



UNITED STATES INFORMATION AGENCY  
Director of the Near East and South Asian Bureaus

1 Jun 03

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

FROM: Director, Near East and South Asian Bureaus

SUBJECT: Shock and Awe

1. The purpose of this memorandum is to provide you with an assessment of the immediate international reaction to the “shock and awe” campaign carried out from March – May 2003. It includes a description of the interpretations of the actions the United States took, as well as my personal estimation of how the reactions of the Arab and Muslim worlds might affect Americans in the future.
2. The “shock and awe” campaign was carried out in many stages, with the reactions of the Arab and Muslim worlds varying with each progression in the conflict. Accordingly, it is easiest to present my assessment of the reaction in relation to each stage of the campaign. First, there is the time period immediately before the invasion, when an American-led attack on Iraqi soil was an imminent threat, and the following few days. The largest period of time is between the initial attack and the subsequent fall of Baghdad. The final phase in the shock and awe campaign includes the weeks after the fall of Baghdad. The headlines, images, and choice of words employed during each of these phases of the campaign offer insight into the general reaction to U.S. actions.
3. Before the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq even took place, *Al-Ahram Weekly* spoke of an impending air and ground invasion, predicting that “the one certain result of [this] is the utter destruction of a once prosperous Arab nation, already devastated by two wars and 11 years of crippling sanctions.<sup>1</sup>” The Arab media was already

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<sup>1</sup> Shukrallah, Hani. “The Gates of Hell.” *Al-Ahram Weekly*. 20-26 March 2003, Issue No. 630.

influencing the opinions of its audience, even before the coalition forces began the invasion. Immediately following the attacks, however, the reports were more focused on the ‘who, what, when, where, and how’ than on the associated political issues. Images of missile attacks and the damage done to Baghdad, like the one seen below, flooded television screens and newspapers worldwide.



*“Smoke billowing as a missile hits the planning ministry in Baghdad yesterday”*

Source: Gulf Times, 21 March 2003

Headlines reading “US-led troops enter Iraq” and “Missiles hit buildings in Baghdad,”<sup>2</sup> ran across most newspapers, with little emphasis of the political ramifications of the attack.

4. Beginning just days after the attack and continuing for the next three weeks, coverage was expanded to include the effect on the civilian population of Iraq, and the perceived aggression of the United States. The words chosen to describe the attack went from the mild, objective “strikes” and “hit buildings” to accusatory and subjective phrases such as “hammered positions,” “relentless pressure,” and “chaos erupting.” Reports of hospitals, offices, and other non-military targets being damaged in the invasion began surfacing, under the headline “US Missiles Hit Maternity Hospital.”<sup>3</sup> The term ‘shock and awe’ was used by countless foreign news agencies as motivation for opposition of the US-led military campaign and “overbearing American power.”<sup>4</sup> Images of civilian losses began to replace those of invading forces that had plastered television screens worldwide in the past. Below is just one example of the kind of pictures used to demonstrate the civilian losses suffered by the innocent Iraqi people.

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<sup>2</sup> *Gulf Times*. 23 March 2003.

<sup>3</sup> *Gulf Times*. 3 April 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Morley, Jefferson. “World Opinion Roundup.” Thursday, 20 Mar 2003. Washington Post Online. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A55823-2003Mar19>



*A family of Iraqi civilians fleeing Basra being caught in the crossfire between Iraqi positions within the city and British soldiers manning a checkpoint on the outskirts of Basra*

