

TOMGRAM: AFTER NOVEMBER . . . ?

## Four More Years of Camp Bush?

By Tom Engelhardt

*“We are heroes in error. . . What was said before is not important.”*

—Ahmad Chalabi on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction

The papers and the television news are all but convulsed with the onrushing presidential campaign: the Bush 9/11 ads and the reactions of 9/11 families; the job situation in Ohio and its effect on the vote; Kerry’s off-stage, on-mike comments about Republican “crooks”; the first attack ads; Cheney as a possibly debilitating running mate; the latest presidential approval figures; Kerry and Dean in a kiss-and-make-up session; the Nader factor, and so on and so forth. Almost eight months to go and it’s already a deluge.

Of course, there’s a sense among Democrats, for the first time in years—as ever, among Republicans—that this may be a make-it or break-it election and that means more eyes than usual attracted to presidential campaign news earlier than ever. But here’s the strange thing: I have yet to see a word in print about what those next four years might actually be like, should the Bush administration be returned to office.

This is all the more surprising given that our brains are speculation machines, which means fiction machines, which means prediction machines. Maybe it was once simply a matter of a large-brained, relatively defenseless creature benefiting from imagining the dangers that lurked around the corner or in the dark of night. Explain it as you will, we live a remarkable amount of our time in imagined futures, even if few of us are able to write them up à la Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, or William Gibson. But here’s an unnerving fact: Put any of us in the unmade future and, while we automatically start telling ourselves stories, we also instantly become the most unreliable of unreliable narrators.

Maybe our distant ancestors gained a slight advantage over death by constantly dreaming of and naming dangers to come. But you have to wonder. Or maybe we were just better at it then. Maybe we’re devolving as speculative creatures. After all, the striking thing is how wrong we—especially the class of pundits who increasingly populate our TV screens and newspapers—regularly are in our predictions. Sometimes it seems to me that our media is made up largely of pundits predicting a near-future which is almost guaranteed not to be. Certainly, I’d hate to see the scorecards of most of the people who, for a living, offer daily predictions of what’s likely to happen to the rest of us. On the other hand, one appeal of the job must be that you can predict away and never have to say you’re wrong or sorry or a fool, because no one ever goes back and checks out your predictions. Punditry is, it seems, a profession without accountability.

In the Clinton-scandals era, I used to love to tune into Ted Koppel’s *Nightline* just to listen to George Stephanopoulos and David Gergen predict upcoming events. My rule of thumb was that, whatever they said, I immediately expected the opposite and I was seldom disappointed. And look at Stephanopoulos; now, he can be wrong on his very own Sunday morning show. Of course, no one’s immune from this disease, though I try not to offer too desperately many predictions myself. Fortunately, for instance, I kept my e-mouth shut when I mentally dumped Senator Kerry in the trash bin of history many, many months ago.

All of this I mention only because I find it curious, given our propensity for prediction, that there has been so little mention of the world beyond November 2. So here goes, a quick leap into a future in which George Bush has won a second term.

## The Guantanamo model

There are a few obvious things to say about the last three-plus years and what we might expect from round two. As a start, in its foreign and domestic policies, the Bush administration has shown a consistency of approach that, until the election loomed and the President's poll figures began to drop, might have been termed (to steal a word from a friend) implacable. As we now know from former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, among others, the leading figures in this administration arrived in office as radical nationalists in an imagined world of one—intent on whacking Saddam's Iraq; largely uninterested in terrorism; hooked on a form of "privatization" that redirected money from the public coffers to the pockets of its corporate friends; convinced of an old Chinese revolutionary slogan, that power comes from the barrel of a gun; ready to put the military in command and scale even the heavens themselves with new forms of globe-girdling weaponry; and armed with a mobilizing imperial vision of how the world works, of where its arteries are and how exactly to control the flow of blood, or more accurately, energy. A number of them like the President and vice-president had spent significant parts of their lives connected to energy industries and, from Enron to Halliburton, had fed off that industry's money. Uniquely, the President was able to name as his national security advisor a woman who, while she was on Chevron's board of directors, had had an oil tanker named after her.

