

A wilful blindness

Why can't liberal interventionists see that Iraq is part of a bid to cement US global power?

The war in Afghanistan has plainly brought certain benefits to that country: thousands of girls have gone to school for the first time, for example, and in some parts of the country women have been able to go back to work. While more than 3,000 civilians were killed by the bombing, while much of the country is still controlled by predatory warlords, while most of the promised assistance has not materialised, while torture is widespread and women are still beaten in the streets, it would be wrong to minimise gains that have flowed from the defeat of the Taliban. But, and I realise that it might sound callous to say it, this does not mean that the Afghan war was a good thing.

What almost all those who supported that war and are now calling for a new one have forgotten is that there are two sides to every conflict, and therefore two sets of outcomes to every victory. The Afghan regime changed, but so, in subtler ways, did the government of the US. It was empowered not only by its demonstration of military superiority but also by the widespread support it enjoyed. It has used the licence it was granted in Afghanistan as a licence to take its war wherever it wants.

Those of us who oppose the impending conquest of Iraq must recognise that there's a possibility that, if it goes according to plan, it could improve the lives of many Iraqi people. But to pretend that this battle begins and ends in Iraq requires a wilful denial of the context in which it occurs. That context is a blunt attempt by the superpower to reshape the world to suit itself.

In this week's Observer, David Aaronovitch suggested that, before September 11, the

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Bush administration was “relatively indifferent to the nature of the regimes in the Middle East”. Only after America was attacked was it forced to start taking an interest in the rest of the world.

If Aaronovitch believes this, he would be well-advised to examine the website of the Project for the New American Century, the pressure group established by, among others, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Jeb Bush, Paul Wolfowitz, Lewis Libby, Elliott Abrams and Zalmay Khalilzad, all of whom (except the president’s brother) are now senior officials in the US government.

Its statement of principles, signed by those men on June 3 1997, asserts that the key challenge for the US is “to shape a new century favourable to American principles and interests”. This requires “a military that is strong and ready to meet both present and future challenges; a foreign policy that boldly and purposefully promotes American principles abroad; and national leadership that accepts the United States’ global responsibilities”.

On January 26 1998, these men wrote to President Clinton, urging him “to enunciate a new strategy”, namely “the removal of Saddam Hussein’s regime from power”. If Clinton failed to act, “the safety of American troops in the region, of our friends and allies like Israel and the moderate Arab states, and a significant portion of the world’s supply of oil will all be put at hazard”. They acknowledged that this doctrine would be opposed, but “American policy cannot continue to be crippled by a misguided insistence on unanimity in the UN Security Council”.

Last year, the Glasgow Sunday Herald obtained a copy of a confidential report produced by the Project in September 2000, which suggested that blating Saddam was the beginning, not the end of its strategy. “While the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein.” The wider strategic aim, it insisted, was “maintaining global US pre-eminence”.

Another document obtained by the Herald, written by Paul Wolfowitz and Lewis Libby, called upon the US to “discourage advanced industrial nations from challenging our leadership or even aspiring to a larger regional or global role”.

On taking power, the Bush administration was careful not to alarm its allies. The new president spoke only of the need “to project our strength with purpose and with humility” and “to find new ways to keep the peace”. From his first week in office, however, he began to engage not so much in nation-building as in planet-building.

The ostensible purpose of Bush’s missile defence programme is to shoot down incoming nuclear missiles. The real purpose is to provide a justification for the extraordinarily ambitious plans — contained in a Pentagon document entitled Vision

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for 2020 – to turn space into a new theatre of war, developing orbiting weapons systems that can instantly destroy any target anywhere on Earth. By creating the impression that his programme is merely defensive, Bush could justify a terrifying new means of acquiring what he calls “full spectrum dominance” over planetary security.

Immediately after the attack on New York, the US government began establishing “forward bases” in Asia. As the assistant secretary of state, Elizabeth Jones, noted: “When the Afghan conflict is over we will not leave Central Asia. We have long-term plans and interests in this region.” The US now has bases in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, Tajikistan and Georgia. Their presence has, in effect, destroyed the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation which Russia and China had established in an attempt to develop a regional alternative to US power.

In January, the US moved into Djibouti, ostensibly to widen its war against terror, while accidentally gaining strategic control over the Bab al-Mandab – one of the world’s two most important oil shipping lanes. It already controls the other one, the straits of Hormuz. Two weeks ago, under the same pretext, it sent 3,000 soldiers to the Philippines. Last year it began negotiations to establish a military base in Sao Tome and Principe, from which it can, if it chooses, dominate West Africa’s principal oilfields. By pure good fortune, the US government now exercises strategic control over almost all the world’s major oil producing regions and oil transport corridors.

It has also used its national tragedy as an excuse for developing new nuclear and biological weapons, while ripping up the global treaties designed to contain them. All this is as the project prescribed. Among other policies, it has called for the development of a new generation of biological agents, which will attack people with particular genetic characteristics.

Why do the supporters of this war find it so hard to see what is happening? Why do the conservatives who go berserk when the European Union tries to change the content of our chocolate bars look the other way when the US seeks to reduce us to a vassal state? Why do the liberal interventionists who fear that Saddam Hussein might one day deploy a weapon of mass destruction refuse to see that George Bush is threatening to do just this against an ever-growing number of states? Is it because they cannot face the scale of the threat, and the scale of the resistance necessary to confront it? Is it because these brave troopers cannot look the real terror in the eye? #