Source: Gulf Times

5. This shift in coverage reflects the shift in the reactions of the Arab and Muslim worlds to the actions taken by the United States. After Baghdad had been taken over by coalition forces, and Saddam's regime essentially toppled, this change in public opinion of U.S. efforts in the region was even more pronounced. There were two related reactions in the Arab and Muslim worlds following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime.
6. One reaction called for the United States and other forces to withdraw and pull out, leaving Iraq to be governed democratically by its own people. Their fear was that an American-appointed government may not necessarily have their best interests in mind. Protesters demonstrated with signs reading "No to America" and "Leave our country, we want peace." Perhaps the most important reaction in this regard was the meeting of officials from Turkey, Iran, Syria, Jordan, Kuwait, Egypt, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia to discuss not only ties with the future authorities in Baghdad but also efforts to have the US-led occupation of Iraq be as brief as possible. The citizens of these nations, following their leaders, also expect a short occupation period, and it is almost certain that the severity of the protests and demonstrations will only escalate with a drawn-out occupation of Iraq.<sup>5</sup>
7. Another concerning reaction to the fall of Baghdad can be summed up in a *Gulf Times* headline from 12 Apr 03, reading "Chaos reigns in Iraq cities." The title alone implies that US efforts to establish and maintain order and democracy within the nation were failing. The article describes looting, rioting, burglary, hijacking and general rowdiness that plagued the entire city, holding its remaining citizens in fear. The media of the Arab and Muslim worlds was quick to blame

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<sup>5</sup> *Gulf Times*. 19 Apr 04.

- the United States. With reports of shopkeepers screaming, “Is this your liberation?” and “We want the law of rule and if the Americans don’t defend us then we’ll defend ourselves with our own weapons,”<sup>6</sup> journalists effectively cast serious doubt on the ability of the coalition forces to affect a change in Iraq.
8. In the wake of the fall of Baghdad, public opinion and its reaction have only become worse. “Playing the ‘terrorism’ card,” “Barbarians at the gate of Baghdad,” and “Unfolding Tragedy” continue to headline major news releases. While the reaction of the Arab and Muslim worlds is important to take into consideration, the more pressing issue still remains; what kind of effect will this have on the American people?
  9. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, the American public, in general, is very sensitive to the opinions and reactions of the Arab and Muslim worlds. Whether this is justified or not is irrelevant. When American citizens see the manner in which the Middle Eastern citizens react to events going on in their region, it ultimately influences their own opinions of and reaction to these same events.
  10. The shock and awe campaign was designed by the US military, and presented to the American people, as a plan that would maximize the effect, and more importantly, the efficiency of American military power. The intended purpose was twofold: one, that the Iraqi military and political infrastructure, specifically their Command and Control capability, would be instantly shattered, and two, that this would be done within as little time and with as little collateral damage as possible. The combined effect, then, would be that the Iraqi people would be both subdued by the ferocity and effectiveness of the campaign, and impressed by the surgical precision of the air strikes.
  11. The problem, however, was that the Iraqi people, or at least the most vocal ones, saw this as an invasion of their right to sovereignty. In their eyes, America was tyrannically using its overwhelming military power to oppress and suppress and ‘independent’ nation. While this may not have been the case for all Iraqis, there were enough militants within Iraq who, aided by international media, were able to promote this idea and therefore represent, albeit inaccurately, the opinions of the entire population. The end result is that the transition to a peaceful government in Iraq has become increasingly difficult and severely delayed. Consequently, widespread Arab support for the US has waned to critically low proportions.
  12. A further complication is the reality that Arab support for the US and US support for the coalition efforts in Iraq are directly proportional. With no clear end in sight for US occupation of Iraq, it is very likely that the Arab and Muslim worlds will begin to look for more effective means of communication to the US leaders their displeasure with the current situation. If they do resort to violence or terrorism that hits more closely to home, it will almost certainly inspire an

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<sup>6</sup> *Gulf Times*. 12 Apr 04.

- enraged American public to demand withdrawal from Iraq, and perhaps abandonment of the U.S. goal of democratizing the country and the region.
13. It is imperative that you remain mindful of the reactions of the Arab and Muslim worlds, but that you also recognize the sacrifices that will need to be made if the United States is to see this democratization through. There is a delicate balance between international reaction and public support for American actions; it is your responsibility to ensure that this balance is maintained and that a nation so close to achieving democracy does not fall back into its past pattern of authoritarian rule under an oppressive regime.
  14. It is important to consider the international response to actions of the United States. This is a global community, and the decisions one nation makes will undoubtedly impact other nations. In particular, the reaction of the Arab and Muslim worlds to the military campaigns conducted in Iraq between March and May 2003 will eventually influence the people of the United States of America.
  15. If you have any concerns or questions, please feel free to contact me at your convenience.

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AMBASSADOR KENTON KEITH

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