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A war with Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein would be the first test case in the Bush administration's larger strategy for projecting U.S. power and influence in the post-Cold War world. Here's an overview of the people, the events, the major statements, and the policy battles behind what's become known as the Bush Doctrine.

Feb. 28, 1991

The Gulf War's Ragged Ending; U.S. Decides on Containment Policy for Iraq

General Norman Schwarzkopf (l) and Paul Wolfowitz (r)

With a Gulf War cease fire declared, President Bush, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell believe Saddam's hold on Iraq is tenuous. Bush urges Iraqis to rise up. They do, and within days Saddam has lost control of southern Iraq. But the rebellion is soon overwhelmed by Saddam's forces, which include helicopter gunships, and Bush orders U.S. troops not to intervene. It is estimated that thousands of Shiites were killed.

The failed uprising is a defining moment for neo-conservatives such as Richard Perle, William Kristol, and Paul Wolfowitz. Wolfowitz complains that the U.S. inaction is comparable to "idly watching a mugging."

With Saddam clinging to power, Bush decides on a containment strategy towards Iraq: tough U.N. inspections, economic sanctions, and no-fly zones to protect the Kurds in the north and south of the country.

1992

First Hints of a Preemption Strategy

Paul Wolfowitz, under secretary of defense for policy (the Pentagon's third-highest ranking civilian), takes the lead in drafting an internal set of military guidelines, called a "Defense Planning Guidance," which is routinely prepared every few years by the Defense Department.

Wolfowitz's draft argues for a new military and political strategy in a post-Cold War world. Containment, it says, is a relic of the Cold War. America should talk loudly, carry a big stick, and use its military power to preempt the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). And if America has to act alone, so be it. (Read excerpts from the Wolfowitz draft.)

Controversy erupts after the draft is leaked to the press. The White House orders Defense Secretary Cheney to rewrite it. In the new draft there is no mention of preemption or U.S. willingness to act alone.

Jan. 20, 1993

Bill Clinton Becomes President; Iraq Containment Policy Continues

During the Clinton administration, Saddam repeatedly pushes the envelope on U.N. inspections and sanctions.

For a detailed chronology of Saddam Hussein's battles with U.N. weapons inspectors, see FRONTLINE's 1999 report "Spying on Saddam."

In 1995, Saddam's son-in-law, who is head of Iraq's WMD program, defects and tells inspectors about Iraq's arsenal. Armed with the new information, the U.N. inspectors raid Iraq's main biological weapons plant and destroy the equipment and growth medium. But most of the chemical and biological weapons the inspectors believe to have been manufactured is never found.

Jan. 26, 1998

Hawks Send Open Letter to Clinton

Letter to Clinton

A group of neo-conservatives, who have formed The Project for a New American Century, argue for a much stronger U.S. global leadership exercised through "military strength and moral clarity."

In an open letter to Clinton, the group warns that the policy of containing Iraq is "dangerously inadequate." They write:

The only acceptable strategy is one that eliminates the possibility that Iraq will be able to use or threaten to use weapons of mass destruction. In the near term, this means a willingness to undertake military action as diplomacy is clearly failing. In the long term, it means removing Saddam Hussein and his regime from power. That now needs to become the aim of American foreign policy.

The letter's signatories include Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, William Kristol, and other current members of George W. Bush's administration, including Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Under Secretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton.

Summer-Fall 1998

Saddam Blocks Weapons Inspectors

In early August, Saddam suspends cooperation with weapons inspectors and on Oct. 31 shuts down all inspections. The inspectors say they have evidence that Saddam had created thousands of tons of chemical and biological agents and that he is working on a nuclear device.

In November, Clinton -- in the midst of the Monica Lewinsky scandal -- orders a bombing campaign against Iraq, but calls it off at the last minute when U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan works out a deal in which Iraq promises to unconditionally cooperate with U.N. inspectors. Within days of the inspectors' return, however, Iraq returns to intimidation and withholding information.

Dec. 16-19, 1998

Operation Desert Fox

U.S. and British military forces launch a four-day air and cruise missile campaign against approximately 100 key Iraqi military targets to punish Saddam for defying U.N. weapons inspections.

On Dec. 16, the day the bombing begins, the U.N. withdraws all weapons inspectors. [Inspections will not resume in Iraq until November 2002, following passage of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1441.]

March 1999

George W. Bush Considers Presidential Run

The Texas Governor's Mansion

Bush sets up an exploratory committee for a presidential campaign and foreign policy experts descend on Austin, Texas, to help prepare him for a White House run.

