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## **Misplaced Nostalgia**

**by Sheldon Richman**

Before we get too nostalgic about the foreign-policy prowess of the George H.W. Bush administration, we should remind ourselves of what happened from 1989 through 1992. I understand that, compared to the bunch running things now, nearly anyone would look good. But I sense almost a giddiness about the supposed return of the Bush 41 team, primarily through James Baker's Iraq Study Group and Robert Gates, who will almost certainly succeed Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense. "Giddiness" isn't an overstatement. About the only criticism of the 41 team is coming from unreconstructed neoconservatives who sense that their messianic worldview is becoming passé.

We can leave aside Bush the Elder's little adventures in Panama and Somalia, although his ouster of Panama president Manuel Noriega of Panama, formerly a staunch U.S. ally, bears some resemblance to the treatment Iraq's Saddam Hussein got at the hands of Bush's son. American presidents don't like ally-dictators to go off the reservation.

Even if we confine our attention to Iraq alone we might temper our optimism about the apparent new influence around the White House. Throughout the Reagan and Bush 41 years, Saddam Hussein was a key Middle East ally of the U.S. government. Years earlier other U.S. administrations had helped the Ba'athist party and then Saddam himself to come to power. When the United States lost the shah of Iran as its regional strongman and the Ayatollah Khomeini became America's new nemesis, Saddam's stock rose mightily. The Reagan administration supported Iraq in its war against Iran and furnished it with the makings of chemical weapons. Rumsfeld was the go-between.

Saddam was not just an ally of convenience. He was also seen as a stabilizing factor, even in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict. This was the neocon view at that time. In their 1987 *New Republic* article, "Back Iraq," Daniel Pipes and Laurie Mylroie wrote that "the fall of the existing regime in Iraq would enormously enhance Iranian influence, endanger the supply of oil, threaten pro-American regimes throughout the area, and upset the Arab-Israeli balance." (How prescient!) They also wrote that economic aid to Iraq "would assert U.S. confidence in Iraq's

political viability.” To the argument that a triumphant Saddam would be bad for American interests, they said, “But the Iranian revolution and seven years of bloody and inconclusive warfare have changed Iraq’s view of its Arab neighbors, the United States, and even Israel.... Its leaders no longer consider the Palestinian issue their problem. [Its] allies have forced a degree of moderation on Iraq.... Iraq is now the de facto protector of the regional status quo.” (My, how views had changed by 2001.)

When Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990 (possibly with a green light from the U.S. ambassador), Bush 41’s inclination was to stay out. Unfortunately, his mind was changed by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain, who never quite understood that small government at home can’t coexist with big government abroad. Bush continued the practice of going to war without a congressional declaration. The allegedly historic war debate that took place in Congress actually occurred *after* U.S. and coalition forces were in place and the ultimatum to Saddam had been issued. In other words, it was a bogus debate.

Even though the Bush team decided not to go to Baghdad and oust Saddam, the war and its aftermath nonetheless set the stage for Bush 43. The embargo against the Iraqi people killed hundreds of thousands of children; the regular U.S. bombing of “no-fly zones” in northern and southern Iraq killed civilians; and the stationing of troops near holy sites in Saudi Arabia created deep Arab and Muslim animosity against the United States, culminating in the blowback known as 9/11. The attacks on that day and the “intelligence” about WMDs were all Bush the Younger needed to win public support for his war against Saddam, although Iraq had no WMDs and nothing to do with the attacks. The quagmire of Iraq must be seen as the product of the two Bush presidencies, with many Clinton contributions in between.

Is nostalgia for the old boys really warranted?

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