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Foregoing Limited Force: The George W. Bush Administration's Decision Not to Attack Ansar Al-Islam

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ABSTRACT After September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush's administration presented a national security agenda that held two key goals: the denial of safe havens to terrorist groups with international reach, and the prevention of terrorist groups from acquiring Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). In 2002, a terrorist group, Ansar al-Islam, operating out of a camp in Khurmal, northeast Iraq, was reportedly developing cyanide gas, toxic poisons, and ricin for potential use against Europe and the United States. The Joint Chiefs of Staff unanimously supported, and formally presented to the White House, a military operation to destroy the Ansar camp. This article, based on research and interviews with senior military and civilian officials, assesses four plausible explanations for why President Bush deferred attacking the only place in Iraq that was producing WMD, albeit in small quantities, before the 2003 war. It argues that President Bush made the mistake of bypassing the Khurmal operation, because of concerns that it could have disrupted plans to remove Saddam Hussein from power. In addition, the article assesses what lessons learned from the decision not to attack Khurmal could be applied to other non-uses of limited force.

KEY WORDS: Khurmal, Iraq, Limited Force, Negative Cases, Terrorism, Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush's declared national security policy focused on two central premises: The United States would 'pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism', and prevent terrorist groups from acquiring Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) that could be used to attack or coerce America or its allies.¹ The reasoning behind this

¹President George W. Bush, 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People', 20 Sept. 2001.

conceptual framework was that without state-sponsorship terrorist organizations are less effective in recruiting new members and planning large-scale operations, and given the commitment of groups such as Al-Qa'eda to create mass casualties, it was likely that they were seeking to obtain WMD. In the face of threats from reckless state leaders and terrorists who employed suicide tactics, long-term strategies of containment or deterrence could not be counted upon. The Bush administration's national security framework justified the use of preemptive force to attack state-sponsors of terrorism, and defeat the catastrophic threat of WMD before it was fully formed.

Six months after this national security framework was first articulated, an unprecedented opportunity emerged for the United States to use preemptive force to attack a terrorist organization, which operated in a country that was labeled a state-sponsor of terrorism by the US State Department, and was reportedly developing WMD to use against America, or its allies in Western Europe. In the Zagros Mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan, a Kurdish terrorist organization – Ansar al-Islam – was running a training camp near the village of Khurmāl, where it was reportedly producing cyanide gas, toxic poisons, and ricin for terrorist attacks by its affiliated cells in Britain, Germany, France, and Italy.² The US military developed a combined air-ground operations option that anticipated striking the camp on 4 July 2002. That option was unanimously supported by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and proposed to the White House. According to General Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the planned operation to destroy Khurmāl 'would have been challenging, but doable'.³ General John Keane, the US Army's representative on the Joint Chiefs, recalled the proposed option as 'very doable from a military perspective'.⁴ If there ever was a clear instance for the Bush administration to execute its post-9/11 national security policy, this was it. Yet, despite the alleged threat from Ansar al-Islam, and a reliable option to use preemptive force to defeat it, President Bush chose not to utilize limited force.

This case study of the decision to not attack Khurmāl is an example of the dog that did not bark. Social scientists refer to such non-events as *negative cases*, where an expected and relevant outcome of interest did not occur, but was a strong possibility.⁵ For the purposes of studying and evaluating the uses of limited military force, it is important to

²Sebastian Rotella, 'Terrorism's Reach: A Road to Ansar Began in Italy', *Los Angeles Times*, 28 April 2003.

³Interview with Gen. Richard Myers, 8 Oct. 2007.

⁴Interview with Gen. John Keane, 27 Sept. 2006.

⁵For rules to selecting negative cases, see Gary Goertz, *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 2006), 177–210.

understand the causes and conditions of such negative cases, where limited force is proposed and debated among senior officials, but never implemented. In an era characterized by perceived threats to US national security from non-state actors and regimes that might be developing WMD or ballistic missiles, it is increasingly likely that the United States will rely more on limited force to defeat these threats, and less on larger uses of military power that seek to remove regimes from power or defeat an adversary's military power. In turn, questions about the feasibility and rationale of when the United States should use, or bypass, limited force can be expected to arise repeatedly, much as it already has since the end of the Cold War.

Limited uses of military force are the norm among all uses of direct military force. Moreover, many more limited uses of force are considered by senior officials than are ever actually implemented. Such recent examples run the gamut from the oversized extreme with indeterminate political objectives: the decision by the National Security Council (NSC) in June 1996 not to execute the 'Eisenhower Option' – a ground invasion of Iran with a half-million or more troops, cruise missile strikes against strategic assets on Iran's coast and WMD sites, and strikes against Iranian-sponsored terror camps in Lebanon – in retaliation for the 25 June 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia;⁶ to the very limited with well-defined political goals. An example of the latter was President George H.W. Bush's decision in late August 1990 to refrain from attacking an Iraqi oil tanker breaching a United Nations embargo, even just to disable it from steaming to Aden in South Yemen, while trying to coerce Saddam Hussein to withdraw his forces from the newly seized Kuwait.⁷ Then there are initially limited operations that expanded beyond what was politically acceptable when logistics and support elements were included. Such was the refusal by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in late 2005 to authorize a complex US Navy Seal operation to attempt to capture the terrorist operative Ayman al-Zawahiri in northern Pakistan moments before it was scheduled to begin.⁸ Within the spectrum between these extremes lies a wide range of limited force options that were developed, proposed, and debated, but ultimately rejected by senior officials.

⁶Kenneth Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House 2004), 284–5, 291; and Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terrorism* (New York: Free Press 2004), 118–21.

⁷Robert Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1996), 497–8.

⁸Evan Thomas, 'Into Thin Air,' *Newsweek*, 3 Sept. 2007; and Mark Mazzetti, 'US Aborted Raid on Qaeda Chiefs in Pakistan in 2005', *New York Times*, 8 July 2007.

Among the recent instances of non-uses of limited force, the Khurmal case has an intrinsic importance since it remains unexplored in the military history or security studies literature, or in the historical accounts of the American approach to Operation Iraqi Freedom. While there have been a few passing news media references, this illustrative story remains largely untold. This article proceeds with the following six sections.

First, it sketches the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism in Iraqi Kurdistan, the founding of Ansar al-Islam, and its links to terrorist operative Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Second, it follows the early debate among senior officials about the threat posed by Ansar al-Islam and what the United States should do, if anything, to counter it.

Third, it details the two military options to strike the Ansar training camp near the Kurdish town of Khurmal that were developed by the military, one of which was unanimously approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Fourth, it offers and evaluates four plausible explanations for why President Bush ultimately decided against implementing either operation: the threat was not great enough, there was no actionable intelligence, the political costs of failure were too high, and the main goal of regime change could be disrupted. This section concludes that the later explanation – President Bush did not want to undertake any actions that could have derailed the option of regime change in Iraq – is the most powerful reason Khurmal was not attacked.

Fifth, it discusses the costs and consequences to American interests of the decision to leave Ansar al-Islam and al-Zarqawi untouched.

Finally, this article analyzes five lessons that this case can tell us about the non-uses of limited force.

The Rise of Ansar al-Islam

Influenced by the Iranian Revolution in 1979, proselytizing by the Muslim Brotherhood, and the return of battle-hardened Kurds who fought alongside the mujahidin in Afghanistan against the Soviet Army, Islamic fundamentalism emerged as a minor political force in northern Iraq in the late 1980s. This was reflected in 1992 by the first democratic elections in northern Iraq for the regional parliament. The main Islamist party, the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan (IMK), received 6 per cent of the vote, badly trailing the two dominant secular Kurdish factions: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) with 46 per cent and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) with 45 per cent.

Throughout the early 1990s, Kurdistan flourished via oil-smuggling revenues and the armed protection of the American-led no-fly zone north of 36th Parallel – within which Iraqi security services were

forbidden from flying fixed-wing aircraft. In short time, the Kurds established a court system, armed an internal security force, built schools and clinics, and installed an elected parliament in the provincial capital of Irbil.⁹ The IMK utilized this safe haven to expand its ranks by recruiting young urban men disillusioned by the secular and Western influences encroaching into northern Iraq. Between 1994 and 1996, the tentative coalition between the KDP and PUK unraveled over a disagreement about the division of oil-smuggling profits.¹⁰ After intermittent fighting, a settlement was reached in which Kurdistan was evenly split with the KDP controlling the northern and western portions bordering Turkey, and the PUK the south and east. In May 1997, through a diplomatic agreement brokered by Tehran, the IMK was able to carve out a 15-square mile area of its own within the PUK's territory that bordered Iran.¹¹ Of the 16 villages in this small mountainous terrain, the largest was named Khurmal.¹²

Ten days before the September 11 attacks, a breakaway faction of the IMK aligned with other Islamist Kurdish groups and was reconstituted as *Ansar al-Islam* – Arabic for 'Supporters of Islam'. Ansar issued a fatwa, or religious edict, which declared war against the two secular Kurdish parties and welcomed fellow jihadis to join the fight by infiltrating their enclave via the porous border with Iran. Backed by financing from Osama bin Laden and Saudi Arabia, and with modest security assistance from Iran, Ansar established a Taliban-style social order within its territory: drinking, smoking, and satellite televisions were strictly forbidden; women were prohibited from education or employment, and men were required to pray five times daily at their village mosque.¹³ Kurds within the enclave who did not adhere to Ansar's strict decrees were threatened, forcibly displaced, or tortured.¹⁴ Islamist Kurds and small numbers of Arab fighters were

⁹John Darnton, 'Almost a Nation: The Kurds in Iraq,' *New York Times*, 21 Jan. 1994.

