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## Playing Texas poker, Bush bets all on Iraq

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A senior Bush official privately admits what his administration cannot declare publicly. The stagnant economy, a dagger aimed at the heart of George W. Bush's second term, will not immediately respond to the president's economic growth program. The economic engine will not be revived until the war against Saddam Hussein is launched and won.

Military victory is anticipated inside the Bush administration as the tonic that will prompt corporation officers and private investors to unleash the American economy's dormant power. Although it is impolitic to say so, the fact that the United States will be sitting on a new major oil supply will stimulate the domestic economy. That puts a high premium on quickly gaining control of Iraq's oil wells before they can be torched--a major uncertainty in an otherwise strictly scripted scenario.

"This is Texas poker, with the president putting everything on Iraq," a Republican senator (who thoroughly approves of this policy) told me. The extraordinary gamble by Bush leads to deepening apprehension by Republican politicians as they wait for the inevitable war. They consider the Democratic Party divided, drifting to the left and devoid of new ideas. Yet, Bush's re-election next year is threatened by two issues: the economy and the war on terrorism. Success on both is tied to war with Iraq.

Few Republicans discuss even in private whether the president had to make this bet. The usually unasked question: Was it really necessary to focus on Saddam's removal from power? With U.S. troops ready to head into harm's way, patriotic politicians do not want to speculate whether this war was avoidable. Any suggestion that the present course largely echoes policies of the Israeli government risks accusations of anti-Israeli and, indeed, anti-Semitic bias.

Ever since the Six Day War of 1967, my late partner Rowland Evans and I have faced such accusations whenever we questioned the wisdom of a joint U.S.-Israeli policy. Most recent was the column in the Washington Post of Feb. 18 by Lawrence F. Kaplan, a New Republic senior editor. He cited me and several other journalists in alleging that "invoking the specter of dual loyalty" (to the United States and Israel) by Jewish Americans was "toxic," polluting and even nullifying "public discourse."

Two days later on CNN's "Crossfire," I asked Kaplan to name one instance when I had suggested dual loyalty by anybody. He could not, because I had not. But more than misrepresenting me is involved. Origins of the decision to wage the war against terrorism by removing Saddam has nothing to do with the ethnic origins of its supporters, but constitute something that should be explored without being attacked.

On July 7, 1996, the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies issued a paper by six "prominent opinion makers" laying out "a new vision for the U.S.-Israeli partnership" that urged an end to "land-for-peace" concessions. Among many suggestions was to "focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq."

The "study group leader" preparing the report was Richard Perle, who as chairman of the Pentagon's part-time Defense Policy Board has put priority, ever since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, on changing the regime in Baghdad.

The group also includes two current full-time administration officials: Douglas Feith, the undersecretary for policy at the Iraq-first Pentagon, and David Wurmser, a State Department senior adviser.

While removing weapons of mass destruction from Iraq was always cited as the primary reason for Saddam's ouster, the broader vision of Democratic Arab states throughout the Middle East--laid out in the 1996 report--was painted in Bush's speech last week to the American Enterprise Institute. Endorsing Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's repeated contention, the president predicted "the passing of Saddam Hussein's regime" will dry up financing of Palestinian suicide bombers.

The senator who told me the president is playing "Texas poker" is delighted to march with Bush in a crusade for democracy in the Arab world, a goal that colleagues well-versed in diplomacy view as unrealistic. That is the heart of George W. Bush's gamble, with his presidency and the course of the nation at stake.

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