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Special Report

March 14, 2003

DENIAL IN THE WHITE HOUSE; RESISTANCE IN FRANCE

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DENIAL IN THE WHITE HOUSE; RESISTANCE IN FRANCE

*Marvin Zonis
(writing from Paris)*

"The visionary lies to himself, the liar only to others."

Friedrich Nietzsche had it right. And his quote provides us with an insight into Bush policy towards Iraq. The President is not a liar, but he is a visionary, as are many in his administration. The desire to remake the Middle East, to eliminate terrorism worldwide, and dictatorship and conflict in the region, are all visionary, idealistic, Wilsonian notions. In the service of that vision, however, the President appears to be lying to himself, or to be in a state of denial. If that is too harsh, then at the least, President Bush certainly appears to have banished all doubt to reach a sense of rightness that brooks no uncertainty.

In his 2000 Presidential debates with Al Gore, Governor Bush declared, "If we are an arrogant nation, they will resent us. If we are a humble nation, but strong, they will welcome us." Somewhere along the path of war with Iraq, the President forgot that insight.

The visionary President's seeming denial goes far beyond the coming war against Iraq. Take his tax proposals. "Nobel-prize winning economist, Joseph Stiglitz, marveled that the administration had pulled off a negative hat trick: an economic plan that doesn't stimulate the sluggish economy, aggravates long-term fiscal problems and exacerbates growing economic inequality." (According to Al Hunt in the [Wall Street Journal](#) of March 13, 2003, referring to an article by Joseph Stiglitz in the [New York Review of Books](#), February 12, 2003.)

But mostly, the President seems to be in denial—"lying" to himself—about the war.

Some examples of risks worth worrying more about:

The President has consistently warned that Saddam Hussein was a menace to the United States because he would use his weapons of mass destruction against the United States or pass them to terrorists. But the CIA, in a letter to the Senate Intelligence Committee, estimated the probability as low that Iraq would either attack the US with such weapons or give them to terrorists, except under one condition. That condition: "Should Saddam conclude that a US-led attack could no longer be deterred, he probably would become much less constrained in adopting terrorist actions."

Or, if you consider an analysis from the CIA to be unreliable, how about an analysis from the military? Retired General Wesley Clark, former NATO commander, puts his opposition to war against Iraq this way, "They picked war over law. They picked a unilateralist approach over a multilateral approach. They picked conventional forces over special-operations forces. And they picked Saddam Hussein as a target over Usama bin Laden." His principal concern, however, is none of these.

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Nor is it that the US military would find it difficult to crush the Iraqi army. Instead, it is about what comes after the overthrow of Saddam. General Clark refers to "the unpredictability of consequences." The Shiites and Sunnis, the Kurds and Arabs, the Turks and Iranians make for a potentially explosive mix. Not for nothing has Saddam been a ruthless tyrant over his peoples.

Or, a different General. No one ever doubted the toughness of four-star Marine General Anthony Zinni. Now also retired, Zinni was the Commander in Chief of the US Central Command and Middle East envoy for the administration of George W. Bush. Al Hunt, in his March 13, 2003 [Wall Street Journal](#) article, reports that Zinni has no fear of the Iraqi military. But he does wonder why the administration has elevated Iraq to pride of place. "Iraq is not an imminent threat," he suggested. General Zinni also worries about the post-Saddam problems. "We are going into this black hole. . . a minefield," he declared, according to Hunt. "We don't know what the Kurds and Shia are going to do. Will they accept Sunni police and governance? What will be the reaction of the Arab streets?"

Or, Jimmy Carter. In an op-ed in the March 13, 2003, [New York Times](#), Carter was especially tough on his successor.

"As a Christian and as a president who was severely provoked by international crises, I became thoroughly familiar with the principles of a just war, and it is clear that a substantially unilateral attack on Iraq does not meet these standards. This is an almost universal conviction of religious leaders, with the most notable exception of a few spokesmen of the Southern Baptist Convention who are greatly influenced by their commitment to Israel based on eschatological, or final days, theology.

"But now, with our own national security not directly threatened and despite the overwhelming opposition of most people and governments in the world, the United States seems determined to carry out military and diplomatic action that is almost unprecedented in the history of civilized nations. The first stage of our widely publicized war plan is to launch 3,000 bombs and missiles on a relatively defenseless Iraqi population within the first few hours of an invasion, with the purpose of so damaging and demoralizing the people that they will change their obnoxious leader, who will most likely be hidden and safe during the bombardment."

The vast array of risks—from Saddam's using weapons of mass destruction against US troops to torching his oil fields to the supercharging of Muslim hatred of the US to the launching of new terrorist attacks to internal strife in Iraq and conflict between the Turkish and even Iranian armed forces and the Kurds to weakening the trans Atlantic alliance—seem to be utterly missing from the President's concerns.

Resistance in France

But they are far from absent from the minds of the French. (If Nietzsche is right, that must mean there are no visionaries here.) From extensive conversations in the French capital with policy specialists and with people on the street, I have yet to hear or experience the slightest "Anti-Americanism," which appears to

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be a staple of US press commentaries. I have, however, run into universal disdain for US policy towards Iraq and widespread dismay at US foreign policy in general.

Americans seem to view this French opposition, and especially President Chirac's pledge to veto a second UN resolution authorizing war, as traitorous perfidy. In fact, there are many sound bases to the French position.

The most important is the French understanding of UN Security Council Resolution 1441. The French see that Resolution as being about disarming Iraq. But the Bush administration sees it as about regime change (and about occupation and about transforming the Middle East). So Secretary of State Powell's presentation to the Security Council was effective in showing that Iraq is and has been guilty of not cooperating fully with the UN. But the French position, accepting that, is that more intrusive inspections and not war are the proper remedy. War for the French, unlike for the Germans, is appropriate. But only as a last resort, when intrusive inspections fail. French Foreign Minister Villepin rejected the latest British proposals yesterday on these very grounds. "We cannot accept the British proposals," he said, "as they are based on a logic of an automatic recourse to force. It's not a question of giving Iraq a few more days before committing to using force. It's about making resolute progress towards peaceful disarmament, mapped out by inspections that offer a credible alternative to war."

There is no indication that those inspections are failing. To the contrary, fearing a US attack, Saddam is clearly cooperating more fully. The lesson for the French is that the US should keep up the pressure but not attack. Their fear is that a second UN Resolution would legitimate a US assault. (I read 1441 as the French do. Try it yourself: <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/2924254.html>.)

The French also resent what is widely perceived here as American bullying. It may be that President Bush considers his position to be "leadership." Here it is seen as the US deciding what the world will do and then browbeating other countries to accept that plan—US domination.

(Interestingly, Philip Stephens, the senior editor of the Financial Times has argued that Tony Blair's position is far closer to President Chirac than seems plausible. "Blair," according to Stephens, "is as frustrated as Chirac with the White House refusal to see that resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is pivotal in the war against terrorism. More broadly, the two men share the conviction that the security of the West depends ultimately on an evenhanded international system binding the strongest as well as the weakest to a set of rules. Britain fears U.S. unilateralism every bit as much as France does.")

The Determination of President Bush

How, in the face of the reservations of so many, could the President have so few? This is a man who having adopted the policy of regime change in Iraq is utterly firm in his belief in the rightness and righteousness of his policy. He has explained it as fulfilling his responsibility as President, having "sworn on the Bible to protect the Constitution of the United States." His zealotry comes from his visionary zeal. The danger, as Friedrich Nietzsche suggested is the denial that seems to have followed.