Right now, of course, they are intent—except when it comes to whacking Senator Kerry—on lessening the implacability factor, one small step at a time. As the President has backed off on testifying before the 9/11 commission (No. . . Well, just for an hour and only for an audience of two. . . Well, okay, just "one hour," but no one will be watching the clock. . .), so in this political season they've been trying to back off from all sorts of things. Oh, you don't like our nominee Anthony Raimondo as "jobs czar" because he axed American workers and moved part of his business to China? No problem. He's gone. You want the UN in Iraq? We're trying. You want allies, well, let me welcome the (despicable) German chancellor to the White House.

I think we can expect that, between now and November, the "reasonable, moderate" George will at long last come out of hibernation; you remember, the famed uniter, not the divider. He'll be strong but considerate, security-conscious but tolerant, open to some version of talk about multilateralism abroad and negotiations at home. Colin Powell will perhaps move closer to front and center and Don Rumsfeld of the Pentagon take a seat nearer the back of the room. Richard Perle has already resigned from the Defense Policy Board. ("We are now approaching a long presidential election campaign, in the course of which issues on which I have strong views will be widely discussed and debated. I would not wish those views to be attributed to you or the President at any time, and especially not during a presidential campaign.") Dick Cheney will again act vice presidential. And so on. All will be righter with the world—assuming, of course, that, from Ayatollah Sistani to the Plame investigation, the world doesn't insist on getting in the way, as it most certainly will—and all of this, I have no doubt, will be chucked out the window on November 3.

But bits of the administration's past—and so of its possible future—are still sticking out everywhere. Just this week, thanks to the five British prisoners released from Guantanamo, we got a shocking peek into that concentration camp, and so a sense of what it means to be inside the Bush version of a total institution, a prison dissociated from any legal system whatsoever—or, as Lt. Cmdr. Barbara Burfeind, a Pentagon spokeswoman, put it most decorously in dismissing as completely false the assertions of one prisoner that he had been tortured and brutalized, "All detainees are treated humanely and, to the extent appropriate and consistent with military necessity, in accordance with the principles of the Third Geneva Convention of 1949."

*To the extent appropriate and consistent with military necessity.* Is there any politer way of

saying that nothing, not even the Third Geneva Convention, binds the Bush administration and the Pentagon administrators of Guantanamo to the legal frameworks of our world or any other world? It's these little things—set, in this case, against the hair-raising account of one prisoner, even if just half true—that remind us of what was at the heart of Bush's first term.

Now, imagine a second term based the same principle—a world further restructured to be “consistent with military necessity”—but an administration even less bound by anything, the Third Geneva Convention included. Think of the second time around, if the Republicans again control the presidency, both houses of Congress, and increasingly (remember those sure-to-arrive Supreme Court retirements) the courts, as part of a dreamed-of process of turning the world into the Bush version of a militarized total institution, beyond the law and controlled from Washington.

### **Following the money trail in Iraq**

In this same light, consider events in Iraq, where our press continues to focus on the crisis of “turning over sovereignty” to an expanded, largely American-appointed body (not even subject to the abstruse caucus process the CPA had previously proposed). There, you can see rather clearly, even if most of our press cannot, a second-term process just under the surface of events. On that surface, the Americans have turned, at first reluctantly, to the UN and Kofi Annan for help; have called on NATO for aid; are welcoming Japanese and soon South Korean troops into the country; are attempting to mollify Ayatollah Sistani; and are half-publicly discussing withdrawal strategies. But in the last week, two news items caught my eye and a third item was on my mind, all concerning the way in which we were actually hunkering down in Iraq:

**I**tem one was a news piece written by Jim Krane of the Associated Press, which began this way (Pentagon to oversee most U.S. spending in Iraq, after dispute with State Department):

“After a power struggle with the U.S. State Department, the Pentagon has won control over most of an \$18.4 billion aid package for Iraq, and rebuilding delayed for a month will start this week, U.S. officials in Baghdad said Sunday. Much of the enormous aid package—funded by U.S. taxpayers—will go toward 2,300 construction projects over the next four years. Of these, the State Department will oversee as little as 10 percent. But \$4 billion of the aid package has been set aside, and spending authority for those funds is still in discussion. . . Now, the resolution means the U.S. military will have chief control over rebuilding in Iraq, even after its command of the U.S.-led occupation ends, officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity.”

