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Winning the War of Ideas in America and the World

THE ASSASSINS' GATE

AMERICA IN IRAQ

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GEORGE PACKER

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AN UNFINISHED WAR

AT THE TIME of the Gulf War, in 1991, a man going by the name Samir al-Khalil started appearing on American television news programs. The name was a pseudonym, and the man's face was always turned away from the camera, his identity further disguised by a wig. Samir al-Khalil was the author of a book about Iraq under Saddam Hussein called *Republic of Fear*. It was written during the 1980s, while Iraq was at war with Iran and hundreds of thousands of men were dying in the trenches and minefields of the two countries' long border, by poison gas and in human-wave attacks, in fighting reminiscent of the stalemate and slaughter of the First World War—except that this war was more modern, fueled in the manner of twentieth-century wars by totalitarian ideologies: in Iraq an aggressive brand of Pan-Arab nationalism, in Iran a revolutionary dictatorship of the clerics. It was a death struggle between fear and faith. More than a million men were killed or wounded in the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88. In this country hardly anyone noticed.

Against the background of this calamity, Samir al-Khalil, who lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and had access to the great collection of Arab sources at Harvard's Widener Library, researched and wrote

his book. *Republic of Fear* is dense and obsessive; it dissects the history and character of the dictatorship of Saddam and his Arab Baath Socialist Party in relentless detail, showing how much the regime resembled and borrowed from the European totalitarian movements, the Nazis, fascists, and communists. By the end of the book, a reader understood why its author had sought refuge behind a pseudonym and a hairpiece.

It took him three years to find a publisher. When the book finally appeared in 1989, it went predictably ignored—until August of 1990, when Saddam invaded Kuwait and put Iraq in the center of Americans' consciousness. Suddenly, *Republic of Fear* became a minor bestseller.

As the Gulf War came to a close in early March 1991, with Iraqi forces routed and in headlong retreat, Samir al-Khalil appeared in public at a Harvard forum and shed his pseudonym. His real name was Kanan Makiya. He was the son of one of Iraq's most distinguished architects and an English mother; he was a trained architect himself and had once managed his father's London firm. Makiya decided to reveal his identity because events in his country of birth were taking a disastrous turn. Shia in southern Iraq and Kurds in the north, encouraged by President George H. W. Bush's call for Iraqis to rise up against Saddam, were being slaughtered in the thousands by the remaining elite units of Saddam's army and his secret police. Iraqi helicopters were taking advantage of the cease-fire terms to massacre civilians from the air or drop suspected rebels to their deaths. At the Harvard event, Makiya urged Bush to stop the slaughter and finish the war by moving on to Baghdad and overthrowing the regime.

The first Gulf War did not turn out as Kanan Makiya had hoped. Saddam kept his grip on power, and soon Bush lost his, and Iraq slipped from most Americans' minds. But throughout the decade between the end of the first Gulf War and the morning of September 11, 2001, Iraq remained an irritant and a reminder of unfinished business. Saddam paved the lobby of an upscale hotel with a mosaic of Bush's face, so that guests had to walk over the features of the American president; apparently needing greater satisfaction, Saddam tried to have Bush killed on a visit to Kuwait. He commanded that his architects build a grand mosque, one of the largest in the world, with minarets in the

shape of AK-47s, and he called it the Mother of All Battles mosque. It was as if Saddam were claiming victory after all. He had done something similar after the war with Iran, in which there was no winner, with catastrophic Iraqi miscalculations and losses. Saddam had ordered gigantic arms to be cast and smelted from models of his own, with the hands holding enormous swords that were crossed into triumphal arches over either end of the military parade ground in the center of Baghdad, about a mile from the Assassins' Gate. The helmets of dead Iranians, pocked with bullet holes, were embedded in the pavement under the arches, so that during the annual ceremonial parade Iraqi tanks would crush them and Iraqi soldiers would stomp on them.

To the world these projects seemed like preposterous delusions. But Saddam had a point: He had twice launched wars of aggression against neighboring countries, and he was still in power, Iraq's paramount ruler. Anyone who tried to overthrow him from within paid the final price. From his capital of grandiose monuments, Saddam continued to taunt and defy the superpower, the West, the United Nations, and his defiance made him a hero to young people and intellectuals across the Arab world. In 1994 he threatened a second invasion of Kuwait. His soldiers skirmished with American and British warplanes patrolling the no-fly zones that the allies had established across northern and southern Iraq in a belated move to protect the Kurds and the Shia. Over the years, not a single Iraqi missile or antiaircraft artillery round struck a single allied plane, so that you began to wonder if they hadn't been ordered to miss. Nonetheless, the engagements were reminders to a world that thought Saddam had been defeated: I'm still here. The UN sanctions on Iraq, which devastated the middle class and were estimated to have doubled the country's infant mortality rate, became a propaganda victory for Saddam in the minds of Arabs and some Europeans. The UN inspectors, who had achieved notable success in the first half of the 1990s in uncovering and dismantling Iraq's unconventional weapons programs, had to leave the country for their own safety after Saddam began to refuse them access to weapons sites and the Clinton administration responded with cruise missile attacks in December 1998; then Saddam shut the door behind the inspectors and

