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Pre-Occupation; The Man Who Would Be President of Iraq

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IF war comes -- the phrase used so often in recent months -- the fighting may be quick or prolonged, but few experts doubt that the huge American force now concentrating in the Middle East will prevail in the end. When the regime finally changes in Baghdad, and Saddam Hussein is dead, in custody or in exile, 70 years of Iraqi independence will end, political authority will pass into the hands of George W. Bush and Western rule will be planted on Arab soil for the first time since the French and British left the region in the middle of the last century.

What then happens to Iraq's 23 million people, its oil and its relations with its neighbors will remain the personal responsibility of Mr. Bush and his successors in the White House until one of them chooses to surrender it.

This dramatic expansion of President Bush's job description, little discussed during the long months of argument at the United Nations over Iraqi weapons, will be the immediate practical result of an American military victory and the occupation of Iraq by the Army's Central Command.

As the military commander in chief, the president will have virtually unlimited power to change and rebuild Iraq as he sees fit, far greater power, for example, than Queen Victoria's over India in the 19th century.

Spokesmen for the White House say the president's plans for Iraq are fair and generous: to root out the worst elements of Mr. Hussein's Baath Party, and to create a constitution and government that will make it a beacon of democracy for the Arab world.

Recent experience in Kosovo and Afghanistan suggests that the American military finds it hard going to rebuild shattered civil societies, get food and medicine to those who need it and stop ancient enemies from settling scores after the sun goes down. But keeping the lights on and the oil pumping will seem easy next to the task of bringing democracy to a country that has never known it, is divided along religious and ethnic lines and is struggling on incomes about a tenth of what they were in 1980.

So while the political details of the new regime are being sorted out, the army of occupation will not be idle. At the top of the list will be ferreting out Iraq's weapons of mass destruction -- not just the factories, laboratories and stocks of lethal material, but the scientists, military units and agencies that ran the effort. The Bush administration is convinced that there is plenty to find, but as was learned in recent months, it does not know where it all is, despite a decade of intelligence effort.

Iraq's unexpected willingness to grant access to United Nations weapons inspectors presented American intelligence with a challenge to put up or shut up. The analysts scored one small success by pointing out glaring omissions in Iraq's 12,000-page arms declaration; Iraq was known to have possessed large quantities of material for biological and chemical weapons, for example -- what happened to it? But scoring rhetorical points was not the same as giving inspectors a street address for stocks of anthrax, or sending a team in protective gear to the one palace among Mr. Hussein's many with a radioactive basement.

The plain fact, after many weeks of diplomatic wrangling now drawing to a close, is that the Central Intelligence Agency doesn't know what Mr. Hussein has, if anything, or even who knows the answers, if anyone.

Intelligence experts attached to the army of occupation will find the missing people, places and records. They will identify, with dollar figures, just who sold contraband to Mr. Hussein and how shipment was arranged -- a prospect bound to worry some people in Europe and Asia.

Finding Mr. Hussein's weapons of mass destruction is a political as well as military necessity. But just as important now will be everything else his regime learned over the decades: in a word, the files. The Baath Party's 35-year-rule has been maintained by police and intelligence organizations -- General Security (Amn al Aam), established by the British after World War I; Military Intelligence (Istikhabarat at Askariya); the internal secret police, or General Intelligence Directorate (Dairat al Mukhabarat al Ammaa); and a National Security Bureau (Maktab Amn al Qawami) personally set up by Mr. Hussein in 1970 to oversee the other agencies.

The soul of intelligence work is the keeping of files. Because small bits of information sometimes make a big difference, and because it is impossible to know in advance which bits it will be, intelligence services universally make a habit of recording everything and saving it forever.

If Mr. Hussein did any favors for Al Qaeda it will be in the files, but that is only a small part of what American intelligence analysts will want to get their hands on. It is the trove itself that will open up the secret history of the Middle East like a field of sunflowers: the immense paper record of decades of secret meetings, intercepted communications, interrogations and debriefings, exchanges with other intelligence services, the comings and goings of arms dealers, terrorists and every kind of influence peddler.

Shredding files sounds easy but is hard to do, and the order generally comes too late, when the bureaucrats assigned the job are already thinking about hiring on with the newcomers. What the C.I.A. learns from the Iraqi files will transform the war on terrorism, but anyone else who ever caught Mr. Hussein's eye will be exposed as well.