¹⁰Andrew Cockburn and Patrick Cockburn, *Out of the Ashes: The Resurrection of Saddam Hussein* (New York: HarperCollins 1999), 232.

¹¹International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Radical Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan: The Mouse That Roared?', ICG Middle East Briefing, 7 Feb. 2003, 3; and Michael Rubin, 'The Islamist Threat in Iraqi Kurdistan,' *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, jointly published by the United States Committee for a Free Lebanon and the Middle East Forum, Dec. 2001.

¹²Michael Howard, 'Under Fire from Militants,' *The Guardian*, 5 Feb. 2003.

¹³Karl Vick, 'In Remote Corner of Iraq, an Odd Alliance,' *Washington Post*, 12 March 2003. According to the US Dept. of the Treasury 'Bin Laden provided [Ansar] with an estimated \$300,000 to \$600,000 in seed money.' See Office of Public Affairs, 'Treasury Department Statement Regarding the Designation of Ansar al-Islam', 20 Feb. 2003.

¹⁴Human Rights Watch, 'Ansar al-Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan,' HRW Backgrounder, 5 Feb. 2003; and ICG, 'Radical Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan', 5.

trained in small arms tactics, explosives, suicide bombings, and assassinations. Armed skirmishes between Ansar and the secular Kurdish militias were videotaped, and posted on a website – (www.ansarislam.com), or circulated throughout the Muslim world for recruitment purposes.¹⁵ Estimates of Ansar al-Islam’s members in Iraqi Kurdistan ranged from 600 to 1,000 armed and dedicated militants within a civilian population of 4,000.¹⁶ They were a violent and dedicated terrorist organization, though largely contained, but not defeated, by the approximately 10,000 PUK fighters surrounding them in the region.¹⁷

While the existence of an armed Islamic fundamentalist movement in northern Iraq was an acknowledged concern by US officials, it did not threaten American interests until it formally merged with Al-Qa’eda members and affiliates fleeing Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban.¹⁸ Foremost among these exiled operatives was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian terrorist, who oversaw a string of spectacular and gruesome attacks throughout Iraq between July 2003 and June 2006, when he was killed by an American airstrike. From early 2000 to October of the following year, al-Zarqawi managed the Al-Matar training facility in the western Afghanistan town of Herat, which contained around 2,000 fighters and their families. His group, *Jund al-Sham* – Arabic for ‘Soldiers of the Levant’ – was dedicated to overthrowing the Jordanian monarchy. In December 2001, al-Zarqawi and 300 of his fighters left the Afghan safe haven for northern Iran. Over the next 14 months, al-Zarqawi traveled to southern Lebanon, Syria, and northern Iraq, expanding his terrorist network. In March 2002, either on his own accord or at Tehran’s insistence, al-Zarqawi and his followers left Iran to live and train in the Ansar enclave in Iraqi Kurdistan.¹⁹

The arrival of al-Zarqawi and his affiliates impacted the capabilities and character of Ansar al-Islam in two important ways. First, it meant the arrival of what one US Special Forces officer – who later investigated Khurmal – referred to as the ‘Al-Qa’eda mobile curriculum’ that had been developed and refined in the training camps

¹⁵Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (London: I.B. Tauris 2003), 202–4, 242–4; and C.J. Chivers, ‘Kurds Face a Second Enemy’, *New York Times*, 13 Jan. 2003.

¹⁶Ed Blache, ‘Northern Iraq Seething as War Looms’, *Jane’s Islamic Affairs*, 20 Dec. 2002; Scott Peterson, ‘The Rise and Fall of Ansar al-Islam’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 16 Oct. 2003; and Catherine Taylor, ‘Taliban-style Group Grows in Iraq’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 15 March 2002.

¹⁷ICG, ‘Radical Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan’, 4.

¹⁸Taylor, ‘Taliban-style Group Grows in Iraq’, 1.

¹⁹Mary Anne Weaver, ‘Inventing Al-Zarqawi’, *Atlantic Monthly* (July/Aug. 2006), 87–100; and Mark Hosenball, ‘Terrorism: Following Zarqawi’s Footsteps in Iran’, *Newsweek*, 25 Oct. 2004, 6.

of Afghanistan.²⁰ Second, it catalyzed Ansar to adopt even bloodier tactics against innocent Kurdish civilians and secular political leaders.²¹

The Civilian Debate on Iraq

Within ten days of assuming office in January 2001, President Bush convened his first meeting of the Principals Committee of the NSC, with the only topic being 'Mideast Policy'. The consensus of the senior officials was that Saddam Hussein's regime was destabilizing the region, and most likely developing proscribed WMD and ballistic missiles. President Bush tasked the heads of the State Department, Pentagon, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to review America's diplomatic and military approach toward Iraq.²²

On 9/11, the Bush administration's Iraq review, though overdue, remained unfinished. A few months later, the review was restarted with a series of secret informal gatherings of the Deputies Committee (DC) of the NSC, known as non-DC meetings, or 'Deputies Lunches'.²³ The meetings were chaired by Deputy National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, and included key senior officials heavily involved in Iraq war planning: Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz, and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Douglas Feith, from the Pentagon, Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage, and Undersecretary for Political Affairs, Marc Grossman, from the State Department, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Peter Pace, Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, John McLaughlin, NSC regional specialist, Zalmay Khalilzad, and Scooter Libby or John Hannah from the Office of the Vice President.²⁴

This group of second and third-ranking foreign policy officials decided early on that the policy of containment had failed, and that Saddam Hussein would have to be removed from power.²⁵ Though the decision

²⁰C.J. Chivers, 'Instruction and Methods from Al Qaeda Took Root in North Iraq with Islamic Fighters', *New York Times*, 27 April 2003.

²¹Jonathan Schanzer, 'Ansar al-Islam: Back in Iraq,' *Middle East Quarterly* (Winter 2004), 41–50.

²²Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neil* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2004), 70–5.

²³Karen DeYoung, *Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2006), 398–9; George Tenet, with Bill Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins 2007), 307–9; and interview with Douglas Feith, 9 Aug. 2006.

²⁴Interview with Douglas Feith, 9 Aug. 2006; interview with Amb. Richard Armitage, 15 Feb. 2007; and James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking 2004), 332.

²⁵Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans*, 332–4.

to invade Iraq had not been made by early 2002, the Deputies considered the checklist of all requirements should the President decide on regime change, from selecting a post-Saddam governing structure, to refurbishing the aging electrical grid, to developing and distributing a new currency.²⁶ The Deputies also debated several schemes to overthrow the Ba'athist regime, including: establishing an independent enclave in southern Iraq, arming Iraqi exile groups, fomenting a coup from within the Iraqi Army, and using unilateral American military force.²⁷

As the Deputies Lunches continued, in early spring 2002, *New Yorker* reporter Jeffrey Goldberg toured Iraqi Kurdistan to investigate the lives of the Kurdish victims of Saddam's Anfal ('Spoils of War') Campaign in 1987 and 1988: a genocidal effort that featured mustard and nerve gas attacks against civilians in at least 60 villages.²⁸ During his interviews, Goldberg visited a prison in Sulaimaniya run by the intelligence service of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Three of the prisoners provided evidence of connections between the Iraqi regime and Al-Qa'eda: Qassem Hussein Muhammad, an Iraqi intelligence officer who alleged that another Mukhabarat employee was 'the actual decision-maker' of Ansar al-Islam; Haqi Ismail, an Iraqi Arab who was alleged by his Kurdish captors to have connections to the Mukhabarat, and who admitted to working in the Taliban Foreign Ministry; and Muhammad Mansour Shahab, an Arab-Iranian who claimed to have smuggled explosives, small arms, and several dozen refrigerator motors that each contained an unidentified liquid canister, between the Iraqi Mukhabarat and Al-Qa'eda in Afghanistan.²⁹

The essential findings from these interviews were a series of damning allegations:

That Ansar al-Islam has received funds directly from Al-Qa'eda; that the intelligence service of Saddam Hussein has joint control, with Al-Qa'eda operatives, over Ansar al-Islam; that Saddam Hussein hosted a senior leader of Al-Qa'eda in Baghdad in 1992; that a number of Al-Qa'eda members fleeing Afghanistan have been secretly brought into territory controlled by Ansar al-Islam;

²⁶Interview with Amb. Richard Armitage, 15 Feb. 2007.

²⁷DeYoung, *Soldier*, 399.

²⁸Human Rights Watch/Middle East, *Iraq's Crime of Genocide: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP 1995), 262–5. This campaign began in the last two years of the Iran–Iraq War and continued afterwards.