Note that, as now planned, on June 30, “sovereignty” will theoretically be handed back to the Iraqis; the occupation of Iraq will “end”; relations between the new temporary ruling body and the United States will be reconstituted on a state-to-state basis through—again theoretically—the State Department, which is to oversee the largest embassy in the world somewhere in Baghdad's Green Zone. That's how the story goes anyway, but the money trail, as Krane indicates, leads elsewhere and tells quite a different story—a tale, in fact, in which the civilians at the top of the Pentagon aren't about to let go of the vast flow of reconstruction dollars heading Iraqwards, and so of Iraq itself.

Let's remember that the Pentagon aced the State Department and all its planners and Arabists out of any role in the postwar occupation and then proceeded to run one of the most ill-conceived, militarized experiments in “nation-building” imaginable. Now under fire in our media, in Congress, and elsewhere, and hemorrhaging in the country

itself, its key officials nonetheless remain both determined to, and bureaucratically positioned to take hold of the vast monies Congress has appropriated for Iraqi reconstruction and run up to 90% of the show into the foreseeable future, “sovereignty” or no. For as Krane puts it, and as the money trail indicates, “By summer, the flow of dollars is expected to turn Iraq into one of the world’s largest construction sites”—a construction site that will be overseen by the Pentagon.

So much for changing policies, shifting gears, and the like. This is an administration that has not only been a fervent proponent of unilateralism globally, but intrabureaucratically. In this new Rome, such as it is, all roads lead to the civilian side of the Pentagon (and so to the vice president’s office as well.)

**I**tem two: Recently, Douglas Jehl of the New York Times reported:

“The Pentagon is paying \$340,000 a month to the Iraqi political organization led by Ahmad Chalabi, a member of the interim Iraqi government who has close ties to the Bush administration, for ‘intelligence collection’ about Iraq, according to Defense Department officials.”

We’re talking, then, of \$4 million a year in payments to the man who, it’s now clear, was the main source of faulty or out-and-out false intelligence information shuffled to the Pentagon’s neocon intelligence operation. These payments continue, as Jehl points out, “a longstanding partnership between the Pentagon and the organization, the Iraqi National Congress, even as the group jockeys for power in a future [Iraqi] government. Internal government reviews have found that much of the information generated by the program before the American invasion last year was useless, misleading or even fabricated.”

Chalabi has been Ahmad-on-the-spot in Washington from moment one, as Jim Lobe of Inter Press Service reports at Antiwar.com:

“Shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on New York and the Pentagon, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith set up two groups, the Office of Special Plans (OSP) and the Counter-Terrorism Evaluation Group (CTEG). They were tasked to review raw intelligence to determine if official intelligence agencies had overlooked connections between Shiite and Sunni terrorist groups and between al-Qaeda and secular Arab governments, especially Hussein’s.

“The effort, which reportedly included interviewing ‘defectors,’ several of them supplied by the Iraqi National Congress (INC), an exile group close to neoconservatives who support Israel’s Likud Party, closely tracked the agenda of the Defense Policy Group (DPG), chaired by Feith’s mentor, Richard Perle.

“The DPG also convened after Sept. 11 with INC leader Ahmad Chalabi to discuss ways in which the terrorist attacks could be tied to Hussein. Neither the State Department nor the CIA was informed about the meeting.”

Long before the war, Chalabi was disliked, distrusted, and discredited both by the State Department and the CIA, but he was always the neocons’ favorite Iraqi and their chosen future Man in Baghdad. Convicted of bank fraud years ago in Jordan to the tune of \$300 million, he found the Bush administration and the press in the months before the war even easier targets than Jordanian banks. Soon after the invasion began, he was even flown by his Pentagon allies with 700 lightly armed supporters into Iraq where, though well positioned and funded, he proved incapable of mobilizing popular support either for his Washington friends or himself. According to fragmentary Iraqi public opinion polls

he is probably the least popular member of the American-appointed Governing Council. But it turns out to matter little, since he was, and remains, the rogue the Pentagon and the neocons were determined to replace the rogue regime of Saddam Hussein with.