locked it. By the end of the decade, Saddam's crushing defeat in Kuwait appeared to have become at least a moral victory—for him, if not for the Iraqi people. He had defied America and gotten away with it.

The fates of the two countries remained entangled, with brief hope, cruel disappointment, hatred born of relentless propaganda, humiliation, and ruin. All this was on the Iraqi side. On the American side, we lapsed back into our characteristic state of inattention.

After his moment in the media glare, Kanan Makiya returned to private life. He published more books, including a study of the crossed swords in Baghdad called *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity and Responsibility in Iraq*, and a passionate denunciation of the betrayal of Iraqis during the Gulf War by the Western powers and the Arab world called *Cruelty and Silence*. He even wrote a novel about seventh-century Jerusalem. It was a story of the intellectual relationships among Christians, Jews, and early Muslims at the time the al-Aqsa mosque was constructed near the Dome of the Rock—a story of relative tolerance, pluralism, and enlightenment that stood in pointed contrast to the religious ideologies of our own age. Makiya taught Middle Eastern studies at Brandeis University, and at Harvard he directed the collection and translation of a trove of official documents that had come out of northern Iraq after the Gulf War—an archive of the Anfal, the Kurdish genocide of 1987–88. He worked in a small apartment off Massachusetts Avenue that was filled with books in Arabic on Islam and the history of the region. On one wall there was a Ben Shahn poster of a characteristically existential-looking figure, and a quotation from a nineteenth-century Englishman named John Viscount Morley: "You have not converted a man because you have silenced him."

I was living in Cambridge during those years. It's not unusual to see bespectacled men walking the streets around Harvard Square with an air of disheveled preoccupation. Some are professors, some are homeless. In the mid-1990s, I began to notice among these walkers a man with a large, balding head and soft, distracted features who always seemed to be in a hurry. After perhaps a year, I figured out that this man was the Iraqi exile and author of *Republic of Fear*—Samir al-Khalil, Kanan Makiya. In a way, he was both a professor and homeless. I always felt a quiver of worry when I spotted him: The head bobbing

along Massachusetts Avenue seemed like an easy target if there were agents of Iraqi intelligence in Cambridge.

One day I introduced myself, and after that Makiya and I would have coffee in the square a couple of times a year. He told me that after the Gulf War he and other Iraqi exiles had written a document called Charter 91, directly modeled on the Czech dissident group Charter 77, of which Vaclav Havel had been a founding member. Makiya was something I'd never encountered—an Arab dissident in the manner of Havel or Solzhenitsyn. Charter 91 was a manifesto calling for a democratic and secular Iraq—a “Republic of Tolerance.” Once, when Makiya and I were talking about the relativism that had taken over liberal political philosophy, he suddenly said, in his disarmingly direct way, with his apologetic smile, “I’m a universalist.” He identified with Europe’s eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Human rights, he said, were an absolute that would have to be the foundation of a new Arab world—a new Iraq.

The fate of exiles is to dream and wait and decay. But Makiya wasn’t decaying—he had his books, his projects. Beneath the slightly bewildered manner lay a fierce intensity and even stubbornness. Charter 91 and the Iraqi National Congress, the exiles’ political organization (Makiya was a member of its assembly), seemed unlikely to create the Republic of Tolerance. The power of Saddam and the Baath Party, like the Soviet Union once, or apartheid South Africa, at that time seemed permanent, an iron lock. The miracles of 1989 and the democratic revolutions of the 1990s were not for Iraq, which belonged to an alien and frightening part of the world where governments and people routinely did terrible things and no light or air ever penetrated. I was a little embarrassed to sit with Makiya and hear his ideas. It was awkward to be confronted with this intelligence and idealism, to sympathize with his hopes, and have nothing to offer in return, not even hope. But he kept Iraq from being a complete abstraction. If not for Kanan Makiya and our irregular coffees, its future would never have crossed my mind.

