
EDITOR'S NOTE

This is our last issue before the next president is chosen, in a so-called “change” election. Much may need changing in U.S. foreign policy, but it is not clear that the damage in the Middle East can be repaired in any normal political time frame, given the mindset of the political class, both Democratic and Republican. The Palestinians and Israelis have not come close to making peace, primarily due to the asymmetry of power and U.S. refusal to balance the scales in any way (see the Lustick and Handelman articles inside). The U.S. military occupation of Iraq continues, and there are apparently no plans to end it soon. There is broad agreement, however on the part of the Iraqis and the Bush administration as well as Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama: another two years is about enough. U.S. military bases have been built for the “long war,” however, and ethno-religious strife continues, making it impossible to conclude a bargain over the oil of Kirkuk, for one thing. Iran, the beneficiary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, is not backing down from its nuclear program, and the war in Afghanistan grinds on. Frustrated by the lack of American investment in peace efforts, Arab leaders have taken matters into their own hands, bringing hostile parties together through diplomacy in Mecca, Doha and Cairo (see the fine report on these efforts from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace produced by Marina Ottaway). Syria and Lebanon have actually established full diplomatic relations for the first time (see articles on the Levant by Kaplan, Saab and El-Masri).

Now, suddenly, just as George Bush and Vladimir Putin had settled in to watch the thrill of victory and agony of defeat in Beijing, Russian troops rolled into Georgia. Our former peer competitor is apparently no longer prostrate, thanks to the astronomical price of oil. The facts of the case are in dispute, but they involve age-old issues of ethnic politics (see William Pfaff on why Georgia does not belong in NATO, <http://www.williampfaff.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=334>). The Georgians had been led to believe that Washington would ride to their rescue — the rest of NATO following along in the posse — in case of trouble with Moscow, and President Bush has, indeed, sent troops bearing aid. But the United States needs Russia's help in dealing with Iranian nuclear ambitions and other daunting issues, so the Bush administration is mainly using diplomacy this time, so far. John McCain, not yet responsible for life-and-death decisions, has been quick to slip back into the familiar Cold War rhetoric of yesteryear, the days of deterrence and mutually assured destruction. There is even chat in the blogosphere about the Bush administration having egged the Georgians on, in order to give the hotheaded McCain a boost against the laid-back Barack Obama. Even more suspicious, McCain's foreign-policy adviser is a paid lobbyist for Georgia. Was this provocation of Russia an August surprise? How little confidence Americans now have in the integrity of their leaders and the political process!

The spectacle of the current U.S. government berating another major state for attacking a weak country was ironic. At least Russia was dealing with a longstanding issue in a troubled region on its own border (we use the Monroe Doctrine to cover similar cases in Latin America). The adventures of Bush and Cheney were enabled by the lack of a check on U.S. power following their over-reaction to the events of 9/11. There have been several recent reminders of the avoidable catastrophes, inexcusable screw-ups, unforgivable duplicity and risible hypocrisy of the current administration in its drive for revenge and a power base in the oil realm. Their “war on terror” has not worked. This has been certified even by a new report from Rand, a U.S. Air Force think-tank: military techniques are ineffective in 92 percent of terrorism cases. *Now* they tell us. Of course, many observers knew from the

beginning that the war was an excuse to enlarge the U.S. strategic “footprint” (as neocon William Kristol calls it) on top of the lakes of oil in the Gulf region and make life safer for Israel, starting with the easiest problem case, Iraq. If the governments in the area did not come around, no problem; American troops were there in any case and would protect Israel.

The claim that Saddam Hussein had nuclear weapons and ties to the 9/11 perpetrators was invented to persuade the public of the need for war. The anthrax that was mailed to an assortment of political and media figures soon after September 11, 2001, was said by ABC News, without a shred of evidence to back it up, to have contained a marker identifying it as originating in Iraq, part of Saddam’s arsenal of WMD. Many liberal hawks boarded the war bandwagon because they had been unable to prevent the mass killings of Muslims in Bosnia (also a motivating factor for many al-Qaeda operatives). Suddenly war felt right; after all, the Kosovo “win” had been easy. Obviously, they did not foresee what a real war would mean, and most have repudiated it, blaming the execution of the post-war occupation for the chaos that broke Iraq (see Niva article on similarities between the U.S. and Israeli occupations). This is not a success story, whatever short-term mitigation of violence has resulted from putting more American boots on the ground, a recommendation that was trashed by neoconservative Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz in 2002, when he portrayed a potential war in Iraq as a liberation.

Other appalling new revelations regarding what was done to make “Them” pay for 9/11 have come from Jane Mayer’s *The Dark Side*, on the extra-legal treatment of detainees, and Ron Suskind’s *The Way of the World*, on the alleged fabrication by highly placed Bush administration officials of a document linking Saddam Hussein to al-Qaeda. A minor piece of good news for American idealism is the recent conviction of Osama bin Laden’s driver, who has been held at Guantanamo for six years. The military tribunal hearing the case in secret convicted Salim Hamdan on only minor charges, despite political pressure to make an example of him. Even Hitler’s driver was given a pass at Nuremberg, but, of course, the Fuehrer was dead and many major war criminals were available for prosecution. The elusive Bin Laden and his cohorts are still successfully hiding out, apparently in tribal Waziristan, where neither bribes nor the Pakistani army has much effect on the locals protecting them.

The ongoing frustration of U.S. relations with Iran is palpable, and the possibility still exists of a U.S. attack on the Islamic Republic before the Bush administration leaves office, but it is growing more remote with the recent dust-up in Georgia. Stability has become the watchword of the secretary of Defense and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who would have to accept the fallout from a third war of choice in the region. Admiral Mike Mullen has just returned from warning the Israelis not to start anything, even mentioning that he would not be fooled by a false-flag operation. Clearly, the government of Israel wants the United States to “take out” Iran’s nuclear facilities. In a *New York Times* op-ed (July 18), Benny Morris put the matter to Bush/Cheney crudely: bomb the suspected sites now or Israel will have to use nuclear weapons on Iran later. Call it extortion, if you will. But perhaps a better term is moral hazard: having been “insured” by the United States, Israel does not have to be cautious or even sensible. The Georgians seem to have learned this lesson too, and without having to pay the high premium that a first-class standing army of lobbyists requires.

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