²⁹Jeffrey Goldberg, 'The Great Terror,' *New Yorker*, 25 March 2002, 52–75. British journalist and long-time Al-Qa'eda watcher Jason Burke interviewed Shahab a year after Goldberg and concluded flatly: 'Shahab is a liar.' See Burke, 'The Missing Link?', *The Observer*, 9 Feb. 2003.

and that Iraqi intelligence agents smuggled conventional weapons, and possibly even chemical and biological weapons, into Afghanistan.³⁰

Goldberg's article, titled, 'The Great Terror,' made an immediate impact on the emerging national debate about whether or not to confront Iraq. Political leaders from both parties, the Director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet, and serving and retired government officials commented on what was characterized by Vice President, Dick Cheney, as a 'devastating story'.³¹ If it were true that Saddam Hussein was harboring Al-Qa'eda members ousted from Afghanistan, and that his intelligence operatives were cooperating with Al-Qa'eda over the production of weapons of mass destruction, then Iraq would clearly meet the threshold for using preventive force as articulated by President Bush after 9/11.

Appearing on talk shows to promote his article, Goldberg was careful not to oversell the validity of his allegation, noting that while he 'underst[ood] that all intelligence is colored by motivation', he felt the prisoners' 'stories were credible enough to warrant reporting'.³² Furthermore, perhaps Goldberg's most damning allegation was that no American government employees – either from the diplomatic, military, or intelligence services – had questioned the prisoners despite repeated pleas from PUK officials. Commenting on this assertion, the former Director of Central Intelligence, James Woolsey, proclaimed: 'It would be a real shame if the CIA's substantial institutional hostility to Iraqi democratic resistance groups was keeping it from learning about Saddam's ties to Al-Qa'eda in northern Iraq.'³³

Goldberg's article crystallized ongoing and divisive inter-agency discussions about possible links between Al-Qa'eda and Iraq. A front-page *Washington Post* story on the *New Yorker* article quoted an unnamed senior administration official 'disposed toward US military confrontation with Iraq', as stating, '[the piece] doesn't strike me as incredible, and may fill in gaps in our knowledge. I'll be interested in what our intelligence people say.'³⁴ At the first Deputies Lunch after Goldberg's article was published, on 25 March 2002, discussion turned toward his allegations, as well as the claim that the CIA had made no effort to interrogate the PUK's prisoners. At one point, Stephen Hadley

³⁰Goldberg, 'The Great Terror'.

³¹CNN, Late Edition, 24 March 2002.

³²NPR, *All Things Considered*, 18 March 2002; and CNBC, *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, 18 March 2002.

³³Goldberg, 'The Great Terror', 52.

³⁴John Mintz, 'Iraq, Al Qaeda Run Extremist Group in Kurdish Territory', *Washington Post*, 18 March 2002.

turned to John McLaughlin and asked ‘What is going on here?’—meaning: ‘Why hasn’t the CIA investigated this?’³⁵ At each meeting over the subsequent weeks, the Pentagon’s representatives, Wolfowitz and Feith, would press McLaughlin on the status of whether the lead American intelligence agency charged with collecting human intelligence abroad would enter Iraqi Kurdistan to follow up on Goldberg’s charges. It would not be until 27 June, three months after the initial allegations surfaced, that McLaughlin would consent to allowing CIA teams to interview the PUK’s prisoners, but only on the condition that the Principals Committee of the NSC approved.³⁶ In the second week of July, an eight-person CIA team – the Northern Iraq Liaison Element – finally crossed into northern Iraq from Turkey to investigate the threat from Ansar al-Islam. The intelligence operatives interviewed the Ansar detainees – verifying that three had trained at camps in Afghanistan, but failed to obtain any physical evidence that poisons were being produced at Khurmal.³⁷

Military Options and Joint Chiefs of Staff Approval

Months before the CIA was investigating Ansar al-Islam, the Pentagon was collecting intelligence about the group, compiling detailed targeting information, and drawing up military options to strike Khurmal. Military planning began at the regional command level, which included both US Central Command (CENTCOM), the command that included Iraq, and US European Command (EUCOM), the command from whose Special Operations assets would have led the mission. The plans were then submitted to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, consisting of the service chiefs of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines, and the Chiefs’ Vice Chairman and Chairman – the principal military advisor to the President, NSC, and Secretary of Defense. The six Chiefs and their staffs meet once or twice a week in ‘The Tank’ – a secure conference room in the Pentagon used for official meetings.³⁸ During a Tank gathering over the Memorial Day weekend (prior to 27 May) in

³⁵Interview with Douglas Feith, 9 Aug. 2006. See also Douglas Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: Harper 2008), 261–2.

³⁶Interview with Douglas Feith, 9 Aug. 2006; and interview with George W. Bush senior administration official, March 2007.

³⁷Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2004), 140–2; Tenet, with Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm*, 389–91; and Tim Judah, ‘Kurdish Guerillas Poised to Fire First Shots Against Iraq’, *The Observer*, 11 Aug. 2002.

³⁸Peter Roman and David Tarr, ‘The Joint Chiefs of Staff: From Service Parochialism to Jointness,’ *Political Science Quarterly* (Spring 1998), 105.

2002 the Joint Chiefs received their first formal briefing about the intelligence on Khurmāl, or 'Khurma' as it was also described in internal Pentagon papers.³⁹ The Chiefs were informed that Ansar al-Islam, a distinct organization from Al-Qa'eda, was preparing toxins that could be used against targets in Europe or the United States.⁴⁰ According to Lieutenant General Gregory Newbold, the Joint Staff's Director of Operations at the time, the information was based on 'extremely good intelligence'.⁴¹ General John Keane, the Army's Vice Chief of Staff, agreed, concluding that, based on all of the intelligence he saw in early summer 2002: 'There was no doubt about the target [Khurmāl] in my mind.'⁴²

Ansar al-Islam Training Camp, Khurmāl, Iraq

Military operations officers at the regional commands, supported by the Joint Staff, immediately worked up detailed plans to attack Khurmāl. The plans were based upon the best intelligence, US strike capabilities stationed in the region, and political sensitivities of the countries from which the participating aircraft and helicopters would have to be based in, or flown-over. While there were many versions as they were constantly updated and refined, the operations officers developed two broad options for striking the camp: An air-only option, and an air-ground combination.⁴³ Since the specific military plans remain classified, the options analyzed below are based upon all of the publicly available information, discussions with informed civilian and military officials, an understanding of recent American uses of limited force, and an examination of the eventual destruction of Khurmāl by the US Army Special Forces and Kurdish militias in March 2003, after the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The air-only option could have been conducted through two means. The first was with a barrage of sea-launched Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (TLAMs) from US Navy assets in the Persian Gulf. The upside for using cruise missiles is that they almost always impact targets with pinpoint accuracy, making them the ideal weapon for attacking above ground and well-exposed facilities such as the Ansar camp at Khurmāl. (See Figure 1) The downside with cruise missiles is that they cannot penetrate deep enough into the earth to destroy hardened underground

³⁹Interview with Gen. John Keane, 27 Sept. 2006; and email communication with Lt. Gen. Gregory Newbold, 29 Aug. 2006.

⁴⁰Interview with Lt. Gen. Gregory Newbold, 29 Aug. 2006.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Interview with Gen. John Keane, 27 Sept. 2006.

⁴³Ibid.



Figure 1. Ansar Al-Islam terrorist training camp, Khurmal, northeast Iraq 2000
 Source: US Department of Defense, March 2003.

bunkers and command centers. Furthermore, the conventional warhead mounted on a TLAM does not burn at a hot enough temperature to reliably incinerate biological or chemical agents, and the Joint Chiefs believed that chemical testing was happening at Khurmal. Therefore, if Ansar al-Islam had indeed developed WMD stockpiles and buried them deep enough, a cruise missile attack would have destroyed the buildings, but left the threatening weapons untouched.

The second air-only method could have been to drop conventional bombs on the target from manned US aircraft. One positive element with air-dropped bombs is that they burrow deeper and contain more explosive power than TLAMs, so that they provide more certainty that any stocks of buried WMD would be destroyed. The key problem with a bombing mission, however, would have been that Khurmal was located outside of the Northern No-Fly Zone (NNFZ) patrolled by American and British aircraft flying out of the Incirlik Air Base in Turkey. The Ansar camp was 55 miles south of the 36th Parallel that served as the southern boundary to the NNFZ. Since its creation in 1991, the Turkish government had severely proscribed the rules of engagement and number of sorties per week for the aircraft patrolling

the NNFZ.⁴⁴ As Marc Grossman, US Ambassador to Turkey in the mid-1990s, recalled, these restrictions ‘were all designed to remind us that we should not allow an independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq’.⁴⁵ Given such concerns, and that American officials were concurrently pressing Ankara for permission to use its territory to serve as a staging area for a US ground invasion into Iraq, it is highly unlikely that Turkish officials would have approved a strike on Khurmal using its ground facilities or airspace.⁴⁶

The other three possible flight-paths to Khurmal also made them an unlikely avenue for a bombing attack.

