CHAPTER 7

George W. Bush’s Overstretch Abroad

The preemptive Iraq War marked the apogee in America’s cycle of internationalism since the Berlin Wall toppled. George W. Bush’s pirouette toward military intervention and democracy promotion in Iraq and elsewhere saw no equivalent among his post-Wall predecessors or successor. None embraced Bush’s Wilsonian faith in exporting democratic institutions to the degree the 43rd president expressed in early 2005 during his second inaugural address: “So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.” He directly linked others’ “imperative of self-government” with “the urgent requirement of our nation’s security and the calling of our time.”1 Tersely stated, democracy delivered for security for the United States.

Bush’s cri de coeur came as America recoiled from the mounting human casualties and financial costs from two large-scale conflicts far from its shores. His fellow countrymen soon lost faith in the presidential project amid the rising toll in blood and treasure expended in unforgiving lands for what seemed as ungrateful beneficiaries. Americans entered the two

We cannot escape history. Abraham Lincoln
No one in his right mind would, or ought to, begin a war if he didn’t know how to finish it. Carl von Clausewitz

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wars with confidence. But the intractable nature of insurgent warfare discouraged them as years past. Prior to that fateful reckoning, the United States waded into its most controversial conflict since the Vietnam War. Like Vietnam, the Iraq War would have a frustrating end after the United States withdrew its military forces. Despite many differences, the two conflicts shared similar outcomes. In both wars, Washington tired of its exertions and left the battle field enabling its enemies to attack again.

**IRAQ—THE WAR OF CHOICE?**

The onetime Texas governor did not set foot in the White House as a prospective warrior president or uber-democracy champion. He inherited a troublesomely aggressive Saddam Hussein from the Clinton administration, which presided over the breakdown of international sanctions and WMD inspections in Iraq, as noted in Chap. 5. Throughout his 18-month presidential campaign, in fact, Bush never spoke of military intervention into Iraq. There were elements within Bush’s Republican Party and without the party machinery who were stridently anti-Iraq, however. Some wanted Hussein forcefully ousted by the United States. They championed the concept of “preemption” to deal with the Iraqi dictator because, in their opinion, international containment of Iraq was steadily eroding. Specifically, these thinkers, who were later identified as “neoconservatives” (or neocons), had formerly urged President Clinton to use military action against Iraq to remove the autocratic regime.

Not a few of this hawkish persuasion were to hold influential positions on President Bush’s foreign policy team. Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, secretary and deputy secretary of the Defense Department, respectively, joined John Bolton (US Representative to the UN), Robert Zoellick (US Trade Representative and other positions), and Peter Rodman, who served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, in favoring a preemptive course of action against Saddam Hussein. Vice President Richard (“Dick”) Cheney also fell prominently into the war-minded camp. Years later and speaking though a biographer, the first President Bush made tough-minded comments about his son’s vice president and Rumsfeld, secretary of defense until late 2006. The elder Bush held Cheney and Rumsfeld responsible for influencing the second President Bush toward war with Iraq. But in the end, Bush 41 acknowledged that Bush 43 held the reins of power when the nation entered into the Iraq War.