Amazingly enough, still financially supported by the Pentagon for the “intelligence” he can offer, this “hero in error” is by now poised not just to be a player but possibly the crucial power-wielder in a “sovereign” Iraq—that is, in the Iraq that would be created once the Bush administration was returned to power. As *Newsweek*’s Christopher Dickey wrote recently in *The Master Operator*:

“Chalabi is now head of the Governing Council’s economic and finance committee. As such he has overseen the appointment of the minister of oil, the minister of finance, the central bank governor, the trade minister, the head of the trade bank and the designated managing director of the largest commercial bank in the country. For the moment, U.S. administrator L. Paul Bremer writes the big checks and can veto policies. But all that will change on June 30, the Bush administration’s self-imposed deadline for returning sovereignty to an Iraqi government. . .

“Chalabi’s other major source of strength is the De-Baathification Commission, which he heads. Its mandate—to work against former members of Saddam’s regime and his Baath Party—is so wide-ranging that even one of Chalabi’s aides calls it ‘a government within the government’ . . . Both Iraqi and U.S. officials in Baghdad say it’s almost certain that on June 30, the government that does receive sovereignty—and the purse strings—will be either the current, appointed council, or some variation on it. Will Chalabi and his people still be in place, still powerful? You can just about bank on it.”

In other words, if you follow the money trail, you end up, on the Washington side of things, back at the Pentagon and in Iraq, at the man the Pentagon put in place there. And so Washington’s policy, despite the mess that is Iraq, seems almost bizarrely on course. Curiouser and curiouser, as Alice might have said, had she plunged into the Bush administration’s version of the Middle Eastern Wonderland.

**I**tem three: We may be ready to turn over “sovereignty” in Iraq, but this administration’s definition of sovereignty turns out to be limited indeed. Privatization of the Iraqi economy continues to be a given, whatever government might regain “sovereignty”; and no less a given has been the creation of major, permanent American military bases in the country.

Here, by the way, we find ourselves confronting one of the mysteries of press coverage during the postwar period. As reported in the *Engineering News-Record*, according to Lt. Col. David (Mark) Holt of the Army Corps of Engineers who has been “tasked with facilities development” in Iraq our base reconstruction program is simply a massive undertaking.

“‘Again the numbers are staggering,’ Holt says. Most of [the] work is being done through [Halliburton subsidiary] KBR. ‘Interesting program in the several billion dollar range,’ Holt says.”

*In the several billion dollar range.* Think of that toss-away line and how it defines basic Bush administration policies in Iraq. Several billion dollars are going into the construction of military bases throughout Iraq, some of almost Vietnam-War-era size, and other than one front-page piece in the *New York Times* in April 2003 just after the war ended,

claiming that four major permanent bases—or as they are now being called, “enduring camps”—were in the process of being constructed, the issue has gone completely unreported in our press.

I find this remarkable. When you look back, you’ll discover that the Pentagon has been planning for the creation of a future Iraqi military of only 40,000 soldiers, relatively lightly armed and without any air force at all, since at least the end of the war, if not before it. Certainly, this was the plan even before L. Paul Bremer demobilized what was left of Saddam’s 400,000 man military. And the 40,000 figure and the description of the nature of the force to be built have not, as far as I can tell, varied to this day. Forget “sovereignty,” forget “democracy”; all you need to know is this to grasp our plans in Iraq. In such a heavily-armed neighborhood, an army of 40,000 with no air force or heavy weaponry is perhaps a border-patrolling force or a force meant to put down domestic opposition, but not a force meant to defend the country. It’s obvious that, as far as the Pentagon and the administration are concerned, our military is clearly the real force being prepared to defend Iraq till hell freezes over—from a series of permanent bases in that country, backed by a Status of Forces Agreement that, when negotiated with the new ruling body, will put the actions of our troops outside the purview of the local courts.

On the question of which branch of our government was to run “democratic” Iraq, on Chalabi’s role in Iraq, and on permanent basing in that country, the Busheviks have really never strayed far from their essential desires, no matter the crisis (and there have been plenty) at hand. So three modest straws, indicating which way the wind is blowing and what future it’s blowing towards, if the Bush administration has anything to do with it.