One would have been to fly 80 miles north through Iran, and then west into Iraq. Although Iran allowed US pilots to drift into its airspace in the 2001–02 war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, it is highly doubtful that American planes would have been given overflight rights to bomb Khurmal, especially since Tehran was a minor patron of Ansar al-Islam. Therefore, a strike package flying over Iran would have likely encountered air-defense and air-to-air attacks, which would have placed American pilots unnecessarily at risk.⁴⁷

A second alternative flight-path would have been to fly north through Iraq from the Persian Gulf or Kuwait. This route would have required flying through the well-maintained integrated air defense system in central Iraq, between the southern and northern no-fly zones.⁴⁸

A final route would have been to take off from a friendly state in Central or Eastern Europe, traverse through Israel and Jordan, and then across central Iraq. Again, the size of the flight-package required for such a bombing operation, and pathway through the most lethal area of the Iraqi air defense system, would have unnecessarily threatened the pilots and planes. The logistical and political hurdles with each possible flight-path to Khurmal would have made the manned bombing option severely unlikely. Therefore, a barrage of a few dozen TLAMs from US Navy assets in the northern Persian Gulf would have been the most probable air-only option to strike the targeted training camp.

⁴⁴Interview with Amb. Marc Grossman, 8 Dec. 2006. As US Ambassador to Turkey, Grossman recalled that dealing with Ankara’s limits on US planes in the NNFZ were ‘a constant and main focus of our attention,’ with him and his staff spending ‘hours, and hours, and hours, and hours’ working the problem.

⁴⁵Interview with Amb. Marc Grossman, 8 Dec. 2006

⁴⁶DeYoung, *Soldier*, 427.

⁴⁷According to Amb. Richard Armitage, ‘There were also some concerns within the administration that [Khurmal] was very close to the Iranian border, and we didn’t want to get into a fight with Iran.’ Interview with Armitage, 15 Feb. 2007.

⁴⁸Michael Knights, *Cradle of Conflict: Iraq and the Birth of Modern US Military Power* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005).

The other option developed by the military for striking the target was with a combined air-ground attack.⁴⁹ The goal of this option would have been to saturate the training camp with bombs, insert ground forces via helicopter to survey the damage, capture or kill any survivors, and conduct sensitive site exploitation to gather any physical evidence of WMD production, intelligence about the group, and/or propaganda material that would be useful in justifying the attack. The ground forces component of this option was to have been led by US Special Operation Forces (SOF) teams, with support from the Kurdish PUK militias.⁵⁰ The SOF teams would have been covertly transported by helicopters from the 352nd Special Operations Group based in Mildenhall, United Kingdom under darkness from a base either in Constanta, Romania or Akrotiri, Cyprus through Turkey to Khurmal.⁵¹

According to a US Air Force colonel who was involved in planning the operation, a tactical concern with the mission was that Khurmal was situated at a high altitude and protected by mountain ridges on all sides: 'We weren't worried about getting to the target, we were worried about getting out.'⁵² Despite the difficult geographic features, and persistent worry of a dust storm that could have blinded helicopter pilots, the Air Force colonel believed that the Khurmal operation was 'doable, but challenging'.⁵³ Officials from the US Special Operations Command (SOCOM) initially informed the Joint Chiefs that it would take months for their teams to be prepared, since they would have to first build a replica of the camp to practice against. Though SOCOM routinely requested extra time to plan and prepare for operations, the Chiefs told them that requesting such a delay for Khurmal was 'unsat' (unsatisfactory), and SOCOM officials accelerated their planning process to meet the required timelines.⁵⁴

In the last week of June, the Joint Chiefs submitted their plans for striking Khurmal to the White House, recommending that the

⁴⁹Interview with Gen. John Keane, 27 Sept. 2006; and interview with Gen. Richard Myers, 8 Oct. 2007. Richard Myers, with Malcolm McConnell, *Eyes on the Horizon: Serving on the Front Lines of National Security* (New York: Threshold Editions 2009), 219.

⁵⁰Interview with Gen. John Keane, 27 Sept. 2006; and interview with Douglas Feith, 9 Aug. 2006.

⁵¹Interview with US Air Force colonel, Feb. 2007. See also Linda Robinson, *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces* (New York: Public Affairs 2004), 298 and Myers with McConnell, *Eyes on the Horizon*, 219.

⁵²Interview with US Air Force colonel, Feb. 2007.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴Interview with Gen. John Keane, 27 Sept. 2006.

combined air-ground operation occur on Thursday, 4 July 2002.⁵⁵ Though no formal vote was taken, there was strong and unanimous support among all six of the Joint Chiefs to attack.⁵⁶ What is remarkable about their position regarding Khurmāl is that during the same time the Chiefs sought to avoid a war with Iraq, believing that the adequate ground forces and logistical support were not available for another war so soon after Afghanistan. As Thomas Ricks, defense correspondent for the *Washington Post*, wrote in late May, 'The Joint Chiefs of Staff have waged a determined behind-the-scenes campaign to persuade the Bush administration to reconsider an aggressive posture toward Iraq in which war was regarded as all but inevitable.'⁵⁷

Assessing Explanations for Why Khurmāl Was Not Attacked

According to knowledgeable senior officials, the inter-agency debates over Khurmāl were among the most contentious – though least publicized – within the Bush administration's policy toward Iraq in 2002. Senior civilians from the Pentagon and the Office of the Vice President, as well as counterterrorism officials in the NSC, argued strongly in favor of an attack. Many civilian officials from the other national security agencies were opposed.⁵⁸ The final decision by President Bush was a 'no'. None of the officials interviewed for this article have a clear explanation why the President made the decision he did. General Richard Myers, who personally followed the potential WMD threat from Khurmāl in early 2002, recalled that it 'was a mystery to me' why civilian officials at the highest levels of the US government did not support a limited operation against Ansar al-Islam.⁵⁹

The key question is: since it was the consensus professional opinion of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and its Chairman – the principal military adviser to the President – to employ a limited force to eliminate the Khurmāl camp, why did the President choose to ultimately reject that

⁵⁵Scott Paltrow, 'Questions Mount over Failure to Hit Zarqawi's Camp', *Wall Street Journal*, 25 Oct. 2004, p.A3.

⁵⁶Interview with Gen. Richard Myers, 8 Oct. 2007; and interview with Gen. John Keane, 27 Sept. 2006.

⁵⁷Thomas Ricks, 'Military Bids To Postpone Iraq Invasion', *Washington Post*, 24 May 2002. See also, David Moniz and Jonathan Weisman, 'Military question Iraq plan', *USA Today*, 23 May 2002; and Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt, 'Military Would be Stressed by a New War, Study Finds', *New York Times*, 24 May 2002.

⁵⁸Interview with Amb. Richard Armitage, 15 Feb. 2007; interview with Amb. Marc Grossman, 8 Dec. 2006; and interview with George W. Bush senior administration official, March 2007.

⁵⁹Interview with Gen. Richard Myers, 8 Oct. 2007.

counsel? Based on interviews with officials who were closely involved in national security policymaking at the time, statements by government officials, and contemporary news accounts, there are four plausible explanations. While each influenced the decision somewhat, the primary explanation why the President deferred attacking Khurmal was over concerns that it could possibly disrupt what was the White House's goal from the first meeting of the Principal's Committee of the NSC – regime change in Iraq.

The Threat was Not Great Enough

Some news accounts contend that Bush administration officials believed that the Khurmal camp was so 'small and crude', and not a direct threat to the United States, that attacking it was unnecessary.⁶⁰ This explanation, however, is belied by the fact that the WMD threat from Khurmal and al-Zarqawi was believed to be real and growing by the majority of the civilian and military officials at the time. George Tenet, who spent much of the pre-war period disproving some of the wilder allegations about the Osama bin Laden–Saddam Hussein connection, described Zarqawi as a 'senior associate and collaborator' of Al-Qa'eda who oversaw the operations at Khurmal, and had terrorist cells in more than 30 countries.⁶¹ Tenet writes in his memoirs:

One of the camps run by [Ansar al-Islam], known as Kurmal, engaged in production and training in the use of low-level poisons such as cyanide. We had intelligence telling us that Zarqawi's men had tested these poisons on animals and, in at least one case, on one of their own associates ... Our efforts to track activities emanating from Kurmal resulted in the arrest of nearly one hundred Zarqawi operatives in Western Europe.⁶²

Secretary Powell's February 2003 presentation to the UN Security Council to detail 'what the United States knows about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction as well as Iraq's involvement in terrorism' contained much of the CIA intelligence referred to by Tenet. Powell declared that al-Zarqawi was connected to Bin Laden and regime elements in Baghdad, and highlighted that one of his specialties was producing poisons. An accompanying slide of the facility was titled:

⁶⁰ABC, *World News Tonight*, reported by John McWethy, 19 Aug. 2002; and David Cloud, 'Kurdish Militants May Have Run Chemical-Weapons Tests in Iraq', *Wall Street Journal*, 20 Aug. 2002.

⁶¹Tenet, with Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm*, 277, 350–1.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 350–1.

