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INVADING IRAQ

by Marvin Zonis

Marvin Zonis argues that any policy towards Iraq is fraught with risks. Analyzing the risks of attacking Iraq to bring about regime change and the risks of not acting against Iraq, he argues that not attacking should be the preferred US option. Yet the Bush administration is likely to attack Iraq. Administration policy, he suggests, is being driven by a group of "Likudnik" hawks in the Bush administration.

Marvin Zonis + Associates, Inc., (MZ+A) helps firms assess, monitor and manage political risk. "Political risk" refers to the uncertainties that arise from instances of political instability (such as riots and coups), poor public policy (such as inflation and currency crises), and weak institutional frameworks (such as discriminatory regulations and ineffective legal systems). "Political risk management" refers to the development of processes, structures, and knowledge that allow firms to deal effectively with political risk.

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Why The War Is Likely to Happen

President Bush is a "what you see is what you get" kind of guy. Many Americans voted for him because he came across in the TV debates during the 2000 elections, as authentic, who was the same 'guy' from debate to debate, from speech to speech. Al Gore, to the contrary, seemed to be a different candidate from week to week.

Based on that sense of President Bush, I would make a small bet—but not a huge one—on a US invasion of Iraq. He said he would use force if necessary to bring about regime change in Iraq. He also has demanded Iraqi disarmament, suggesting that the ouster of Saddam might not be necessary if he were to disarm.

Saddam might agree to unfettered inspections. But the Bush administration will never trust him. They fear he will develop nuclear weapons in secret. That, like North Korea, he will spring a surprise on the world, acquire fissionable material from wayward Ukrainian generals or Russian criminals and just have a bomb.

President Bush has already unveiled a document legitimating a war against Saddam. The National Security Strategy of the United States, issued on September 20, 2002, makes it official US policy to launch "preemptive" wars.

"The United States has long maintained the option of preemptive actions to counter a sufficient threat to our national security. The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction- and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack. To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively.

"The United States will not use force in all cases to preempt emerging threats, nor should nations use preemption as a pretext for aggression. Yet in an age where the enemies of civilization openly and actively seek the world's most destructive technologies, the United States cannot remain idle while dangers gather. We will always proceed deliberately, weighing the consequences of our actions."

The US invasion of Iraq will come no matter what the Europeans think, no matter what resolutions the UN Security Council adopts or fails to adopt, no matter whether Hans Blix and UNMOVIC, the UN inspection team, returns or does not return to Iraq, gets into or is kept out of Saddam's palaces, or what inspectors find or do not find in the course of their searches.

The invasions will most likely come between the New Year and the end of March, 2003 after which the weather makes military operations on the ground in Iraq inordinately difficult.

Why the War Might Not Happen

Only one thing now appears likely to stop the US juggernaut—a regime change in Iraq before a US invasion.

The CIA is reported to have told President Bush in June 2002, that the chances of Saddam Hussein's assassination would be substantially enhanced by an imminent US invasion. An Iraqi insider, aware that his country was about to be subject to massive damage by the US military onslaught, might conclude that the wiser course was to assassinate Saddam to stop the US attack. Only the reality of a US attack might bring about the assassination that could produce regime change. The CIA analysis seems right on the mark. It is possible that as the reality of a US attack becomes palpable, Saddam will be killed.

The recent release of prisoners from Iraqi jails may, in fact, be a step towards the collapse of his regime. The notion that freed prisoners would be grateful to Saddam for their early release defies logic. The vast majority were imprisoned for reasons they and their families consider trivial or, in many cases, for no reasons at all. They will not stand with Saddam because he released them from years or decades of imprisonment from their mile square torture house in the Iraq desert.

Instead, Saddam may have lost his ability to impose the sine qua non of dictatorial rule—repression. There is no repression without jails. There are now no jails in Iraq. Saddam could round up the amnestied and reincarcerate them to restore dictatorial rule. More likely, their release represents a significant failure of Saddam's judgment. He has already demonstrated his capacity to make disastrous decisions—to invade Iran in 1980, to invade Kuwait in 1990, to refuse to withdraw from Kuwait before the US attack in 1991. This decision to open the jails is a significant cracking in the power and invincibility of his regime. Whether it develops into more widespread protests against his rule, like Eastern Europe in 1989, leading to its collapse or merely peters out, cannot now be determined.

