



**Episode 341 – Why Iraqi Regime Change was Doomed to Failure**

**Guest: Michael MacDonald**

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**WOODS:** There are a lot of things we can talk about in your book I just introduced to people, *Overreach*. I have a few themes that pop into my mind that I would like to run by you, but before we do that, I want you to give us your two-minute *precis* of your thesis here, what you're claiming the overriding motivation behind the war in Iraq really was.

**MACDONALD:** Well, I think there were two—there was one fundamental motivation and one fundamental assumption. The fundamental motivation was the U.S. was less interested in eliminating WMD or worried about ties with al Qaeda than it was committed to enacting regime change. Bush, the Republicans, Clinton before them, repeatedly said they wanted regime change in Iraq. The catch was that none of them specified what they meant by regime change. So the U.S. embarked on a war in Iraq to enact regime change without knowing what it meant by regime change. That kind of ambiguity concealed two or three different visions of what regime change would mean. For the senior uniformed military and for the intelligence agencies and more or less for the National Security Administration, what regime change meant was getting rid of Saddam and plopping a more amenable, manipulable, general or intelligence agent or something like that in Saddam's place. For most liberals and for Bush and for much of the Republican Party, what regime change meant was something along the lines of enacting liberal, democratic market capitalism in Iraq.

The third kind of definition of regime change was that of the neocons, which meant something close to cultural revolution. They implied, occasionally stated, but often implied that the key source of oppression and misbehavior in Iraq was Islam, and they were committed to curbing, reforming Islam. They would sometimes talk about the need in Islam for something akin to the Reformation that occurred with Protestantism inside of Christianity.

Each of these definitions implied a different strategy and different objectives, but they coexisted and would be interchanged promiscuously and largely unconsciously by policymakers depending on the needs of the moment. As a result, American policy was not only very confused, it was often chasing mutually exclusive objectives. That led at the very least to inept

implementation. More fundamentally, I argue in *Overreach*, it was pursuing objectives that were simply not available historically in Iraq in the year 2003.

**WOODS:** All right, let me try and put the whole thesis together, then. You are saying furthermore that the underlying, well, philosophy behind this whole thing, if there was one, was the view that an Iraq that shares American values or, to some degree, Western Enlightenment values is more likely to be a magnet for the rest of the Middle East in terms of attracting them to these ideas, in terms of pursuing policies that will be more favorable to the West. That was the thinking, that we can actually change their political outlook, in terms of the way they look at the state, and that this will have a cascading effect throughout the region that will be beneficial from a pro-Western point of view.

**MACDONALD:** Yeah, but a lot hedges on the word “change.” For some American policy makers, it was necessary to alter the way Iraqis were. For others, it was sufficient to kind of peel away the oppression of Saddam and let the kind of natural universality of liberal values surface. So those who thought Iraqis had to be changed would talk more about the need for implementation. Those who saw Iraqis as incipiently liberal because liberalism is naturally universal, and what you need to explain is not where it comes from, but why it’s not present. For those figures in American and British policy, what you needed to do foremost was just get rid of Saddam, and then good things would happen. It would take a period of guardianship, and it wouldn’t happen overnight, but they took the destination of Iraq to be obvious and inevitable. And once you assume that Iraq was naturally inclined to embrace and express liberal values, you assume the destination of Iraq, and the content of regime change is self-evident.

**WOODS:** Do you find it odd that people who call themselves conservatives and, therefore, presumably trace themselves back in some way to Edmund Burke would have been caught up in this? Edmund Burke is saying that changes in the political order have to develop organically from already existing institutions, principles, practices. What could be more foreign in Iraq than the kind of change that the neocons wanted to introduce? Are these people conservative in any way? Is there some version of conservatism that maybe I am not familiar with?

**MACDONALD:** Well, there is no serious political thinker more alien to neocons than Edmund Burke.

**WOODS:** Okay, that is the most quotable line on my show over the past three weeks, that right there.

**MACDONALD:** Thank you. Burke would talk about a compact between the living, the dead, and the unborn. What the neocons were interested in doing was destroying the past. It’s not conservative. It’s a combination, I think, of very naïve liberalism with the residue of the Trotskyism of some of the founders of neoconservatism. It’s not conservative. I don’t speak as a conservative, but I won’t blame conservatives for this one. It was mostly reckless. There was a certain kind of nihilism. You could see it in some of Tom Friedman’s columns, which I quote fairly extensively in *Overreach*. He comes to see the problem as Iraqis. He comes to see the

problem as Iraqi culture. Now, if you come into a country to liberate them so that they will become the beacon for the region, and you come to see those you mean to liberate as those who must be changed, then you're saying the U.S. must remake Iraq, and the problem is those we said we were going to emancipate. That's something akin to cultural revolution, and it didn't work.

