The Bush Administration's Busy Year in the Middle East:

A Preview of 2004

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Brief Analysis

STANLEY GREENBERG

Foreign policy questions will play a larger role in the 2004 presidential election than they have in any recent election. The Middle East in particular will play a central role in the foreign policy debate. President George W. Bush's foreign policy is closely intertwined with his domestic policy; in fact, the administration's domestic concerns often guide its foreign policy decisions.

When the Clinton administration first took office, White House pollsters were barred from conducting polls on foreign policy subjects and from meeting with the national security advisor. This measure was taken in order to avoid creating the impression that the administration's foreign policy decisions were being driven by political calculations. In contrast, political considerations clearly play a significant role in shaping the Bush administration's response to issues that it regards as important. For example, the timing of the Iraq resolution in Congress was undoubtedly linked to the administration's sinking poll numbers at the time. Similarly, it should come as no surprise that the administration has not put any pressure on Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon in recent months. In fact, it is difficult to find any area in which political considerations do not constitute a crucial part of the decisionmaking process in this White House.

The Bush administration's focus on politics is most likely rooted in the fact that the electorate is evenly divided. Currently, the American public is 46 percent Democrat and 46 percent Republican, a demographic that would hold regardless of who was in the White House. The House and Senate are evenly divided, and the total numbers of state legislators across the country are nearly so. At the same time, however, most of the current social demographic trends consistently -- though not dramatically -- favor the Democrats. Consequently, the Bush administration frames most of its decisions around the preservation of power.

Prior to the September 11 attacks, the president sat atop a faltering administration that was self-conscious about avoiding comparisons to the Reagan administration. The country was not looking for a revival of Reagan-era policies, and the polls reflected that sentiment. September 11 dramatically altered those dynamics, albeit only temporarily. President Bush's popularity increased sharply after the attacks as a result of his initiatives and successes in security matters. His popularity then returned to its pattern of steady decline; although it rose briefly each time the administration undertook a major response to September 11 (e.g., the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq) or achieved a key goal (e.g., the capture of Saddam Husayn), the trend of decline reemerged shortly after these events. The White House has surely recognized this phenomenon. Indeed, the degree to which President Bush is involved in security and foreign policy issues, and the manner in which he is using the military, are related to the administration's efforts to boost his popularity.

The transformation that the president underwent after September 11 was not just a result of his increased poll numbers. More profoundly, he found his legs in the process of mobilizing the public to respond to the attacks and to

throw off the multilateral shackles that had prevented the United States from using its power to promote freedom worldwide. September 11 thus played a critical role in reviving the Reagan worldview. Similarly, the war with Iraq was meant to underscore several key planks of the Reagan platform: America's exceptionalism, its commitment to freedom, and its ability to use military force without constraint from multilateral institutions. Although the war was rooted in politics, it was also intended to legitimize the broader vision of launching a new Reagan era.

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The 2004 election will have larger stakes than most presidential elections. After a decade in which the country has been evenly divided and uncertain of where it is heading, this year's election will establish a clear direction for U.S. politics. If President Bush is reelected, he will no doubt believe that he has been given a tremendous mandate to govern with an expanded Republican majority in Congress. A Bush defeat would have decidedly different consequences. Although the Republicans could well maintain control of both the House and Senate, a new Democratic president would most likely be able to govern successfully for at least six to twelve months on the strength of an energized Democratic party, a mandate based on defeating Bush, and the cooperation of moderate Republicans. In other words, the 2004 elections will result in significant policy changes regardless of who wins.

Not since Lyndon Johnson's 1964 victory has a sitting president been elected with his party controlling both houses of Congress, and that election had a major impact on both public policy and the political environment. Johnson's reelection -- and, perhaps, the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, a year in which Republicans also took control of the Senate -- is probably the best model with which to assess the structural character and stakes of the upcoming election.

Another key factor will be partisanship, which has become increasingly important despite what many political scientists believe. Party cohesion in Congress is higher than it has been in nearly ninety years, and the parties themselves are more distinct with regard to economic issues and, in particular, social and cultural indicators. Moreover, straight-ticket voting among the electorate has reached levels unseen in recent history.

Beyond these structural characteristics, the importance of the upcoming election is that it will be the first presidential contest since the September 11 attacks. In reaction to those attacks, President Bush adopted a bold set of foreign policy ideas and initiatives, all of which will be judged by voters in this election. Moreover, it has been many years since a presidential election has been marked by such a large divide between the parties' proposed approaches to foreign policy, particularly at a time when foreign policy concerns are so significant.

This election will also be held against the background of the Iraq war. More than 100,000 U.S. troops remain in that country, and all of the Democratic candidates have either been against the war from the beginning or have turned against it after voting to authorize it. Howard Dean's surge completely changed the dynamics of the Democratic Party by pushing the other candidates to adopt positions more critical of the war. In fact, it is impossible to analyze the Democratic race without referencing the war. Because of the number of American lives still at stake and the financial costs of the war itself, Iraq (along with the war on terror) will be the central issue of the campaign season, even though other related issues (e.g., the Arab-Israeli conflict and democratization) are certainly important to President Bush's vision of the Middle East.

Most of the president's political advisors would have counseled him against the bold and risky foreign policy he has adopted. Indeed, no good political advisor would have urged him to launch a war in Iraq with unclear consequences, particularly now that so many troops remain deployed there and are suffering daily casualties. It is to Bush's credit that he overrode many of his political advisors in October and November 2003 by rejecting a gradual withdrawal plan. He is gambling everything on the situation in Iraq and the war on terror, both of which are motivated not by politics, but by ideals in which he and his administration strongly believe. That gamble will be the central issue of the

2004 election.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Benjamin Fishman. ❖

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