DURING THE YEARS between the Gulf War and September 11, Iraq was rarely on the front page of newspapers. But another story was

playing out, subtler but no less important than war: the development of certain ideas about America and its mission in the world. The Iraq War started as a war of ideas, and to understand how and why America came to be in Iraq, one has to trace their origins.

On March 8, 1992—almost a year to the day after Kanan Makiya came out of pseudonymity to urge the overthrow of Saddam’s regime—*The New York Times* published selections from the draft of a document that had been leaked by an apparently dismayed official in President Bush’s Pentagon. The document, forty-six pages long, was called the Defense Planning Guidance, a policy statement that outlined America’s political and military strategy after the Cold War. It was written by Zalmay Khalilzad and Abram Shulsky, both of whom would become second-tier players in the Iraq War under the second President Bush. The Defense Planning Guidance was commissioned by Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and overseen by the undersecretary for policy, Paul Wolfowitz. Its intellectual ambition confirmed Wolfowitz’s reputation as a big thinker.

“Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival,” the draft declared at the outset. The United States would preserve its preeminent power across the globe and discourage potential competitors by keeping defense spending at high levels. Those competitors were as likely to emerge in Europe as anywhere, in spite of America’s long-standing alliances with the Western democracies. Germany and Japan came in for special suspicion. “Like the coalition that opposed Iraqi aggression,” the authors wrote, “we should expect future coalitions to be ad hoc assemblies, often not lasting beyond the crisis being confronted.” There was no mention of the United Nations or any other international organization. Instead, the document described a world of dangers and power struggles in which America had to remain the superpower, for its own security and for stability everywhere else.

The Defense Planning Guidance was one of those internal bureaucratic memoranda—like the famous NSC-68 paper of 1950 outlining an aggressive Cold War strategy—that foretold a grand historic shift. After the leak was published in *The New York Times*, President Bush at first disputed that the implications were far-reaching at all, then he ordered Pentagon officials to rewrite it. When the document

was released in May, the language about preeminence was gone; the toned-down revision made reassuring noises about cooperation and alliances. The press played the story as a case of the mature, sober Defense Secretary Dick Cheney reining in the rambunctious thinking of Undersecretary Wolfowitz. In hindsight, this account seems unlikely. With its language about American dominance, ad hoc coalitions, and preemptive war to prevent threats from unconventional weapons, the Defense Planning Guidance of 1992 foreshadows with uncanny accuracy, down to the wording of key sentences, the second President Bush's National Security Strategy of 2002, which poured the foundation for what came to be called the Bush Doctrine, and its first test, the Iraq War. And this second document reflected, as much as anyone else's, the ideas of Vice President Cheney.

The DPG was a barely visible hairline fracture that over time developed into a profound break. That the leaked document was cleaned up for public presentation wasn't just a response to poor early reviews. Between its authors and the president they served lay a philosophical gulf too vast for the editing out of a few phrases to close. Bush the father belonged to the Nixon-Kissinger school of political thought. In the jargon of foreign policy, he was a "realist," which meant that he believed in preserving the balance of power between states that acted out of narrowly defined interests. For realists, the key phrase was "vital national interest." To officials of this persuasion, the fall of the Soviet Union wasn't an occasion for America to expand its military dominance across the face of the earth. It was a cause for concern, because it upset the balance of power. One realist even wrote an article titled "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War." The mainstream of the Republican Party was dedicated to this line of thought, and after the Cold War its leaders seemed uncertain about what course to pursue—especially once Bill Clinton defeated George Bush. With a Democrat in the White House, Republican wise men began to call for American retrenchment around the world. They disliked the new president's forays into the margins of geopolitics like Haiti and the Balkans. They especially disliked the talk of human rights and democracy as causes for expending blood and treasure abroad. To the realists, these were dangerous fantasies. What foreign regimes did to their

own citizens within the privacy of their own borders was no business of the United States.

During the presidency of Bill Clinton, this view pushed the Republican Party close to its old isolationism of the years before Pearl Harbor. But throughout the 1990s, another current of thought ran alongside or beneath this mainstream, quietly at first, later gathering force.