'Terrorist Poison and Explosives Factory, Khurmāl'. Utilizing uncharacteristically vivid and threatening language, Powell made clear the potentially lethal threat from Khurmāl: 'Let me remind you how ricin works ... Less than a pinch of ricin, eating just this amount in your food, would cause shock, followed by circulatory failure. Death comes within 72 hours and there is no antidote. There is no cure. It is fatal'.⁶³ Underscoring that threat, two weeks after Powell's presentation, the State Department formally designated Ansar al-Islam as a Foreign Terrorist Organization for 'its close links and support for al-Qaida'.⁶⁴

While it was later shown that certain elements of the pre-war intelligence on Iraq was wrong, from mid-2002 to early 2003 the specific threats from Ansar al-Islam – as a potential producer of WMD, and al-Zarqawi – as an Al-Qa'eda affiliate, were believed by the Pentagon, CIA, White House, State Department, and widely accepted by most of the key decisionmakers that managed these agencies. Furthermore, the threats were believed to be credible enough by the Joint Chiefs that they were considered important targets to attack and destroy. That the White House exploited the threat from Ansar al-Islam and al-Zarqawi – and exaggerated their connections to Hussein's regime in Baghdad – to build support for the war is irrelevant to the fact that on their own they were considered to be a clear threat to American interests in mid-2002. What is more, under the Bush administration's post-9/11 national security framework, which focused on denying terrorist safe havens and preventing terrorists from acquiring WMD, attacking what was probably the largest international terrorist training camp – 'a hub for Al-Qaeda operations' according to Tenet – should have been a logical decision.⁶⁵

⁶³US Dept. of State, Secretary Colin Powell, 'Remarks to the United Nations Security Council', New York City, 5 Feb. 2003. The allegations of al-Zarqawi's connections to Baghdad would turn out to be false. According to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence report into the use of intelligence in the period preceding the Iraq war: 'Saddam viewed al-Zarqawi as an outlaw and attempted, unsuccessfully, to locate and capture him. Similarly, Saddam Hussein viewed the al-Qa'ida affiliate group Ansar al-Islam operating in Kurdish-controlled northeastern Iraq as a threat to his regime. A May 2002 intelligence document indicates that the Iraqi regime was concerned that the United States would use the presence of Ansar al-Islam, operating in an area that Baghdad had not controlled since 1991, to support claims of links between the regime and al-Qa'ida.' See US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *The Use by the Intelligence Community of Information Provided by the Iraqi National Congress*, 8 Sept. 2006, 181–2.

⁶⁴US Dept. of State, 'Designation of Ansar al-Islam', 20 Feb. 2003.

⁶⁵Tenet, with Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm*, 350.

No Actionable Intelligence

Another explanation, offered by an NSC spokesman, was that, 'Because there was never any real-time, actionable intelligence that placed al-Zarqawi at Khurmal, action taken against the facility would have been ineffective.'⁶⁶ This assertion overlooks two key issues. First, while it is impossible to know if al-Zarqawi was, or was not, at Khurmal at any specific moment in 2002, there is evidence he was there. Michael Scheuer, then a Special Advisor to the Chief of the CIA's Bin Laden Unit, wrote that: 'Over the summer and fall of 2002 the quality of the intelligence on al-Zarqawi remained high, and the targeters came to the point of being routinely and reliably able to fix al-Zarqawi's location.'⁶⁷ According to the NSC's Director for Combating Terrorism, Lisa Gordon-Hagerty, who was also a participant in the administration's working group that reviewed the military options to strike the camp: '[Khurmal] was definitely a stronghold, and we knew that certain individuals were there *including Zarqawi*.'⁶⁸ An anonymous US intelligence official involved in planning the attack claimed that '[al-Zarqawi] was up there, we knew where he was, and we couldn't get anybody to move on it'.⁶⁹ Kurdish intelligence officials also placed al-Zarqawi at the camp.⁷⁰

Second, the proposed use of limited force was intended to eliminate a terrorist group with international connections that was reportedly developing WMD, not to kill one specific terrorist. In August 2002, there was clear actionable intelligence to strike and destroy the threat from Ansar al-Islam at Khurmal. Along with Lieutenant General Newbold's earlier statement that the plans were based on 'very good intelligence', the Chief's Director of Operations also recalled that during his tenure, '[Khurmal] was the best target we ever had against a terrorist camp'.⁷¹

This unprecedented opportunity to attack the Ansar camp ended as rumors of a possible strike began leaking. In late July or early August, an article appeared in the Turkish press that hinted at an American-led

⁶⁶Paltrow, 'Questions Mount Over Failure to Hit Zarqawi's Camp'.

⁶⁷Michael Scheuer, *Marching Toward Hell: America and Islam After Iraq* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 126.

⁶⁸Paltrow, 'Questions Mount Over Failure to Hit Zarqawi's Camp', Emphasis added.

⁶⁹Evan Thomas and Rod Nordland, 'Death of a Terrorist', *Newsweek*, 19 June 2006, 22.

⁷⁰Robinson, *Masters of Chaos*, 322.

⁷¹Interview with Lt. Gen. Gregory Newbold, 29 Aug. 2006.

raid.⁷² In early August, Turkish government officials also learned of the plans to strike Khurmal and recalled its intelligence officers that were in northern Iraq.⁷³ Finally, on the evening of 19 August ABC News reported that Al-Qa'eda operatives under the protection of Ansar al-Islam 'had been experimenting with both poisonous gas and various toxic chemicals, killing various barnyard animals and, sources say, at least one human'. The broadcast revealed that the CIA and Pentagon had been planning a covert operation against 'what appeared to be a budding chemical weapons laboratory'.⁷⁴ The following morning, CNN corroborated the report, adding that although President Bush had been briefed on the potential target, according to an unnamed official, 'any plan for an attack has now been called off'.⁷⁵ With satellite dishes prevalent in the region, this information would have circulated throughout Iraqi Kurdistan: Ansar members remaining at the targeted training camp would have fled. It is likely no coincidence that it was around this time in August that al-Zarqawi temporarily fled Iraq, disappearing from the radar screens of American and Jordanian intelligence officials for months.⁷⁶

The inter-administration debates over Khurmal continued until the story was finally leaked in the American press and beyond. As late as 30 July 2002, Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld and General Tommy Franks, Commander of CENTCOM were holding meetings in the Pentagon to discuss the goals and options of an attack.⁷⁷ The SOF teams that had planned and trained for the Khurmal operation remained on a high state of alert, believing that they could be deployed at any moment. 'Intelligence and tactics officers were constantly updating the plan to the last minute', recalled the Air Force colonel.⁷⁸ By mid-to-late August 2002, however, with the element of surprise eliminated, the window of opportunity to strike Ansar al-Islam was effectively closed. Congressional members, as well as military and

⁷²An exhaustive search of Turkish-language media, as translated by the US Dept. of Commerce, National Technical Information Service's World News Connection, could not find this article. Several administration officials, however, have referred to this article. It is doubtful that this one article would have definitely alerted Ansar al-Islam members to flee Khurmal, as a close reading of all translated Turkish media articles published between 1 June and 31 Aug. demonstrates that there were persistent rumors of an imminent US or Turkish military invasion of Iraq.

⁷³Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 142.

⁷⁴ABC, *World News Tonight*, 19 Aug. 2002.

⁷⁵CNN, *Live at Daybreak*, reported by Barbara Starr, 20 Aug. 2002.

⁷⁶Walter Pincus, 'US Effort to Link Terrorists to Iraq Focuses on Jordanian', *Washington Post*, 5 Feb. 2003, p. A17.

⁷⁷Interview with Douglas Feith, 9 Aug. 2006.

⁷⁸Interview with US Air Force colonel, Feb. 2007.

intelligence officers persistently questioned Bush administration officials for a definitive answer about attacking Khurmal.⁷⁹ In January 2003, the debate briefly re-emerged when the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy developed an 'options briefing' memo that listed three possible goals for striking Khurmal: Eliminate potential WMD and conventional military threats to the US, Turkey, and the PUK; establish a staging area for bigger US combat operations against Baghdad; and apply additional pressure on Saddam Hussein.⁸⁰ The issue of attacking Khurmal did not gain any traction in interagency meetings for reasons that are detailed below. It was not until weeks before the ground war began in March 2003 that the White House formally rejected the military option proposed and endorsed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff nine months earlier.⁸¹

The Political Costs of Failure were Too High

A third plausible explanation is that the White House believed that the political fallout from a failed operation was too great to risk it. There were three types of failure that concerned administration officials: American soldiers could be killed in action, the attack could result in civilian casualties, or the military objectives could be unmet.⁸² Although these potential problems and others are found in most instances of American non-uses of limited force, none would have been a deal-breaker in a hypothetical operation against Khurmal in 2002. While American or Iraqi civilian casualties might have caused some temporary political damage for the Bush administration, they would have been downplayed when the rationales for the mission were clarified after the fact. As is true of all uses of force,

⁷⁹According to a Feb. 2003 news report: 'Lawmakers who have attended classified briefings on the camp say that they have been stymied for months in their efforts to get an explanation for why the United States has not launched a military strike on the compound near the village of Khurmal.' See, Greg Miller, 'Ongoing Iraqi Camp Questioned', *Los Angeles Times*, 7 Feb. 2003. On the day after his Security Council presentation, Powell was asked by Senator Joseph Biden at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing: 'Why hadn't we taken direct military action [at Khurmal]?' Powell replied: 'I would rather not in this setting go into what contingency plans we had looked at or what we might or might not have done. But I can assure you that it is a place that has been very much in our minds and something we have been studying very carefully.' See, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 'Hearing on US Foreign Policy', 6 Feb. 2003.