One other factor might postpone the US attack—President Bush's determination may falter. He may decide that world events are so complex that the government, or at least the foreign policy apparatus, is overloaded, dealing with al Qaeda, Korean nukes, Israel-Palestine, India-Pakistan. He may listen to senior military officers who have clearly been unenthusiastic. The UN Security Council is also unenthusiastic and the President may determine he needs France and Russia for the war against al Qaeda. Ordering the assault now may just be too much, at least in these months.

What Are the Risks of Not Going to War

Iraq policy is fraught with risks. No matter what course the US adopts, the risks will be immense and non-quantifiable. The Bush administration is dealing with profound uncertainties.

The risks of not going to war to force regime change in Iraq are considerable. The US could instead insist on a tightened sanctions regime and more widespread and more intensive inspections of Iraqi weapons sites. But Saddam already has weapons of mass destruction. He has already weaponized chemical agents. He has biological agents (but probably has not weaponized them). He has lots of the pieces and lots of scientists and engineers with the talent for building a nuclear weapon but has no fissionable materials. He has some medium range rockets that can reach Riyadh, Tehran, Istanbul, Tel Aviv, and Cairo.

What had kept the US and the USSR from launching attacks against the interests of each other was the fear of the retaliation that would follow. President Bush has implied that Saddam can "threaten" the US with his 'Unmanned Aerial Vehicles.' Since those UAVs have a range of some 200 kilometers, Saddam cannot offer a direct threat to the US homeland. However, he could send those UAVs to deliver his chemical weapons against US troops in Kuwait. He could invade his neighbors again, as he did in 1980 and 1990. But he is unlikely to do any of these because, unlike the months preceding his invasion of Kuwait in 1990, he has been told again and again that hostile Iraqi military action outside its borders will lead to its obliteration.

Saddam may make bad strategic decisions and he may be erratic. (Perhaps his release of the prisoners can be chalked up to erratic decision-making under stress.) But he is a survivor. It is very difficult imaging his launching attacks on his neighbors in the face of certain destruction.

More worrisome than the risk of an Iraqi attack is the risk of Saddam's acquiring nuclear weapons. He has pursued that goal for twenty years and has not succeeded. But it would be foolhardy to bet that he will fail in the next twenty years, no matter how tight the sanctions and no matter how deep the inspections.

Even a nuclearized Iraq would be unlikely to attack its neighbors because it would be certain of retaliation, even nuclear retaliation. But two other possibilities loom. One is that conventional Iraqi aggression in the region would become more likely because the states against which Iraq aggressed would fear to retaliate against the Iraqi Homeland. Iraq would then have the nuclear deterrent that would enhance its safety and put other states at risk.

A second fear is that the Saddam would lose a nuclear weapon into the hands of terrorists—al Qaeda or others. Al Qaeda would hide the weapon and shift it around the world, eventually smuggling it into the US and exploding it in the heart of a major US city.

Saddam is a danger and the perpetuation of his regime is fraught with risks and uncertainties. But the risks and uncertainties of going to war against him appear to be even greater than the risks of not going to war. In the balance, the wiser course for the Bush administration would be to postpone any military action against Saddam.

What Are the Risks of Going to War

The risks following a US war against Saddam are staggering.

Saddam Preempts. Saddam, a rational decision maker, even if an erratic one, seeks to stay in power and will not use his weapons of mass destruction for fear of retaliation. But if he were facing an imminent US assault committed to regime change, he might then decide "après moi, le deluge." All bets would be off and he would throw his weapons

as far as he could throw them—at least as far as Tel Aviv. (This suggests that any US attack ought to come as a surprise to Saddam in order to minimize his chances to launch.)

US Casualties. It is clear that Saddam's military is vastly inferior to what it was in the first Gulf War while the US Armed Forces are vastly superior to what they were in 1991. This has led predictions of a roll over of the Iraqi army. But Saddam could adopt one strategy that would reduce the differential. He could take the 40,000 or so members of the Revolutionary Guards who would fight to preserve his regime and distribute them, with machine guns, in Baghdad apartments. Then the US would be faced with urban warfare, a particularly difficult and dangerous military operation. Saddam told a British newspaper, "If they come, we are ready. We will fight them on the streets, from the rooftops, from house to house." That strategy would certainly not bring Saddam victory. But it would cost the US (and certainly the Baghdadis) casualties.

