

Making the Middle East Safe— for Bin Laden

Are Wolfowitz and Perle the terror master's agents of influence?

By Martin Sieff

A TYRANNICAL BUT SECULAR and stable regime has been toppled in Iraq. The Syrians with good reason fear they are next. And an extraordinary campaign of calumny continues against the Saudis: The Bush administration's policy towards the Middle East is one that was inconceivable when it took office less than two and a half years ago.

Underlying the other apparent motives, such as control of oil and support for Israel, lies a more ambitious, and almost eschatological, vision. It is revealed in a phrase that has become beloved of neo-conservatives and those who fancy themselves tough *realpolitik* analysts of the post-9/11 world. That phrase is "draining the swamp." The predominantly Arab Muslim nations of the Middle East must be remade as democracies to "drain the swamp" of the anti-Western—especially anti-American and anti-Israeli—hatreds that seethe within them. Only this way will the enormous, and growing, popular support Osama bin Laden and his heirs enjoy be dissipated. So goes the argument.

But like so many general explanations for more complex processes, this policy is not only wrong, it is also guaranteed to produce the exact opposite of what it promises. Far from "draining the swamp," it is systematically demolishing the dikes that hold back the most ferocious passions of anti-Western extremism that would otherwise remain contained.

The evidence for this is already apparent in Iraq, only weeks after the downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime. The *Washington Post* noted on April 23 that both State Department and Pentagon officials were astonished at the vast popularity, fervor, and organization the Shi'ite majority in southern Iraq had already exhibited less than three weeks after the collapse of the Ba'ath government. The story carried the all-too-revealing title, "U.S. Planners Surprised by Strength of Iraqi Shiites." The authors began by reporting, "Bush administration officials say they underestimated the Shiites' organizational strength and are unprepared to prevent the rise of an anti-American Islamic fundamentalist government in the country."

recognizing that other approaches may be necessary.

On April 25, Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum, circulated an article he wrote that argued, "Iraq needs a democratically-minded Iraqi strongman." For the United States must prevent the Iraqi people, or at least the Shi'ite majority of them, from saying "Yes to Islam," or "Yes to Iranian-style militant Islam." Therefore, some secular Iraqi dictator ruthless enough to prevent such a takeover is now required.

Well, of course, until April 9 this year, the Iraqis had such a ruler. His name was Saddam Hussein.

The enthusiastic support for virulently anti-American forms of Islam now sweeping southern Iraq is not unique to

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"Surprised"? "Underestimated"? "Unprepared"? What do we pay these people their six-figure salaries for?

What is the new neoconservative prescription for this phenomenon that none of them appears to have anticipated—though many others among us clearly did? True-believing neocons still recite the mantra of full democracy in Iraq. Some wiser heads, however, are already

Shi'ites, as many neoconservative pundits have already opined.

Neil MacFarquhar wrote a piece in the *New York Times* on April 13 headlined, "Humiliation and Rage Stalk the Arab World." And the Arabs are predominantly Sunni, not Shi'ite. The title of a companion piece by Alan Cowell—"A Tyrant Disappears, So Who Feels Safe?"—had a particularly eerie resonance,

appearing as it did only four days after Saddam's regime collapsed.

Saddam has indeed been ousted. Syrian President Bashar Assad may be next in line for the same treatment. And the amazing barrage of Saudi-bashing on the mainstream op-ed pages of the U.S. media has already risen to its old post-9/11 stridency. But will this really make us safer, as Cowell rightly asked? Will it disperse, or only further intensify, the humiliation and rage sweeping the Arab world that MacFarquhar documented? And if the Iraqi people are indeed given the freedom to choose their own rulers, as President Bush so movingly promised them, how can one doubt that they will immediately raise up leaders who hate him—and us?

Yet the ideologically driven neoconservative push to “drain the swamp” of the Middle East by pursuing regime change throughout shows no sign of diminishing. Who, then is in position to profit from this destruction or mortal weakening of secular or moderate governments throughout the region? Not the American people or the national interests of the U.S. That is for sure. Not Israel either. It is notable that Israeli officials have been signaling recently that they do not favor “regime change” in Syria, since they recognize that the only credible alternative government there would come from the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood—a natural ally for bin Laden if ever there were one.

Who then does stand to benefit from current U.S. policy? Who else but the man who most wants to see the current governments of the Middle East destroyed so that he can proclaim the New Caliphate and True *Jihad* against the West? None other than bin Laden himself.

We already see that the dethroning of Saddam—for so long relentlessly urged by Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, and their acolytes—has served to unleash Islamic fundamentalism throughout

Iraq. And there is no reason to doubt that the discrediting or toppling of the governments of Syria and Saudi Arabia will do the same.

Are Perle and Wolfowitz, therefore, deliberately acting as bin Laden's Agents of Influence? Presumably not, yet it is hard to argue otherwise, as they are so obviously doing what he wants. At the very least, they are repeating the catastrophic error of Jimmy Carter a quarter century ago when he undercut the Shah of Iran by urging democratization on him, only to get instead—Ayatollah Khomeini.

It would be a disaster for America, the

West, and Israel too, for that matter, if the current weak and corrupt governments that run most of the Middle East were to be overthrown. For it is bin Laden and his ilk that would sweep in to reap the rewards, just as they have begun to do in Iraq.

This cannot happen unless the power of the United States is deliberately mobilized to undermine the region's major governments. Yet that is exactly what is now happening. The Middle East is being made safe all right. But not for us. ■

Martin Sieff is Chief International Analyst for United Press International.

Missile Defense Bait and Switch

Protecting the homeland or building the empire?

By Charles V. Peña

PRESIDENT BUSH ANNOUNCED last December that the United States would deploy a missile defense by 2004. The plan calls for deploying ten ground-based interceptors at Fort Greely, Alaska in 2004 and another ten in 2005 or 2006. But this initial deployment is a phantom missile defense rather than a functional military system providing any meaningful protection for the American public.

The ground-based midcourse system is still in a test and evaluation phase. Eight tests have been conducted, five of which have been considered successful by the military. So even under artificial test conditions, the system is only about 60 percent effective. More realistic tests

(including against decoys and other countermeasures) need to be done before being able to make any hard conclusions about whether such a system is operationally effective and reliable against real missiles. Indeed, the Pentagon Office of Operational Test and Evaluation states that the system “has yet to demonstrate significant operational capability.”

The latest scare fueling the rush to deploy missile defense is CIA Director George Tenet's affirmative response when asked on Capitol Hill whether North Korea currently has a missile capable of hitting the West Coast of the United States. The doomsayers were quick to proclaim that Americans are