⁸⁰Interview with Douglas Feith, 5 April 2007.

⁸¹Paltrow, 'Questions Mount Over Failure to Hit Zarqawi's Camp'.

⁸²Interview with Douglas Feith, 9 Aug. 2006; and interview with Marc Grossman, 8 Dec. 2005.

while the military was planning for Khurmal, the CIA and State Department were drafting papers for release to outline the intelligence justifying the attack, and to address any questions of international legality.⁸³

Support from the American people for attacking Khurmal would have been a near certainty, since after the attacks of 9/11, public opinion overwhelmingly supported military operations against international terrorist organizations, especially those with an interest in producing or using WMD.⁸⁴ Eight in ten Americans agreed with how the Bush administration was handling the war on terrorism, and the President was personally enjoying 70 per cent approval ratings.⁸⁵ Furthermore, even before the White House's public relations campaign to justify regime change in Iraq, the majority of Americans favored using force to topple Saddam Hussein.⁸⁶ Thus, a limited military strike against a terrorist group, with alleged connections to Al-Qa'eda, and operating from within Iraq, would have almost certainly been endorsed by the American public in 2002.

As for the concerns of an unsuccessful mission, it should be noted that in the recent history of American uses of limited force, operations that have failed militarily have had little domestic or international impact on the White House specifically, or the reputation of the United States more generally. Presidents have authorized several uses of limited force that were unsuccessful in the last 35 years. For example: Gerald Ford – the 15 May 1975 bungled assault and bombing raids against Koh Tang, Cambodia over the *Mayaguez* Incident;⁸⁷ Jimmy Carter – 'Desert One', 24–25 April 1980 unsuccessful hostage rescue operation

⁸³Interview with Douglas Feith, 9 Aug. 2006.

⁸⁴American Enterprise Institute, *America After 9/11: Public Opinion on the War on Terrorism, The War With Iraq, and America's Place in the World*, updated 26 Dec. 2003, 94–5.

⁸⁵ABC News/*Washington Post* poll, 22–25 Feb. 2007, <www.pollingreport.com/terror.htm>, accessed 1 March 2007; and Roper Center, 'Job Performance Ratings for President Bush', <www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/>, accessed 1 March 2007.

⁸⁶Ann Scott Tyson, 'Invading Iraq: Would the Public go Along?', *Christian Science Monitor*, 17 July 2002; and Richard Morin and Claudia Deane, 'Poll: Americans Cautiously Favor War in Iraq', *Washington Post*, 13 Aug. 2002. The concerted Bush administration effort to highlight the threat of Saddam Hussein did not begin in earnest until early Sept., because, in the words of White House Chief of Staff, Andy Card, 'From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August.' See Elisabeth Busmiller, 'Bush Aides Set Strategy to Sell Policy on Iraq', *New York Times*, 7 Sept. 2002.

⁸⁷J.F. Guilmartin Jr, *A Very Short War: The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang* (College Station: Texas A&M Press 1995).

in Iran;⁸⁸ Ronald Reagan – 4 December 1983 attack on Syrian anti-aircraft sites in Lebanon that resulted in two downed planes, one killed US pilot, and another taken hostage;⁸⁹ and George W. Bush – 16 February 2001 airstrikes against Iraqi command-and-control sites in which 26 of the 28 AGM-154A Joint Stand-Off Weapons missed their targets by an average of 100 yards.⁹⁰ In each instance, both the key military and political objectives of the mission went unfulfilled, but the President suffered no noticeable decline in public support, and world leaders did not appreciably doubt the resolve of the United States, or willingness to use limited force in the future. If a raid against Khurm al had failed, it is likely that the domestic and international environment would have accepted the operation.

What is more puzzling in President Bush's decision to bypass striking Khurm al is that just three months later he approved a use of limited force in Yemen, when a CIA-operated Predator aerial drone fired one Hellfire missile into an sports utility vehicle carrying Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harethi, a suspected operational planner of the USS *Cole* bombing, four other Yemenis, and Ahmed Hijazi, a naturalized US citizen. Though the Predator strike on 3 November 2002 was a covert operation and supposed to remain a secret, American involvement was acknowledged by the Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz. The reaction from the international community to this well-publicized attack was one of general acceptance. The domestic political response, meanwhile, ranged from quiet approval to overt praise, with the hope that similar strikes against Al-Qa'eda members operating elsewhere were soon to come.⁹¹

⁸⁸US Dept. of Defense, Adm. J.L. Holloway III, Chair, *Rescue Mission Report* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 23 Aug. 1980).

⁸⁹David C. Willis, *The First War on Terrorism: Counter-Terrorism Policy During the Reagan Administration* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield 2003), 76–7.

⁹⁰David Fulgham and Robert Wall, 'Strikes Hit Old Targets, Reveal New Problems', *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, 26 Feb. 2001; Thomas Ricks, 'Bombs in Iraq Raid Fell Wide Of Targets', *Washington Post*, 22 Feb. 2001; Thomas Ricks, 'Iraq Bombing Errors Blamed on Poor Data', *Washington Post*, 24 Feb. 2001; and William Arkin, 'America Cluster Bombs Iraq', special to washingtonpost.com, 26 Feb. 2001.

⁹¹Interview with Amb. Richard Armitage, 15 Feb. 2007; Dana Priest, 'CIA Killed US Citizen in Yemen Missile Strike', *Washington Post*, 8 Nov. 2002; Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of Its Enemies Since 9/11* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2006), 181; Michael DeLong, with Noah Lukeman, *Inside CENTCOM: The Unvarnished Truth about the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq* (Washington: Regnery Publishing 2004), 70; James Bamford, 'Big Brother is Listening', *Atlantic Monthly* (April 2006), 67; and Brookings Institution, Policy Briefing with Abd Al-Kareem Al-Iryani, Special Adviser to the President of Yemen, 26 Nov. 2002.

Attacking Khurmal could Disrupt or Accelerate the Option of Toppling Saddam Hussein

While the three preceding explanations may have played some minor role, the final, and most powerful reason for why the Bush administration did not strike Khurmal was that by August 2002, an informal decision had been made, if not to remove Saddam Hussein from power, than to take no actions that could either derail the option of regime change, or initiate a war with Iraq ahead of schedule.⁹² Evidence for this assertion is found in several sources.

First, in April 2002, President Bush declared flatly: 'I made up my mind that Saddam needs to go ... The policy of my government is that he goes.'⁹³

Second, on the eve of Operation Iraqi Freedom, a senior administration official reflecting on the opaque decisionmaking process recalled that while 'In the immediate aftermath of [September] the eleventh ... the focus was on Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden, Al-Qa'eda ... It's somewhere in the first half of 2002 all this changed. The President internalized the idea of making regime change in Iraq a priority.'⁹⁴

Third, according to Ambassador Richard Haass, State Department Director for Policy Planning, when he asked National Security Adviser, Condoleezza Rice, in early July 2002 about whether the Bush administration wanted to invade Iraq at the expense of the global war on terrorism, Rice replied, 'That decision's been made, don't waste your breath.'⁹⁵

Finally, the timing of Haass' assertion is consistent with the 'Downing Street Memo' – the minutes of a 23 July gathering of top British national security officials with Prime Minister Tony Blair. The Memo detailed 'recent talks in Washington' by Sir Richard Dearlove, head of MI6, Britain's foreign intelligence service, with senior US officials. Dearlove reported 'a perceptible shift in attitude. Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam,

⁹²The formal decision for regime change might have been reached even earlier. A Feb. 2002 news report quoted an anonymous senior administration official: 'This is not an argument about whether to get rid of Saddam Hussein. That debate is over. This is ... how you do it.' See Warren Strobel and John Walcott, 'Bush Has Decided to Overthrow Hussein', *Knight-Ridder*, 13 Feb. 2002.

⁹³White House, 'Interview of the President by Sir Trevor McDonald of Britain's ITV Television Network', 4 April 2002.

⁹⁴Nicholas Lemann, 'How It Came to War', *New Yorker*, 31 March 2006, 36.