**WOODS:** I guess what I want to know is, no matter how naïve and inept the thinkers were who were behind this war—and I am sorry to give you kind of a loaded question here, but I genuinely want to know how it's possible that you could look at a country like Iraq that is an artificial country, we all know that it's got Kurds, it's got Sunni, it's got Shia in there, and that a majoritarian democracy there would consist of simply one group using its electoral strength to oppress the others. It would not be a matter of, you know, we'll all conform to the general will. There is no general will. There are three factions that are going to be jockeying to oppress the others. How do they not see that as an obstacle? How did they think that these new liberal institutions they hoped to institute would cope with that problem?

**MACDONALD:** I wrestle with this a lot. I think there's three kinds of answers. The first is, most of the neocons who wanted the war and most of the American liberals, because liberals wanted it, too, knew very little about Iraq and didn't care to learn very much. They just didn't think what Iraqis wanted was meaningful. That's the first kind of reason. The second kind of reason is that these people assume, again, the universality of some kind of American liberalism. They really thought or they acted as if they really believed that America is the destination of history—remember all this end of history stuff coming from the neocons in the early 1990s. If you assume that America is the destination of history because America is universal, then you kind of locate into Iraqis—us.

The third reason, and I have never quite known whether I fully believe this, but if you take seriously what neocons were saying about what came next, a lot of them were talking about invading Iran. So if you institute a democratic—if you have democratic elections—majoritarian elections in Iraq in 2003, 2004, 2005, you're very likely to get a Shia government that would have ties to Iran, much as you have now. It may have been that deep in the recesses of some of these people's unconsciousness, or consciousness in the case of Cheney, that they were going to regard the outcome of democratic elections or majoritarian elections in Iraq as a reason to attack Iran in time. I don't know that they actually thought this through consciously, but they thought so little through consciously that what you have to do is tease out what they must have believed in order to make sense of what they were doing. So a lot of them said they wanted to move into Iran, and since Tony Blair says that Cheney wanted to move into Iran, then it seems to be plausible that the very failure of the original invasion in Iraq might have been turned into an occasion to invade Iran. What they utterly miscalculated was how terribly they would fail in Iraq, which would make it impossible to move into Iran. In fact, you now have the U.S. acting as tacit allies with Iran versus ISIS, which followed fairly directly from the logic of the invasion.

**WOODS:** When I look at the Middle East in the wake of neoconservatism, it has been such a disaster in every conceivable sense that it does make you wonder. A lot of these people have graduate degrees in international relations and this and that. They should have had some kind of a sense of the likely outcome of what they were doing, but it does sometimes make me believe in “the worse, the better” theory, that maybe they are doing this on purpose, that the chaos becomes a rationale for further intervention. There’s no way to prove that, but the evidence seems highly suggestive, I will put it that way. Now, on the other hand, the U.S. government does not seem to have had any compunction whatsoever about installing dictators or supporting repressive regimes. So they are supporting the most backward possible regime in Saudi Arabia at the very time they are singing the praises of liberalism in Iraq. What makes Iraq different? How do you square this circle?

**MACDONALD:** I don’t know the answer to that.

**WOODS:** I am sorry to keep doing this to you.

**MACDONALD:** That’s a very good question. I think it has something to do with a deep, abiding hostility to Iran. The Saudis hate Iran. The U.S. was after Iran. Why invade Iraq if you’re interested in weakening Iran? It’s unclear to me. Saddam, whatever else he was, was a bulwark against Iranian influence. Why you remove Saddam, who is a bulwark against Iranian influence and replace Saddam with an elected government and a society that’s predominately Shia, and therefore, presumably more sympathetic to Iran, makes even less sense, but these people weren’t thinking these through very carefully. What they believed, I think, was that if you did destruction, good things would emerge from it. And remember, there were plenty of Democrats who sort of opposed the war in 2002, 2003 on the ground that the real enemy should have been Iran. If you wanted to go to war there, they said, target Iran, not Iraq. I think that the most efficient explanation is the U.S. thought the default option to deposing Saddam was some kind of incipient, liberal, market, capitalist democracy.

It makes no sense, because the preconditions for liberal, capitalist, market democracy were absent in Iraq, but if you assume that liberal, market, capitalist democracy is universal and natural, then the contingents weren’t really absent. They sort of are in all people naturally. That’s the only explanation that I find persuasive, but it suggests a radically naïve and simple understanding of Iraq. But they didn’t learn anything about Iraq. They didn’t have to know anything about Iraq. What they knew was they would liberate Iraq. They said Iraqis were going to behave liberally. Bush gave speeches to this effect. Bill Clinton had given speeches to this effect. Both implied that any questions about the availability of liberal values in Iraq were implicitly racist. They really do seem to believe that the alternative to Saddam was some kind of not perfect, not immediate, not ideal liberal democracy, but a good enough liberal democracy to serve as a beacon for the region.