His tutors include both neo-conservative hawks, such as Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld, and pragmatic realists, including Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice. During the campaign, neither side will really know where it stands with the candidate.

Jan. 20, 2001

The Second Bush Presidency Begins

Both hawks and realists present Bush with candidates for foreign policy posts in the new administration. The hawks end up with three important jobs: Lewis "Scooter" Libby becomes Cheney's chief of staff, Donald Rumsfeld becomes secretary of defense, and Paul Wolfowitz becomes deputy secretary of defense. But Colin Powell's nomination as secretary of state is viewed as a formidable counterweight to the Pentagon hawks.

The two groups express varying views on how to deal with Saddam Hussein. The hawks develop a military option and push for increased aid to the Iraqi opposition. Colin Powell advocates "smart sanctions" that would allow more humanitarian goods into Iraq, while tightening controls on items that could have military applications.

Sept. 11, 2001

Terrorists Attack World Trade Center and Pentagon

In his address to the nation on the evening of Sept. 11, Bush decides to include a tough new passage about punishing those who harbor terrorists. He announces that the U.S. will "make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them."

To many observers, the president's words set the tone and direction for the Bush administration's policy on Afghanistan and Iraq.

Sept. 13, 2001

Wolfowitz v. Powell

Wolfowitz speaking at a Pentagon briefing

Two days later, Wolfowitz expands on the president's words at a Pentagon briefing. He seems to signal that the U.S. will enlarge its campaign against terror to include Iraq:

"I think one has to say it's not just simply a matter of capturing people and holding them accountable, but removing the sanctuaries, removing the support systems, ending states who sponsor terrorism. And that's why it has to be a broad and sustained campaign."

Colin Powell and others are alarmed by what they view as Wolfowitz's inflammatory words about "ending states." Powell later responds during a press briefing: "We're after ending terrorism. And if there are states and regimes, nations that support terrorism, we hope to persuade them that it is in their interest to stop doing that. But I think ending terrorism is where I would like to leave it, and let Mr. Wolfowitz speak for himself."

Sept. 15, 2001

Camp David Meeting: Iraq Debated

Four days after the Sept. 11 attacks, Bush gathers his national security team at Camp David for a war council. Wolfowitz argues that now is the perfect time to move against state sponsors of terrorism, including Iraq. But Powell tells the president that an international coalition would only come together for an attack on Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, not an invasion of Iraq.

The war council votes with Powell. Rumsfeld abstains. The president ultimately decides that the war's first phase will be Afghanistan. The question of Iraq will be reconsidered later.

Sept. 20, 2001

Speech to Joint Session of Congress

President George W. Bush addressing a Joint Session of Congress (photo: Eric Draper/White House)

Bush's address to Congress builds on his speech on the night of Sept. 11:

"We will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime."

Bush's speech also outlines a vision for a strong American leadership in the world, a leadership that would project America's power and influence:

"Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom -- the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time -- now depends on us. Our nation -- this generation -- will lift a dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail."

Jan. 2002

State of the Union Speech Signals Possible Action in Iraq

Bush's State of the Union address introduces the idea of an "axis of evil" that includes Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, and signals the U.S. will act preemptively to deal with such nations.

"North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens. ...

"Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror....

"Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. ...

"States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.

"We'll be deliberate, yet time is not on our side. I will not wait on events, while dangers gather. I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons."

June 2002

Bush Calls for a Policy of Preemption

In a graduation speech at West Point, Bush cites the realities of a new post-Cold War era and outlines a major shift in national security strategy -- from containment to preemption.

"Our security will require all Americans to be forward-looking and resolute, to be ready for preemptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives."

The president also calls for an American hegemony: "America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge." Both strategic aims -- preemption and hegemony -- echo the recommendations Paul Wolfowitz made back in 1992 in his controversial Defense Planning Guidance draft.

August 2002

Within Administration, Open Debate on Iraq

The chambers of the U.N. Security Council

Powell reports trouble getting U.S. allies on board for a war with Iraq and wants to consult the U.N. At a private dinner with Bush on Aug. 5, Powell warns the president that the U.S. should not act unilaterally and must fully consider the economic and political consequences of war -- particularly in the Middle East.

Powell's view is championed by Brent Scowcroft, former National Security Adviser in the Bush I administration, who publishes an op-ed in The Wall Street Journal on Aug. 15 in which he argues that Bush is moving too quickly on Iraq, and advocates pressing for the return of U.N. inspectors.

Soon after, Vice President Cheney emerges as the administration voice advocating action against Iraq. In a Nashville speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Cheney warns that "a return of inspectors would provide no assurance whatsoever of [Saddam's] compliance with U.N. resolutions."