⁹⁵Lemann, 'How it Came to War', 36. Haass was not the only member of the diplomatic corps cut out of the loop on Iraq. State Department employees later recounted that by mid-June 2002 staffers from the Office of the Vice President and the Pentagon were 'too cocky' and acting 'like they know something we don't'. See DeYoung, *Soldier*, 399.

through military action', and that 'the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy'. At that same meeting, Geoffrey Hoon, Defence Minister, noted that while 'no decisions had been taken ... he thought the most likely timing in US minds for military action to begin was January'.⁹⁶ According to Douglas Feith, the Pentagon's number three official and a proponent within the administration for removing Saddam Hussein from power: 'If you end up with empty hands [no WMD at Khurmali] you could conceivably derail a much larger project [regime change].'⁹⁷

The other concern about attacking Khurmali, relating to the ultimate goal of regime change, was that it could escalate into a full-scale war before the political, diplomatic, and military planning was completed. By early August 2002, there were still many logistical and political tasks to finish before D-Day: the administration still sought a Congressional resolution authorizing the use of force, President Bush had yet to choose between the 'Running Start' and 'Generated Start' warplans offered by General Franks, American diplomats were still working to secure diplomatic, economic, and military assistance from the largest number of countries, and the Pentagon needed to initiate planning for the post-war stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq.⁹⁸

There was a concern among senior civilian and military officials that striking Khurmali could compel Baghdad to trigger a war with the United States before the full range of tasks – between 150 and 200 interagency responsibilities coordinated by the NSC's Executive Steering Group – were finished.⁹⁹ CENTCOM's intelligence analysts, for example, worried that Iraq could initiate a war prematurely by: launching a ground invasion into Kuwait, flooding the Mesopotamian

⁹⁶As reprinted in, 'The Secret Downing Street Memo', *Sunday Times*, 1 May 2005. According to George Tenet, Dearlove told him after the memos were leaked 'that upon returning to London in July 2002, he expressed the view, based on his conversations, that the war in Iraq was going to happen'. See Tenet, with Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm*, 310. For more on the July 2002 meetings that informed Dearlove's assessment, see James Risen, *State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration* (New York: Free Press 2006), 112–14.

⁹⁷Interview with Douglas Feith, 9 Aug. 2006. Paul Pillar, who was the National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia from 2000 to 2005, but not involved in the Khurmali decisionmaking, posited that the Bush administration decided against attacking Khurmali because, 'I think the White House didn't want to complicate the main event [regime change].' Interview with Pillar, 28 Sept. 2006

⁹⁸Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon Books 2006), 52; and Bob Woodward, *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III* (New York: Simon and Schuster 2006), 90–2.

⁹⁹Interview with George W. Bush senior administration official, March 2007.

Valley, igniting the southern oilfields, instigating a conflict with the Kurds, or using WMD.¹⁰⁰

Statements corroborating the proposition that a military operation on Khurmali could have led to a full-scale war with Iraq prematurely are found from a range of senior policymakers within the Bush administration. Ambassador Marc Grossman, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, recalled: 'At the bosses' level, there was a concern that [attacking Khurmali] could start a war before having decided to do so.'¹⁰¹ Ambassador Richard Armitage, the State Department's number two official, concurred, noting that a raid on the camp 'could have gotten us rolling in a fight with Saddam Hussein before we were ready to go'.¹⁰² From the Pentagon, Douglas Feith, remembered that, 'If we did this Khurmali thing as a one-off thing prematurely, it could set off a chain of events before we were ready to handle them.'¹⁰³ Yet, another senior administration official noted that after August, 'with a fair amount of planning going on for the larger war, there was considerable hesitation with attacking Khurmali'.¹⁰⁴ Whenever General Keane asked administration officials about striking Khurmali in the fall of 2002 and spring of 2003, he was informed that 'it was getting too close to the invasion date, and we didn't want to flag our hand'.¹⁰⁵

Aftermath and Assessment

As the Joint Chiefs predicted in the summer of 2002, destroying Khurmali would prove to be a 'very doable' mission for the US military and their Kurdish allies. On the second day of the war, 21 March 2003, Operation 'Viking Hammer' began, during which 64 Tomahawk cruise missiles razed the camp and its surrounding fortifications. After a week-long logistics delay, on 28 March, several thousand lightly armed PUK fighters, supported by the US Army Special Forces 3rd Battalion, marched on the remaining Ansar al-Islam militants. After four days of intense fighting, the Ansar enclave was successfully eliminated and secured. Although two dozen Kurdish militiamen were killed, not one US soldier was even wounded in the battle. However, several hundred Ansar members, who survived the cruise missiles and ground fighting,

¹⁰⁰Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 68; and DeLong with Lukeman, *Inside CENTCOM*, 79.

¹⁰¹Interview with Amb. Marc Grossman, 8 Dec. 2006.

¹⁰²Interview with Amb. Richard Armitage, 15 Feb. 2007.

¹⁰³Interview with Douglas Feith, 5 April 2007.

¹⁰⁴Interview with George W. Bush senior administration official, March 2007.

¹⁰⁵Interview with Gen. John Keane, 27 Sept. 2006.

fled over the border into Iran, many returning later to join up with the Iraqi Sunni insurgency.¹⁰⁶

Although largely overlooked or forgotten, the Bush administration's claims in 2002 that WMD were being produced at Khurmāl turned out to be highly accurate. An American sensitive-site exploitation team deployed to Khurmāl uncovered chemical hazard suits, atropine injectors, and Arabic-language manuals on how to make chemical munitions. Tests also revealed traces of cyanide salts, ricin, and potassium chloride, all deadly toxins.¹⁰⁷ An investigative report by the *Los Angeles Times*, which both examined documents and computer files seized at Khurmāl and was informed by interviews with US and Kurdish intelligence operatives, found no evidence that Ansar al-Islam was connected to Hussein's regime, but was able to prove that the group 'was partly funded and armed from abroad; was experimenting with chemicals, including toxic agents and a cyanide-based body lotion; and had international aspirations.'¹⁰⁸

According to Tenet, after the US-led invasion of Iraq, '[The CIA] obtained reliable human intelligence reporting and forensic samples confirming that poisons and toxins had been produced at [Khurmāl]'.¹⁰⁹ While administration officials later opined about whether Hussein's unaccounted for arsenal and mobile weapons laboratories had been buried, dismantled, or hidden in Syria or Iran, Khurmāl is the only place in Iraq where the United States discovered that WMD were actively being produced, albeit in small quantities, before the war.

The Bush administration's decision not to use limited force against the Ansar al-Islam camp in eastern Kurdistan in the summer of 2002 was one of many tactical mistakes that contributed to the strategic disaster that America later faced in Iraq. Soon after the United States missed its best opportunity to attack Ansar al-Islam at Khurmāl and potentially to kill Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian terrorist and his associates organized what became the Sunni insurgency's most

¹⁰⁶Gregory Fontenot, E.J. Degen, and David Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press 2005), 250; Robinson, *Masters of Chaos*, 296–323; and US Army, interview by Operational Leadership Experiences Project with Major D. Jones, Combat Studies Institute, Ft Leavenworth, KS, 9 Nov. 2005.

¹⁰⁷Robinson, *Masters of Chaos*, 296–323; Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 341; Greg Jaffe and David Cloud, 'US Sees Foreign Hand in Iraq', *Wall Street Journal*, 29 Oct. 2003; and US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence on Postwar Findings About Iraq's WMD Programs and Links to Terrorism and How They Compare with Prewar Assessments*, 8 Sept. 2006, 93–4.

¹⁰⁸Jeffrey Fleishman, 'Militants' Crude Camp Casts Doubt on US Claims', *Los Angeles Times*, 27 April 2003.

¹⁰⁹Tenet, with Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm*, 278.

violent wing in order to resist what they believed would be the inevitable American occupation of Iraq, and to foment sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shias.¹¹⁰

An intelligence assessment by the British Joint Intelligence Committee on the eve of the war accurately forewarned that: 'Reporting since (February [2002]) suggests that senior Al Qaida associate Abu Musab al Zarqawi has established sleeper cells in Baghdad, to be activated during a US occupation of the city. These cells apparently intend to attack US targets using car bombs and other weapons ... Al Qaida-associated terrorists continued to arrive in Baghdad in early March.'¹¹¹ Seven months into the American-led occupation, Air Force Lieutenant General Norton Schwartz, the Joint Chiefs' Director for Operations, labeled Ansar al-Islam as 'our principal organized terrorist adversary in Iraq right now'.¹¹²

The United States and Osama bin Laden – in significantly different ways – both acknowledged the growing importance of al-Zarqawi as a terrorist leader. In October 2002, the US State Department placed a \$5 million bounty on al-Zarqawi's head, doubling that amount in February 2004, and finally increasing it to \$25 million four months later, the very same amount offered as a reward for information leading to the capture or death of Bin Laden himself. By 2006, the US military unit – the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) – responsible for tracking down both terrorist leaders would recognize that finding al-Zarqawi was a higher priority than either Bin Laden or his Egyptian deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri.¹¹³

In December 2004, what had been speculated for over three years – the existence of a formal relationship between Al-Qa'eda and al-Zarqawi – became a reality when Bin Laden dubbed the Jordanian terrorist the 'Emir' of Al-Qa'eda in Iraq – the Sunni terrorist group that had merged with Ansar al-Islam. In a letter to Bin Laden, al-Zarqawi proclaimed it his goal 'to drag the Shia into the battle because this is the only way to prolong the fighting between us and the infidels'.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰As one of al-Zarqawi's cohort later noted, 'He had been planning for this for a long time.' See Loretta Napoleoni, 'Portrait of a Killer', *Foreign Policy* (Nov./Dec. 2005), 41.