Gaining information from Iraqi files, and making sure that any weapons of mass destruction have been found are two goals that can be met only with Mr. Hussein's ouster followed by military occupation. Then there is the third, perhaps most important goal: establishing an American presence in the region. In its 15,000-word National Security Strategy released last September, the administration linked ''the unparalleled strength'' of American forces with ''their forward presence'' as guarantors of peace. ''The presence of American forces overseas is one of the most profound symbols of the U.S. commitment to allies and friends.''

Dropping talk of ''regime change'' was an American compromise necessary to win unanimous Security Council support for the resolution passed in November. But the administration has said nothing that suggests it would accept less than complete Iraqi disarmament confirmed by American boots on the ground. That it would come to war in the end was always implicit in the American military buildup in the region, difficult to halt or reverse. In remarks last October, for example, the president's special envoy to the Iraqi exiles, Zalmay Khalilzad, issued unvarnished calls for getting rid of Mr. Hussein.

''We are of the view that disarming Iraq is extremely unlikely without regime change,'' Mr. Khalilzad said in a speech in Washington. He conceded it was a possibility that a provisional Iraqi government might be formed before a war to take over the country afterward, but noted, ''It's more likely that there would have to be liberation first, and then a government put in place.'' He did not say what has since become apparent: that the administration effectively opposed creating a government in exile that could take power when Mr. Hussein fell.

This means the postwar power in Iraq will fall to the Pentagon's Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, established by President Bush in January. The office's chain of command runs through Gen. Tommy R. Franks of the Central Command, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the secretary of defense and finally to Mr. Bush.

The Pentagon's official statement is that the United States will stay ''as long as necessary'' to get things going, and then leave ''as soon as possible.'' When closely questioned by members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who wanted more of an answer, the under secretary of state for political affairs, Marc Grossman, conceded on Feb. 11 that he did not think power could be completely turned over to an Iraqi government in less than two years. As for how many American troops will be required, the Army's top general recently said he thought it would take 200,000. The Pentagon immediately said no, not so many, without saying how many.

Whatever the number, they will become a target for Arab nationalists and terrorists, who have proved in the past that they can find a way through American security perimeters. In 1983 in Lebanon, where President Ronald Reagan sent American troops to help resolve a civil war, terrorists twice struck American targets with devastating effect. A bomb outside the American embassy in Beirut wrecked the building, killing more than 60 people including the entire C.I.A. station. A second bomb, outside a building converted into a barracks for American marines, killed 241 servicemen, and led to a complete American withdrawal within months. Responsibility for the attacks was never proved, but in both cases the C.I.A. suspected terrorist groups supported by the government of Iran, which shares a 730-mile border with Iraq, soon, perhaps, to be defended by Americans. C.I.A. analysts also suspect Iran's involvement in the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, which killed 19 Americans.

The Bush administration does not dismiss any of these events as ancient history, regarding Iran as part of the ''axis of evil'' for its support of Hezbollah and Hamas, both classified as terrorist organizations, and for its pursuit of nuclear weapons, which Iran denies pursuing.

Iran was quick to denounce the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks by Al Qaeda, but the thaw in relations was brief. Last summer, Mr. Khalilzad charged that Iran's ''unelected few'' -- the administration's customary way of referring to the clerics in power -- are ''aggressively pursuing nuclear weapons and the missiles to deliver them.'' This is supported by the C.I.A. as well as civilian groups that monitor weapons development; all agree Iran's nuclear program is bigger and closer to success than Iraq's. Iran's ''continuing support for terrorists,'' Mr. Khalilzad said, ''heightens our concern.''

For President Bush the combination of nuclear weapons, ''rogue states'' and terrorists is the sum of all fears. In releasing the National Security Strategy last fall, President Bush said, ''America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed.''

It is fear of Iraq that will bring the American military to Iran's doorstep in the Middle East, and it is likely that fear of Iran will keep them there until the differences between Washington and Tehran are resolved by diplomacy or war, whichever comes first.

***Correction:****March 23, 2003*

*A picture caption last Sunday with an article comparing the American occupation of Iraq to the British occupation of India misidentified Lord Curzon, the viceroy of India. He was the man in a pith helmet, seated near the center of the picture, not the man in a white suit.*