” and, perhaps, tactical nuclear weapons American government advisers have told them it would hurl at them, no one I saw or talked with is digging trenches, piling up sandbags or even storing emergency rations. They are strangely mute, even seemingly obvious to the coming storm.

My third question is what then? Both the Anglo-Americans and Iraqis, I think, have missed the likely course of events. American military planners believe that a house-to-

house guerrilla war is unlikely. The most wildly optimistic assessment holds that 99 out of each 100 Iraqis will welcome the Americans with smiles on their faces. But in Baghdad alone, a city of 6 million, that will leave at least 60,000 people who, thinking of dead and dying relatives, lying under the rubble of their houses, will be consumed with hatred for America.

Their numbers will quickly grow. Even in the best of circumstances, armies make poor neighbors to civilians. Power breeds contempt for powerlessness and powerlessness breeds hatred for power. More important, nationalism will assert itself: natives will want the foreigners to get out. This is not just an Arab-American phenomenon. America experienced it in Vietnam in the 1960s. Indeed, the stationing of British troops in Boston, long ago and mostly forgotten today, was one of the main causes of the American Revolution in 1775. No matter how benign the Americans will think themselves to be as they “restructure” Iraq, the Iraqis will quickly come to see American soldiers as heirs to British imperialists. Americans may be oblivious to that piece of recent history, but Iraqis are not.

It is, of course, for this reason that Usama bin Ladin has urged the Iraqis to fight America. He hates the Iraqi “Socialist infidels,” as he called them,” but an Anglo-American invasion will give his cause a whole new generation of potential recruits. Thus, the real winner in the American policy is likely to be Usama bin Ladin.

William R. Polk

© William R. Polk, February 23

William R. Polk taught Middle Eastern politics and history and the Arabic language at Harvard University until President Kennedy appointed him to the Policy Planning Council of the U.S. Department of State. He was in charge of planning American policy for most of the Islamic world until 1965 when he became professor of history at the University of Chicago and founded its Middle Eastern Studies Center. Later he also became president of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. Among his many books are *The United States and the Arab World*; *The Elusive Peace: The Middle East in the Twentieth Century* and *Neighbors and Strangers: The Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs*.