## Hyperpowerman

We’ve been embroiled for so many months in arguments over the reasons for the Iraq war. But think of every dismissed argument as just so much flak in the skies over actual policy. No WMD; no terrorist connections; cherry-picked intelligence, manipulation, and lies; no threat to the U.S. from Saddam; but mainly, no matter. The point is: none of it ever was the point, not to George’s guys. They weren’t fighting in the negative—to “prevent” something from happening in the future. Their fight was positive and Iraq was just the start, the enemy country that looked easiest to take down in the Middle East. They were deeply invested in creating a global future that they had dreamed about for years, part of a vision in which they believed deeply, and which remains fundamental to them.

It has two aspects, reflecting what might be considered the two main, if overlapping wings of the administration. From the neocons, laid out in documents long before the Bush administration ever took office, came a vision of remaking the Middle East in the interests of a new American global imperium and—these two goals were not separated by the likudniks of this administration—in the interests of Sharon’s Israel. Iraq would be whacked down. It would be simple enough to do, given the weakness of Saddam’s military; and the simple Iraqis, a memory-less people incapable of recalling the sanctions we had fiercely enforced for over a decade, or the Shia uprising we had allowed Saddam to put down after Gulf War I, would welcome us with open arms while we settled down militarily in their country. (After all, Ahmad Chalabi, who hadn’t been in the country in years and years, assured them this was so). Then, with the Iraqi “cakewalk” over and “Iraqi democracy” in hand, we would sweep through the Middle East at bayonet point like Napoleon’s armies, or at least via predator drones armed with Hellfire missiles; Syria would go down, while Iran would be cowed (or vice-versa, it hardly mattered); Saudi Arabia, no less cowed, would be brought to heel (no more Wahabist foolishness); and the Palestinians, isolated, impoverished, and essentially disarmed, would have to give in

to a Sharon-style Greater Israel.

The world would attend. The North Koreans too would be cowed—or if not, they would get whacked and their Dear Leader’s regime would collapse like a house of cards. Either China, our great future enemy, would find itself encircled and contained with our military bases in the Central Asian ‘stans nuzzling up against its western border; India to the south, with its own fundamentalist government, a natural ally (as well as a new military ally of Israel); Taiwan emboldened; and Japan rearmed, its peace constitution in the nearest ditch. . .

Okay, so it was only a strategic vision—but what a vision it was! The U.S. would essentially come out of the closet (my apologies to the Bush administration for the image). Pallid, Clintonian Clark Kent would rush into the nearest phone booth, change into his power suit, and emerge as. . . tada. . . Hyperpowerman. And with x-ray vision—or its military equivalents—why would we need anything more than allies of convenience? The United States would be a New Rome, a global power unparalleled in history; and though the term has now fallen into disuse for obvious reasons, this remains their vision of the United States, as codified in their National Security Strategy of September 2002.

In the meantime, from the Cheney wing of the administration came a global energy vision that was a natural for men who consider reports about the Earth’s limited long-term oil supplies—“the end of oil”—everyday trade talk (though the issue of when global oil output might “peak” is only now creeping into the mainstream media). They identified an “arc of instability” which stretched from the Andes to the edge of China and held most of the earth’s remaining great energy reserves and were intent on garrisoning the energy veins of the planet. That way we could, in the future, turn the oil taps on and off—a threatening possibility for industrial allies and enemies alike. And indeed we’ve been dropping new bases into the arc with profligate regularity. Have we ever had so many high officials visit countries like Armenia or Kazakhstan? (Donald Rumsfeld was there just the other week, discussing how to bolster the Kazakh military and help protect its Caspian Sea oil deposits.)

Only in this sense was Iraq an “oil war” or rather part of a larger policy for the global control of the planet’s energy arteries. Critics of the critics of the Iraq war reduced this to the thought that the Bush administration was waging war to capture for ourselves the literal reserves under Iraq—and then rejected that idea as simpleminded and reductionist which, of course, it is. But what they’re somehow too sophisticated to see is that this is an energy administration, with black-gold dreams running through its brain. Their vision isn’t of seizing Iraqi oil (though they did imagine, quite incorrectly, that any occupation of Iraq would take place on the cheap because Iraqi oil would be there to pay for it); theirs is a vision of controlling the world’s oil lifelines, a very different matter.