THE IRAQ WAR will always be linked with the term "neoconservative." The connection is so tight that we've forgotten the history of the word. Neoconservatives have been around since the late sixties, when a small group of liberal intellectuals, many of them originating in the left-wing sects of the 1930s, watched the era of Vietnam, black power, and student revolution unfold. They watched in horror, and while other liberals were turning dovish or radical, they moved sharply to the right. One of them defined a neoconservative as a liberal who's been mugged by reality. The great foreign-policy concern of the first-generation neoconservatives—Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, Norman Podhoretz, Irving Kristol, Daniel Patrick Moynihan—was the same concern of the Truman-Acheson generation of liberals: communism. The disaster in Vietnam did not teach them the lesson that America had tragically overreached and needed to learn the limits of its power. They concluded instead that America had gone wobbly. Our unwillingness to fight, they argued, only encouraged the Soviet Union to expand, until half the globe or more would fall under communist rule. As the seventies stumbled along—the SALT talks, détente, the fall of Saigon with the humiliating evacuation off the American embassy roof, the Iranian revolution, the hostage crisis, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the insurgencies in Central America—their alarm reached a dire pitch. In the pages of *Commentary* magazine, and in the statements released by their group, the Committee on the Present Danger, the neoconservatives warned that American power had grown provocatively weak. Accommodating the Soviet Empire was a sign of defeatism, not realism. The tone of these warnings was righteous and apocalyptic, laced with anger at soft-headed liberals (many of them former friends and colleagues of the neoconservatives) who'd lost their nerve in the '60s. The

tone was personal and, in a sense, natural; it owed something to the left-wing version of world-historical struggle on which so many neoconservatives had nursed in their early years.

In their grim worldview, there wasn't much room for human rights outside the Soviet bloc—especially when President Carter put talk of human rights at the center of his foreign policy. This talk seemed to the neoconservatives truly dangerous, for it undermined friendly regimes (Nicaragua, South Africa, Iran) whose behavior we might not like (they were corrupt, they tortured and killed their own citizens) but whose survival was essential for the resistance to communism. In 1979, one of the neoconservatives, Jeane Kirkpatrick, published an essay in *Commentary*, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," arguing that the tendency of human-rights do-gooders to undermine America's friends and leave the way open to our enemies turned both grand strategy and morality on their heads. Our friends might be nasty, but our enemies were worse; the difference between them was the difference between benign and malignant cancer. It was America's mission to prevent authoritarian friends from becoming totalitarian enemies, which by their essence locked whole populations in eternal prisons that could never be opened from the inside. The essay caught Reagan's eye and the following year won Kirkpatrick an appointment as UN ambassador under the newly elected president.

IN REAGAN the neoconservatives found their champion. His election and his administration's policies, which were partly inspired by the ideas of men like Podhoretz and Kristol, showed the neoconservatives that ideas could lead to power, and that power required ideas. This was not a lesson that came naturally. Their earlier lives in left-wing sects in the 1930s and '40s had been studies in political futility, all the more intense for their impotence, carried on as if New York was St. Petersburg and Toledo Kiev, and America itself on the verge of its own dialectical orgasm of revolution. But these fights at least taught the participants to take themselves and their ideas very seriously, to treat intellectual combat as an extension of the political and even

the weaponized kind. In 1980, the long training of their younger years paid off.

To the neoconservatives' ideas about American power Reagan added a quality of his own: a benign disposition. This wasn't a mere quirk of temperament. Reagan's character, his comfort with the plain American idiom of optimism, gave the confrontational worldview a smiling face that suggested something higher than grim combat. American power, Reagan said, was a force for good in the world—this at a time when respectable opinion, in America and elsewhere, was still riveted by the memory of napalm igniting the jungles of South Vietnam. In 1976, Reagan won a fight at the Republican convention against the establishment forces of President Ford and his cold-blooded secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, to put a "morality in foreign policy" plank in the party's platform. To large numbers of Americans, including Republicans, morality in foreign policy meant minding our own business. At best it meant speaking up for dissidents in the Soviet Union or Chile. Reagan meant something far grander: confronting and defeating communism all over the world. And though he lost the nomination battle to Ford in 1976, he won the war for his party's soul.

In 1981, the first year of Reagan's presidency, Elliott Abrams, who was Reagan's aggressive assistant secretary of state for Latin America and, later, human rights, wrote a memo arguing that the administration shouldn't simply oppose communism; it should also promote democracy, in communist and noncommunist countries alike. The memo contradicted the harsher view expressed two years before by Jeane Kirkpatrick in the magazine edited by Abrams's father-in-law, Norman Podhoretz. Out of personal inclination as well as strategic calculation, Reagan in his rhetoric embraced the idea of promoting democracy. In 1982, speaking before the British parliament at Westminster, he presented a vision of democracy expanding across the globe. The words inspired a new generation of young officials orbiting around Reagan's sun.

One of them was Robert Kagan. The son of a Yale professor of Greek history, Kagan is about the same age as I, but we learned the opposite lesson from the historical moment of our early years: After Vietnam, I