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“What We Say Goes”

by Sheldon Richman

President Bush tells us that Saddam Hussein alone will determine whether Iraq burns, but the president is increasingly unable to conceal his smugness when he says such things. The fact is that Bush decided to go to war long ago and every step he takes is calculated to bring that result about.

None of this has been lost on the brutal dictator Hussein. Bush’s abrupt and pragmatic switch from threatening “regime change” to demanding disarmament fooled very few, least of all the president of Iraq. He knows that he has been in Bush’s crosshairs and that nothing he does is going to change that.

The questions to ponder are these: if Hussein knows he’s a dead man no matter what, what incentive does he have to surrender his weapons? What does he have to lose by gambling that he can hold some weapons back?

The answers: no incentive at all and nothing.

Bush’s strategy is effective — if war is the intended outcome. At best Bush thinks war is unavoidable and necessary. There’s no other way to explain his actions. Hussein has not attacked the United States. He has apparently not aided terrorists who target the American people. He hasn’t fought with a neighbor since 1990. Instead, he has become that most loathed character in the eyes of American foreign-policy makers: the ally who is overcome by ambitions of independence. In the 1980s, when Hussein was fighting his nasty war with Iran, the same Americans who today are planning his demise were promoting him as the constructive moderate in the Arab world. They even envisioned him helping to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum. The U.S. policy elite didn’t merely wish Hussein well; they also supplied him with the things they now condemn him for having, such as the means to make chemical and biological weapons. As was said of another of the U.S. government’s thuggish allies, “He’s a son of a bitch, but he’s *our* son of a bitch.” Unfortunately, Hussein didn’t continue to play this old game. Thus our present predicament.

Debate rages endlessly over why Bush wants war. It's conceivable that he really thinks the security of the American people is imminently at stake, but I doubt it. That doesn't mean he's acting in bad faith. Rather, he seems to believe that Americans' long-term well-being depends on a U.S. government robust enough to maintain a specific world order. This in turn requires intervention when a regime is perceived as a threat to that order. History or God has imposed this solemn duty on the United States. Bush's speeches say as much.

He seems further to believe that such an order — his father's New World Order — depends on having the world's oil in hands friendly to U.S. policymakers. He failed to realize that any foreign government that controls oil will be willing to sell it out of economic self-interest. Attempts to force up the price would be limited by the competitive world market, technological advancement, and substitute products. In other words, the American people don't need to have their government to play global cop in order to enjoy access to oil.

But the U.S. war planners don't see it that way. In their view, they can maximize their flexibility in maintaining world order only if they don't have to worry about what someone like Hussein will do to the world oil market or the economy generally.

It would be a mistake to regard oil as the only or even the top reason for current U.S. policy in the Middle East. That's just one part of the broader rationale discussed above. President George H.W. Bush revealed it back in 1990 when he was amassing his coalition to expel Hussein's army from Kuwait. The occupation would end, Bush said, because "what we say goes."

Those four words spoke volumes, and there is every reason to think they are the controlling principle now. It is palpable in the current President Bush's words and facial expressions.

"What we say goes." Or else? Or else the U.S. government will launch a war on the offending society.

Does anyone wonder why lots of people besides the Iraqis are nervous?

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