## **Pentagonization and presentism**

Okay, now imagine that, one way or another, they squeak through (or better) on November 2. It doesn’t really matter under what guise they win, or what modest policies for peace and security they put forward during the election campaign, just as it didn’t the last time around. So here they are, with Iraq undoubtedly in a worse mess, but their imperial dreams remarkably intact. Congress in hand, the courts ready to be nailed down; Colin Powell in retirement; CIA director George Tenet finally walked off the nearest plank and the “intelligence community” ready for Pentagonization (no more extramural activities needed). Globally, Syria at the very least is immediately in the crosshairs. After all, if you’ve just created one failed state in the Middle East, why not another, and then another? And let’s not even think about North Korea, or allies, or treaties.

Take it for granted, for instance, that the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, governing the non-militarization of space, will be torn up and tossed from the window of our moving spaceship. For a second term would undoubtedly mean major steps towards the unilateral

militarization of space, long part of the imperial thinking of Donald Rumsfeld and other administration high frontiersmen about how to control the planet for decades to come. On nuclear weapons, take it for granted that part of the planning for what Jonathan Schell has called our “proliferation wars” would involve the renewed testing of nuclear weapons and a rush toward the creation of a new generation of “mini-nukes” that might actually be used in future rogue campaigns, and so on. Global warming, don’t even bring the subject up. Heat blisters in the south and frostbite for the North Atlantic community are both acceptable risks.

What else would proliferate in a second Bush administration? Our black hole of injustice, our mini-gulag of camps, prisons, and guest lodgings in assorted foreign countries, stretching from Afghanistan to Cuba, would certainly expand, as undoubtedly would the use of various forms of torture globally in an all-against-all world, while human rights would shrink further. Military basing policies will undoubtedly continue to expand in the “arc of instability” and environs, with ever more “forward basing” in what used to be called the Third World and now should simply be thought of as the oil lands of our planet.

The Pentagon will continue to grow, of course, and increasingly its influence will creep into other areas including perhaps the policing of “the homeland.” The giant militarized corporations like Halliburton and Bechtel, now so closely allied with the Pentagon and eating Congressional Iraqi reconstruction funds like popcorn—companies which one reader has suggested should be called “weapons of mass construction”—will grow ever fatter and less accountable to any public on earth (and will hire ever more Bushonauts as they hit that revolving door out of government and into the promised good times of privatization), and more and more of the Pentagon will be privatized into them. It goes without saying that the “private” homeland and global-security business will be a boom industry (as, in any second Bush administration, will terrorism itself).

As with the privatization of Iraq, the stripping down of our own country, with states and municipalities ever more starved for money flowing elsewhere (mostly into the hands of the rich and secure) will only accelerate and, as is already happening, for instance, in California, things like after-school programs, school libraries, even school sports will blink off the map. And of course in the name of all the industries now running the EPA, the Agriculture Department, and the Interior Department, the assault on our environment will simply redouble.

To date, the Bush administration’s policies have, in the largest sense, been two-pronged: In the military sphere, the Busheviks have been planning for the domination of the planet for the rest of this century (and putting advanced weaponry of every sort on the drawing boards for 2020, 2030, 2040, even 2050). In the military sphere of imperial thinking, in the arena of power and control, their perspective couldn’t be longer term. On everything else, their perspective is presentist (if such a word exists) with a passion. Control forever but eat everything now.

Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not really predicting the future here in any meaningful way. I’m only pointing out that most of the key players in this administration are utopian (or dystopian) dreamers and the greatest gamblers in our history. On the other hand, as Iraq shows, like many past utopian dreamers, they seem incapable of taking into account our difficult, recalcitrant, stubborn and unexpected world, which is bound to trip up their plans in untold and unpredictable ways. What’s clear, however, is that the Bush administration has remained remarkably tenacious in its policies. It’s been willing at various moments to say almost anything, to turn to the vilified UN, to praise hated former allies to the skies, and so on. But its basic policies, whether toward the world or the “homeland,” have remained remarkably consistent and remarkably assaultive. Our country, not to speak of the world, simply can’t afford four more years of this.

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