**WOODS:** Michael, I hope you won’t think I am just being playful here, but it’s interesting that although I understand you’re not a conservative it seems to me that your argument as to why

regime change, not in the trivial sense of getting rid of one person, but regime change in the way that the neocons wanted, a complete cultural revolution, was doomed to failure. It seems that your argument for why it's doomed to failure is a Burkean argument.

**MACDONALD:** Well, I have read Burke pretty seriously over the years, and I take Burke very seriously. You can make a similar argument from the left, actually. You could draw in Marxist conceptions to the notions of capitalism and liberalism, or you could make that kind of argument from a kind of centrist position, drawn on people like Alexis de Tocqueville. All you really have to do is believe that history matters, and you're going to see the difficulties of assuming liberal democracy as the default option in Iraq. I think history matters. Conservatives think history matters. Liberals think history matters. Some radicals think history matters. All you have to do is believe that because people are formed historically, certain options are open, and certain options aren't open immediately. That doesn't mean Iraq can't become liberal. It doesn't mean it can't become capitalist. It doesn't mean it can't become democratic. What it means is it's not going to become liberal, democratic, or capitalist spontaneously and easily. It took centuries for Europe to become liberal. It took a whole lot for liberalism to become universal in the United States, including an extraordinarily bloody civil war. To assume these things are natural and spontaneous is to assume the end of a historical process as the beginning, and that seems to me not just naïve, but deeply irresponsible.

**WOODS:** What do you say to people who try to use the examples of postwar Germany and Japan against you to say that here were places where liberalism was utterly foreign—Japan had little exposure to it and Germany, of course, the whole regime was anti-liberal on purpose. They thought liberalism was a disease that undermined a vital nation like Germany. How do they go from those detestable regimes to liberal regimes very quickly, and how could that not be done in this case?

**MACDONALD:** Well, I know more about Germany than I do about Japan, so my answer will center on Germany. There's two reasons. First, there were always strong liberal currents in Germany. They lost out to reactionary conservatism—the Junkers in Prussia—but they were strong, liberal currents. And so you didn't have to kind of plant the seeds newly in Germany postwar, but the most important reason is that the reactionary forces in Germany, again, the Junkers, the military were destroyed in the war. Specifically, they were destroyed on the Eastern Front. The enemies to liberalism had been weakened—many of them had actually been weakened by Hitler, but between Stalin and the U.S., they were obliterated, which allowed the kind of liberal traditions that had always been there to emerge more easily. It wasn't as if the U.S. and the victorious allies had to introduce a notion such as the rule of law or of individual rights or of markets. Those had been present in Germany certainly since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and really before then. The difference was that in Germany the conflict between the hard right and the liberals had ultimately been won by the hard right, but there always had been liberals. There were trade unions. There were social democrats. There was sort of

identifiable European politics. What they were suppressed by was the Right, and the Right was backed by the military, and the German military was destroyed in World War II.

**WOODS:** Let's switch back to Iraq now. Can you describe for us what the current regime really is like? A lot of times Americans seem to lose interest. Once the war is over, who cares what's going on in that country? Does anybody in the U.S. know anything about what's going on in the Balkans at this point? Completely off the radar. So tell us what that regime is like, because they did get rid of Saddam, and Saddam was a bad guy, and I think a lot of people think that's really all we need to know.

**MACDONALD:** Well, they got rid of Saddam, and then eventually, they had a civil war, and the civil war was kind of won by the Shia with some of America's help, even though the U.S. leadership was hoping that the Shia would cut a deal with the Sunnis. What's happened over the past year or so is obviously the emergence of ISIS, which was facilitated by the disintegration of the Iraqi regime. There's this sort of parliament and ministries in Baghdad. But if you define a regime in terms of the ability of the regime to enact its decisions and to use violence against internal threats to the regime's existence, then there's effectively no meaningful regime in Iraq. Mosul, which is the second or third largest city in Iraq, depending upon how you count, between 30,000 and 60,000 troops—ostensibly had between 30,000 and 60,000 troops—who were defeated by 800 members of ISIS. Now, the 30,000 to 60,000 troops is tricky, because a whole lot of those troops didn't really exist. They were ghost troops designed to inflate the pocketbooks of the officers who were ostensibly commanding them. They would say I have 60,000 troops, 60,000 troops would be paid, and then 30,000 troops' pay would be ripped off by various officers. That's kind of the microcosm of the regime in Iraq. It is deeply corrupt. It is so corrupt that it has destroyed the conditions of its own existence.