Cheney also outlines a larger, long-term strategy whereby regime change in Iraq could transform the Middle East:

"Regime change in Iraq would bring about a number of benefits to the region. When the gravest of threats are eliminated, the freedom-loving peoples of the region will have a chance to promote the values that can bring lasting peace. As for the reaction of the Arab 'street,' the Middle East expert Professor Fouad Ajami predicts that after liberation, the streets in Basra and Baghdad are 'sure to erupt in joy in the same way the throngs in Kabul greeted the Americans.' Extremists in the region would have to rethink their strategy of Jihad. Moderates throughout the region would take heart. And our ability to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process would be enhanced, just as it was following the liberation of Kuwait in 1991."

As Bush leaves for an August vacation in Crawford, Texas, he agrees to take his case to the U.N. and asks his advisers to start preparing the speech.

Sept. 12, 2002

Bush U.N. Address on Iraq

In the United Nations speech, Bush seems to be siding with Powell in calling for a new U.N. resolution on Iraq. But the president also warns:

"The purposes of the United States should not be doubted. The Security Council resolutions will be enforced -- the just demands of peace and security will be met -- or action will be unavoidable. And a regime that has lost its legitimacy will also lose its power."

Sept. 17, 2002

U.S. National Security Strategy Released

Twenty months into his presidency, George W. Bush releases his administration's National Security Strategy (NSS). It is the first time the various elements of the Bush Doctrine have been formally articulated in one place. The 33-page document presents a bold and comprehensive reformulation of U.S. foreign policy. It outlines a new and muscular American posture in the world -- a posture that will rely on preemption to deal with rogue states and terrorists harboring weapons of mass destruction. It states that America will exploit its military and economic power to encourage "free and open societies." It states for the first time that the U.S. will never allow its military supremacy to be challenged as it was during the Cold War. And the NSS insists that when America's vital interests are at stake, it will act alone, if necessary.

Policy analysts note that there are many elements in the 2002 NSS document which bear a strong resemblance to recommendations presented in Paul Wolfowitz's controversial Defense Planning Guidance draft written in 1992 under the first Bush administration.

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Paul Wolfowitz, then-under secretary of defense for policy, supervised the drafting of a 1992 policy statement on America's mission in the post-Cold War era. Called the "Defense Planning Guidance," it is an internal set of military guidelines that typically is prepared every few years by the Defense Department. This policy guidance is distributed to military leaders and civilian Defense Department heads to provide them with a geopolitical framework for assessing their force level and budgetary needs.

The 46-page classified document circulated for several weeks at senior levels in the Pentagon. But controversy erupted after it was leaked to The New York Times and The Washington Post and the White House ordered then-Defense Secretary Dick Cheney to rewrite it.

Key Points/Excerpts:

The number one objective of U.S. post-Cold War political and military strategy should be preventing the emergence of a rival superpower.

"Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival. This is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defense strategy and requires that we endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power. These regions include Western Europe, East Asia, the territory of the former Soviet Union, and Southwest Asia.

"There are three additional aspects to this objective: First the U.S must show the leadership necessary to establish and protect a new order that holds the promise of convincing potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture to protect their legitimate interests. Second, in the non-defense areas, we must account sufficiently for the interests of the advanced industrial nations to discourage them from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political and economic order. Finally, we must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role."

Another major U.S. objective should be to safeguard U.S. interests and promote American values.

According to the draft document, the U.S. should aim "to address sources of regional conflict and instability in such a way as to promote increasing respect for international law, limit international violence, and encourage the spread of democratic forms of government and open economic systems."

The draft outlines several scenarios in which U.S. interests could be threatened by regional conflict: "access to vital raw materials, primarily Persian Gulf oil; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles, threats to U.S. citizens from terrorism or regional or local conflict, and threats to U.S. society from narcotics trafficking."

The draft relies on seven scenarios in potential trouble spots to make its argument -- with the primary case studies being Iraq and North Korea.

If necessary, the United States must be prepared to take unilateral action.

There is no mention in the draft document of taking collective action through the United Nations.

The document states that coalitions "hold considerable promise for promoting collective action," but it also states the U.S. "should expect future coalitions to be ad hoc assemblies" formed to deal with a particular crisis and which may not outlive the resolution of the crisis.

The document states that what is most important is "the sense that the world order is ultimately backed by the U.S." and that "the United States should be postured to act independently when collective action cannot be orchestrated" or in a crisis that calls for quick response.

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