Diversion from Controlling al Qaeda. No matter what the White House and Defense Department claim, making war against Saddam would be a massive diversion from the war against 'global terror' and al Qaeda. The US has identified 25 key al Qaeda leaders. The US knows the fate of only 8—dead or captured. Some 17 senior al Qaeda leaders, including Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri, are unaccounted for.

We also know that al Qaeda has been regrouping and has been responsible for successful recent terrorist outrages including the nightclub bombing in Bali, the attack on a French oil tanker off Yemen, two bombings in the Philippines, and the murder of a US soldier in Kuwait. None of these al Qaeda leaders and none of those outrages were connected to Saddam. We have an immediate and threatening global enemy—al Qaeda. The resources of the US should properly be focused on the immediate threat.

Supercharging Islamic Hatred for the US. There is virtually unanimous disdain, if not hatred, for US foreign policy across the Islamic world. Even so-called moderate Muslims see US policy as arrogant, heavy handed, and decidedly anti-Islamic. US policy towards the Palestine-Israel conflict is everywhere perceived as not merely one-sided but positively hostile to the Palestinians. No amount of US counter-claims or examples of pro-US foreign policies, e.g. in Kosova, has a chance of changing these perceptions.

A war against Iraq would confirm this hatred. The results could be catastrophic. Hordes of new recruits for al Qaeda would be produced. New volunteers for suicide bombing missions in Israel would be recruited. The Arab Middle East would be radicalized and moderate Muslims who seek to bring about a reformation in Islamic thinking would be sidetracked. Pro-Western Middle Eastern regimes—Egypt and Jordan, in particular—would tighten repression in order to stay in power, further slowing economic growth and raising the likelihood of political instability.

US Responsibility for a post-war Iraq. However the war is pursued, and even if the US targeted only Saddam's regime and its strategic assets, vast damage is likely to be done in Iraq. Moreover, the destruction of the hated regime will leave Iraq without a government. The US will have to step in. Reports from the Defense Department have suggested that the military is preparing to create a military government, similar to General MacArthur's rule in Tokyo. There are several differences. For one thing, the Japanese had been utterly defeated in years of combat. For another, the emperor was retained and the Japanese, obedient to hierarchy, obeyed their emperor. The Japanese were willing participants in the post-war US regime. Moreover, Japan was a centuries' old nation inhabited only by Japanese. Iraq is an artificial creation of the British following World War I and has never comfortably joined its Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shi'a Arabs into a single state. The challenges for the US would be formidable. Worse, the Bush administration has consistently reiterated its refusal to do "nation building."

Of course the burden would not fall exclusively on the US. The United Nations would be there. Other countries would help meet the financial burden. But the risks would be on the US and would likely develop in a fashion similar to Israel's experience in Lebanon, post-1982. After they had defeated the Palestinians and the religious militias and the central army, the Israelis began to take casualties. They fled the country in 1986.

Oil Price Spikes and Economic Costs. No matter what the increase in OPEC production before a US attack or the lifting of crude from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, count on oil prices to spike. The traders in the New York Merc would bid up prices, no matter what the level of OPEC production. How long the spike would last depends on whether or not Saddam damages Iraqi oil fields or those of his neighbors and how long the war lasts. It is certainly possible that the spike would be short lived and that the rapid resumption of Iraqi oil exports would lead to a plunge in oil prices, driven down by the end of the war premium or the expectation of vastly expanded, post-Saddam Iraqi exports.

But the risk of a long lasting spike would be great and the higher oil prices would drive the US economy into recession, as happened in 1991.

The Bush Administration: Massive Risks Without Doubt

These massive risks do not lead inescapably to the conclusion that a US war against Iraq would be misguided.

But that is the conclusion I reach.

At the very least, these risks ought to produce a great deal of hesitation and caution.

That does not seem to be the case with those in the Bush administration or those advising it who are the war's leading advocates—Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, Stephen Hadley, Richard Perle, Kenneth Adelman.

The reason, I believe, is that these men share an ideology about the position of the US in the world and its appropriate foreign policy that was formally the province of a marginal fringe but has now become the guiding world view of the Bush administration. (It is also the ideology that has driven Israel's Liked Party.) As distinct from the "Liberal/ Multilateralists" or the "Realists," these men are the "Hawks."

They believe that the United States has the power—economically and militarily—and the right—as the principal champion of liberal democratic values—to reorder the world as the US sees fit. The result will be a world safer for the United States and for all states in which democracy and the market economy will reign.

The last country that tried that was the Japanese with their "Co-Prosperity Sphere." They failed and so will the US under the Hawks.