There are politicians. They were kind of elected. They command comparatively little ability to get people to do their bidding. They become very dependent on Shia militias actually to do the fighting against ISIS, which the Shia militias are almost always influenced, sometimes directly commanded, by Iranians. So what's essentially happened is that the Sunnis are in a state of opposition, either because they support ISIS, they are intimidated by ISIS, or they fear the Shia militias. The regime has become dependent upon the Shia militias. And what the U.S. is preaching is some kind of coexistence, collaboration, between Sunni and Shia politicians, which ignores two fundamental problems. One is there is no state really for them to govern through, and second, the Sunni and the Shia politicians disagree fundamentally on what they want to do with whatever power they might accumulate in the future. There isn't a meaningful state there. What there is is rival militias, rival warlords, Sunni nihilists in the form of ISIS competing for power in a society that's essentially fragmented. The Kurds have taken further steps to de facto secession. The regime is more and more dependent on Iranian military support, and the U.S. government is essentially providing air cover for what it pretends are the Iraqi military, but often are effectively the Shia militias, because the Obama administration—the Shia militias—have both decided that their foremost threat in the region is ISIS. It's a very complicated

situation. It's made all the more complicated by the fact that some of our Arab allies—Saudi Arabia—have had in the past dealings with ISIS and are deeply opposed to the Shia government in Baghdad. It's highly confused, it's highly contradictory, and there is essentially no government in any meaningful sense of the term. It's essentially a sort of competition for land, survival, and oil revenues.

**WOODS:** Michael, I want to close with this comment and get your thoughts. A couple of years ago, I—I am not naturally optimistic in the short run. I tend to be more optimistic in the long run, but in the short run, I feel like, well, we're stuck with this political class, and there's not much we can do about it, and they have all these preconceptions about foreign policy that are all wrong and dangerous, but a couple of years ago, I started to see things maybe turning around a little bit. You may not have seen it, but even Newt Gingrich had an article in the *Washington Times* saying, you know, maybe in the future we shouldn't be so knee-jerk interventionist. The outcome has not been so favorable. I thought, well, that's not the best grounding for it, but that's a good start. That's nice to see. And I was very surprised when, basically, public opinion demanded that there be no intervention in Syria. So I thought maybe we're turning a corner. Now with ISIS you put beheadings on TV, and that's all people need to see, and suddenly everybody's for intervention. What do you think about this and the prospects for the future?

**MACDONALD:** Well, I think there is obviously pressure for intervention. There is also pressure for intervention against Iran. I think that's seriously unwise. Of all the lessons I learned from writing *Overreach*, the one that bothers me most is the absence of accountability in American politics. It's very tempting to blame Bush for everything that went wrong, but that's kind of a version of the great man theory of history. Bush built on a lot of prior support for war in Iraq. He mismanaged it, but focusing on his mismanagement implies it would have succeeded had he been more capable. What's striking to me is that both houses of Congress—both political branches of government—the executive and Congress—both parties, the foreign policy establishment in both parties, and a generation of mostly Baby Boom politicians, called for and got a war in Iraq. When the war failed, they largely escaped accountability, just as many of them at the same time were escaping accountability for the financial crisis in '08, '09 and still really. I think there has been a real weakening in American democracy if politicians can make monumentally terrible decisions and skate free. If there is no accountability, then it's not clear to me that there is any real meaningful democracy.

One of the things I like to do in *Overreach* is simply quote what people were saying at the time. Opinion leaders, foreign policy elites, and officeholders—senior figures in American politics—most of them supported the war, and those who supported the war often fared better afterwards than those who had opposed the war at the time. The obvious exception is Obama is president, in substantial measure, because he opposed the war, and Hillary Clinton was denied the Democratic nomination in substantial measure in 2008 substantially because she supported the war. But apart from those two figures, the hawks in the early '00s did better

than the doves subsequently, and that's disappointing, especially because most Americans now clearly understand the war was wrong not just in execution, but in conception.

**WOODS:** The book we've been talking about is *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iran*, published by Harvard University Press, by our guest Michael MacDonald. Michael, do you have a website where people can follow you?

**MACDONALD:** You know, I don't. I am kind of a Luddite in technology, but you can find the book certainly at Amazon and certainly through Harvard University Press, and hopefully, your local bookstores.

**WOODS:** And I will link to it on our show notes page for this episode. This is episode 341, so this show notes page would be [tomwoods.com/341](http://tomwoods.com/341). Well, Michael, I hope you found this as useful a discussion as I did and as I am sure my listeners will—very important points, and great to hear you say them—to hear somebody coming from your perspective and with a book published by Harvard saying things that so many of us are trying to get out there in the public, and it's wonderful to hear you doing it. Thanks so much.

**MACDONALD:** Thank you, Tom. I had a great time.