

## ***Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq***

**by Michael MacDonald**

A Review by Marco Fernandez

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The Second Gulf War was doomed to fail even before it began: so argues Michael MacDonald in his new book, *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq*. To begin with, the war derived its impetus from faulty intelligence. Compounding this original error, the administration based the success of the broader strategic objectives of the war on an equally flawed premise: the United States could pursue regime change in Iraq in 2003 while enhancing its prestige around the world and furthering its interests in the Middle East.

Neoconservatives and hawkish liberals inside the Democratic Party believed the best way to project American power in the Middle East was by removing a longstanding foe of the United States, Saddam Hussein, and crafting a stable, democratic and capitalist Iraq. Contrary to their expectations, the Iraq War did not produce such an outcome.

*Overreach*, conveniently short yet full of international relations theory, is also a useful text for readers outside of academia. MacDonald's book is an attempt to set the record straight on several fronts. Using logic and documentary evidence in a lawyerly manner, MacDonald debunks several myths and common tropes concerning the Iraq War.

First, there was broad agreement at the highest levels of the Bush administration that Hussein possessed or was in pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. There were doubts among members of the intelligence community, the State Department, and the Energy Department, but top administration officials sincerely believed in the existence of these

weapons in Iraq. They suffered, MacDonald argues, from confirmation bias and groupthink. Meanwhile, a compliant media allowed many officials to confidently reinforce the credibility of their information.

Second, the author considers it highly unlikely that George W. Bush chose to invade Iraq in order to succeed where George H. W. Bush had failed. However, a psychoanalytic analysis of the president's relationship with his father does not suffice to explain the cornerstone of American foreign policy during the Second Gulf War. Ideology, though not a perfect indicator, is a stronger factor in explaining why certain people either opposed or supported what eventually became a war to transform Iraq and the region. For instance, Brent Scowcroft, George H.W. Bush's National Security Advisor and a foreign policy realist, opposed the invasion of Iraq in 2003. On the other hand, Paul Wolfowitz, a neoconservative working inside the Pentagon during both Gulf Wars, expressed disappointment that Bush 41 did not finish the job by going to Baghdad and pushed hard for Bush 43 to do as much.

Third, MacDonald states that the United States did not fight the Iraq War to satisfy Israel. Considering that many officials inside the Israeli government were more realistic than Americans about the regional impact of regime change in Iraq, it is not clear that there was consensus from the Israeli perspective about what the United States should do. Israel was and remains far more concerned about Iran than Iraq. It is worth mentioning that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was a vocal supporter of the Second Gulf War, and testified before Congress to such an effect. However, at the time, he was outside the Israeli government.

Finally, the United States did not go to war in Iraq in order to acquire oil or to increase world supply. There is no doubt oil was an important consideration, and that this natural resource makes Iraq a geopolitically significant country. But MacDonald highlights that although Iraq's oil supply is considerable, it is not sufficient to dramatically alter the world market. Moreover, the rosiest assumption inside the administration indicated that revenue from oil in Iraq would not greatly reduce or balance the financial burden of the war. Overall, policymakers did not believe invading Iraq would result in massive profits.

Why, then, did the Bush administration chose to embark on a self-defeating war? According to MacDonald, the problem lay in the ideology of crucial policymakers. As neoconservatives or liberal interventionists, these men and women conflated America's values with its interests. They believed there was no need to choose between the two.

From the neoconservative perspective, core, secular American values of democracy, freedom, individual rights, and free markets are universal. They appeal to all peoples around the world. Furthermore, in their opinion, the United States benefits when nations adopt these values. With Saddam Hussein in power, there was no possibility of Iraq adopting these values and the institutions needed to protect them. However, if the Iraqi dictator were removed, and with him the state apparatus with which he controlled the population, a liberal, open and capitalist society would flourish. Additionally, the Iraqi example would encourage other Sunni Middle East powers to reform. In the aftermath of the war, neoconservatives claimed, the United States would exert enormous diplomatic, economic, and military influence over Iraq.

Yet trillions of dollars, 4,500 dead and 32,000 more wounded American soldiers later, it is plain to see it was not meant to be. MacDonald correctly posits that regime change was inherently flawed. The moment the strongman and the state he commanded were undone, chaos inexorably ensued. Longstanding tensions between Kurds, Shia, and Sunnis came to the fore. Iran gained leverage. The United States, in large measure due to poor post-invasion planning, proved incapable of providing stability. Civil war broke out.

MacDonald contends that the Bush administration was incompetent in the execution of the occupation phase of the war. However, the author rightly observes that, absent colossal mistakes such as de-Baathification and disbanding the Iraqi Army, there was only room for marginal improvement. For example, the United States initially had too few troops in country and followed the wrong fighting strategy. This situation was remedied during the 2007 to 2008 "surge" and the implementation of counterinsurgency doctrine under General David Petraeus. These alterations temporarily ameliorated conditions on the ground.

Nevertheless, these considerations were not the primary problem with the Iraq War. If there did not exist a deeper, more structural impediment to reconciliation among the warring parties, Iraq today would be a stable, democratic, and market-oriented country. Sadly, this is not the case.

Ultimately, MacDonald highlights a tragic irony he terms “the consummate paradox of Gulf War Two.” He states the policies of regime-change advocates “subverted the very interests that were to have been idealized by them.”

MacDonald’s book does not grant much space to chronicling administration deliberations, congressional approval, or intelligence community assessments prior to the war and during its course. This book is more aptly described as a scholarly work fond of invoking political philosophers and theorists such as Plato, Hobbes, and Weber. *Overreach* is most assuredly not the Iraq War’s version of *The Best and the Brightest* by David Halberstam. That book, an engaging and entertaining history of the decision-making process and personalities involved in the Vietnam War, was the product of an investigative journalist with a flair for narrative. In contrast, MacDonald’s book, although high-minded and astute, has a less captivating narrative.

#### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> Michael MacDonald, *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).