¹¹¹The JIC report is dated 12 March 2003. See [Butler Report, UK] Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors, chairman, The Lord Butler of Brockwell, *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction* (London: The Stationery Office: 14 July 2004), 120.

¹¹²US Dept. of Defense, 'DoD News Briefing-Secretary Rumsfeld, Mr Di Rita and Lt. Gen. Schwartz', 23 Oct. 2003.

¹¹³Sean Naylor, 'SpecOps Unit Nearly Nabs Zarqawi', *Army Times*, 28 April 2006.

¹¹⁴US Coalition Provisional Authority, 'English translation of terrorist Musab al Zarqawi letter obtained by United States Government in Iraq', Feb. 2004.

According to intelligence selectively declassified by President Bush, in January 2005, Bin Laden tasked al-Zarqawi to form a cell for planning operations outside Iraq, noting that America should be the primary focus of foreign attacks.¹¹⁵

Though Bin Laden's efforts to form such a cell apparently failed when an Al-Qa'eda official sent to brief al-Zarqawi was detained in Turkey en route to Iraq, the Jordanian terrorist had already activated his extensive international networks to plan and conduct terrorist attacks *outside* Iraq after August 2002.¹¹⁶ These began with his orchestration of the October 2002 shooting death of the US Agency for International Development official James Foley in Amman, Jordan. Later, in January 2003, British police dismantled a jihadist cell in London – linked directly to al-Zarqawi – that was planning attacks using ricin on the city's subway system.¹¹⁷ Additional cells were uncovered in France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Norway, Saudi Arabia, Spain, and Turkey that were formed to plan terrorist operations in those countries, as well as recruit, fund, and funnel European Muslim jihadists to join the Iraqi insurgency.¹¹⁸

The most spectacular attack outside Iraq that was attributable to al-Zarqawi was the 10 November 2005 near-simultaneous suicide bombings of three hotels in Amman, which killed 60 civilians, including those attending a wedding party. These attacks prompted the government of Jordan to substantially increase its intelligence sharing with the United States, which helped lead to the 7 June 2006, F-16 jet airstrikes that killed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi while he hid in a house 40 miles northeast of Baghdad.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵White House, 'President Bush Delivers Commencement Address at United States Coast Guard Academy', 23 May 2007; and White House, 'Fact Sheet: Keeping America Safe From Attack', 23 May 2007.

¹¹⁶Karen DeYoung, 'CIA Received Recent Detainee from Turkey, Al-Qaeda Says', *Washington Post*, 25 May 2007; and Alexis Debat, 'Osama bin Laden's Heir', *National Interest* (Summer 2005), 155–60.

¹¹⁷David Cloud, 'Elusive Enemy: Long in US Sights, A Young Terrorist Builds Grim Resume', *Wall Street Journal*, 10 Feb. 2004.

¹¹⁸As of 2004, at least 116 terrorist operatives were arrested from Zarqawi's network *outside* Iraq. See Matthew Levitt, 'Untangling the Terror Web: Identifying and Counteracting the Phenomenon of Crossover Between Terrorist Groups', *SAIS Review* (Winter–Spring 2004), 38. See also Desmond Butler and Don Van Natta Jr, 'Trail of Anti-US Fighters Said to Cross Europe to Iraq', *New York Times*, 6 Dec. 2003, A8; and Daniel Williams, 'Italy Targeted By Recruiters For Terrorists', *Washington Post*, 17 Dec. 2003.

¹¹⁹Mark Bowden, 'The Ploy', *Atlantic Monthly* (May 2007), 54–68; and 'Listening Pod Used in Attack on Al Qaeda Brass', *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, 12 June 2006, 18.

Khormal and Negative Cases

What lessons derived from the decision not to attack Khormal could be applied to other negative cases of limited uses of force? First, and most importantly, when deciding not to use limited force, policymakers should carefully weigh the potential risks and benefits of both taking action versus not taking action. Senior civilian officials opposed to striking Khormal had internalized a Murphy's Law mindset about the proposed operation: that which could go wrong, would go wrong.¹²⁰ Overemphasizing the possible failures, however, inherently discounts the potential gains. In short, policymakers must accept that choosing not to use limited force is as much an active decision as choosing to use force. Psychologically though, from the perspective of attempting to avoid blame or criticism –namely, 'cover your ass' – policymakers are held accountable for actions much more than non-actions.

Second, bypassing limited force in the hopes that the conditions for a larger operation will emerge could preclude any opportunity for using military force against an adversary. For example, as this article contends, the primary reason the Bush administration chose not to attack Khormal was that it could have prematurely triggered a full-scale war with Iraq, which had already been decided upon. However, if Saddam Hussein had accounted for the history and status of his proscribed WMD and ballistic missile programs, and fully complied with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441, most Bush administration officials believe that the war would have been avoided. Then, as the international crisis passed, Saddam would have been verifiably disarmed while still remaining in power, but the threat from Khormal would have persisted, because it was *never* inspected by the UN inspection teams.¹²¹ This would have the effect of leading to a

¹²⁰For evidence that concerns of risk persisted among senior civilian officials, see Eric Schmitt and Mark Mazzetti, 'Secret Order Lets US Raid Al Qaeda', *New York Times*, 10 Nov. 2008, p.A1.

¹²¹Though the rumor of poison and toxin production at Khormal was well known before the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission for Iraq teams entered the country in Nov. 2002, the inspectors never visited Khormal, because it was perceived as being outside of the control of Saddam Hussein's regime. Thus, had Saddam complied with the UN Resolutions and stayed in power, Ansar al-Islam could have continued operating outside the watch of the international community. Interview with senior UNMOVIC official, Oct. 2005; and Hans Blix, *Disarming Iraq* (New York: Pantheon Books 2004). The CIA's *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD* also did not mention Khormal, because, as the report noted: 'The goal of this report is to provide facts and meaning concerning the Regime's experience with WMD.' Emphasis added. See *Comprehensive Report*, 30 Sept. 2004, p.1.

worst-case scenario: a verifiably disarmed country that retained some capability to produce WMD within its borders.

Third, do not allow one missed opportunity to use limited force against a target to set a precedent against future actions against that same target. The best opportunity to strike Khurmal was in August 2002, before the camp was emptied out by a leaked rumor of the possible US operation to strike. Later in 2002 and early 2003, however, Bush administration officials noted that Khurmal's population ebbed and flowed as various Ansar members came while others left. Although there were further inter-agency discussions about Khurmal in January 2003, with the planning for the invasion of Iraq consuming the administration, these discussions never moved beyond the conceptual stage. As one senior administration official noted of the possibility of attacking Khurmal in January 2003, there was a sense among policymakers that 'we'd already had that debate.'¹²²

Fourth, do not allow a recent unsuccessful use of limited force to be the reason for not using force in the future. Policymakers, like everyone else, misapply and overextend historical analogies when deciding a course of action.¹²³ In the Bush administration debates in 2002, several officials raised the militarily successful, but politically unwise, bombing of the El-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum, Sudan in August 1998 as one reason not to strike Khurmal. The lesson learned from the mistake over El-Shifa was that faulty intelligence – specifically, that generated by the CIA – had betrayed the Clinton White House. The key factor that contributed to the intelligence failure of El-Shifa, however, was that the decisionmaking process was constrained to a small group of senior officials, and they were largely unaware of dissenting voices from the wider intelligence community.¹²⁴ Thus, Bush administration officials remembered the embarrassing results of El-Shifa, but forgot the flawed policymaking process that contributed to the outcome.

Fifth, do not be paralyzed by the possibility of 'gradualism'. Some senior officials, primarily military officers, believe that limited force is rarely applied in a clean and controllable manner. These officials contend that limited force intended to achieve a limited effect could possibly fail, and that failure could compel a military escalation to

¹²²Interview with George W. Bush senior administration official, March 2007.

¹²³Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 1976), 217–82.

¹²⁴Tim Weiner and James Risen, 'Decision to Strike Factory in Sudan Based on Surmise Inferred from Evidence', *New York Times*, 21 Sept. 1998; James Risen, 'To Bomb Sudan Plant, or Not: A Year Later, Debates Rankle', *New York Times*, 27 Oct. 1999; Risen, *State of War*, 153; interview with William Clinton administration intelligence official, July 2006; and interview with Paul Pillar, 28 Sept. 2006.

definitively destroy the target, achieve the desired political effect, or recover any loss in reputation. In 2002, Bush administration officials worried specifically about American casualties or hostages, or being dragged into a conflict between Ansar al-Islam and the PUK, who controlled the territory that surrounded the Khurmali enclave.

Yet, by avoiding a relatively limited problem in 2002, the United States was forced to risk the lives of many more American troops against a much bigger problem years later. The Khurmali option merely consisted of a short bombing campaign and the temporary infiltration of Special Operations Forces to assess and verify the destruction. The hunt for al-Zarqawi alone, on the other hand, demanded using thousands of troops over more than two years to capture the man whom the JSOC considered to be the most wanted terrorist in the world. While military officials are prudent to worry about gradual escalation as a result of limited uses of force, they must acknowledge that if no actions are taken, the problem itself can escalate uncontrollably and exponentially.

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