



Schlesinger Working Group  
on Strategic Surprises

# Unintended Consequences of an Expanded U.S. Military Presence in the Muslim World

SCHLESINGER WORKING GROUP REPORT, SPRING 2003

Prepared by Paul G. Frost

The Institute for the Study of Diplomacy of Georgetown University launched the Schlesinger Working Group in 1999. This program recognizes the distinguished public career of Dr. James R. Schlesinger and his remarkable contributions to national security policymaking and strategic thought. This project is based on a multi-year Working Group initiative with a mandate to review and assess a range of possible scenarios that contain significant potential for strategic surprise and for unanticipated outcomes. The Schlesinger Working Group relies on a permanent “core membership” of generalists from the policy-making and research communities and academia (please see page 2), who are sometimes joined by respected authorities on specific regional or functional topics under consideration. The meetings are chaired by Schlesinger Professor of Strategic Studies Dr. Chester A. Crocker and ISD Director Professor Casimir A. Yost.

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The Schlesinger Working Group on Strategic Surprises in Spring 2003 took on the topic, “The Unintended Consequences of an Expanded U.S. Military Presence in the Muslim World”, holding its first meeting March 18, literally on the eve of war against Iraq. Its second meeting was held May 27, after the war ended, and as the difficulties of post-war reconstruction were becoming clearer. Core members and area/subject experts met to examine benefits and drawbacks, as well as scenarios that could stem from an expanded American military presence in the Middle East, South Asia and North Africa.

## ARGUMENTS FOR SUSTAINING AN EXPANDED PRESENCE

The United States has expanded its forward military presence in these regions for several reasons. First, troops back up our ability to confront regimes that pose threats to U.S. and regional security. Second, they give us the opportunity to shape the geopolitical structure of the region. And finally, history suggests that momentum stimulates an expanded presence on top of military bases that already exist.

### *Facing Down Threats*

It was argued that having a military presence in the region gives us leverage to confront potential threats to U.S. or regional security in three ways. First, our presence conveys an important signal: that there is a high price for attacking or provoking the U.S., and that America can forcefully face down threats to its security. The potential danger of WMD in the hands of terrorists is still very real, with Iran and Syria (not to mention North Korea)

at the top of the list of worrisome states. Clearly absolute security does not exist in Afghanistan or Iraq. However, taking a lesson from the fate of Iraq, Syria is taking seriously U.S. warnings not to play host to Saddam’s regime and is responding to concerns about WMD. U.S. interest in influencing developments in Iran represents another factor which inevitably comes into play in deciding about future U.S. power projection capabilities in the Gulf region. Second, military hardware and boots on the ground have enabled the U.S. to strike quickly and attack terrorist targets, often with the help of nations in the region such as Yemen. A third benefit of sustaining a beefed up U.S. military presence in these regions is to ensure U.S. access to affordable oil and to stabilize the regional environment in which the world’s oil reserves are so heavily concentrated.

### *The Promotion of Democracy*

It was also argued that having forces in these regions may help the U.S. to shape the political geography by enabling democratic institutions to take root in the Middle East by providing necessary security in Iraq and implicit support for democracy-building initiatives elsewhere. However, proponents of this ambitious project acknowledged that bringing democracy to the Middle East would require staying power and political consensus among those who hold power in the United States. The U.S. would need a long-term commitment to make a success of a new government in Iraq if it is to have the necessary standing and authority to promote broader regional strategies. Moreover, America will need the assistance of allies and friends to provide for the

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\* Core members of the Schlesinger Working Group were not asked to approve this *Report*. The *Report*, however, relies heavily on the discussions of the group. As such, this document reflects the general ideas of working group members, but is not a consensus document and cannot be ascribed to any individual member.

humanitarian and security needs of the Iraqi and Afghan people to show that its interest extends beyond the immediate, strategic goal of regime change.

***Bureaucratic Momentum***

Practically speaking, one participant stressed that the natural tendency of the American military is to expand from the location in which it already maintains a presence. In addition, commanders prefer to be forward based, particularly in the Army and Air Force. When the first Gulf War came to an end, the U.S. had established forward-deployed forces involving ongoing operations in Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. In 1997 military planners had begun to steps to expand their presence into Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Djibouti and Central Asia. By 2000 the U.S. had concluded formal basing agreements with all of the Gulf Cooperation Council (G.C.C.) states except Saudi Arabia. CENTCOM's force structure prior to the Iraqi Freedom buildup included approximately 11,000 troops on land and 5,000 to 10,000 at sea in the Gulf area for a total of 16,000 to 21,000. These numbers gave the U.S. the capacity to pursue a policy of dual containment of Iraq and Iran for over a decade, undertake Operation Enduring Freedom in late 2001 in order to defeat the Taliban and root out al Qaeda terrorist networks, and to successfully contain (and later defeat) Iraq. In the new environment of post-conflict Iraq, military leaders will inevitably seek to keep significant numbers of troops and facilities in this strategically salient and volatile region.

**DOWNSIDERS OF EXPANDED  
MILITARY PRESENCE**

A number of participants argued that expanded military presence in the Muslim world has a number of downsides for the U.S. First, several members argued that by occupying Iraq, we have taken a step down a "slippery slope" of empire, while lacking the human and political capital to sustain or even complete what we have begun in Iraq and Afghanistan. One member commented that the U.S. is acting like an "angry giant" and predicted that at some point global sentiment toward the U.S. will turn from fear and respect to resentment, dissipating our ability to influence and inspire throughout the globe. Another member countered that while the U.S. does not seek empire, it does seek the ability to confront and deal with threats wherever they appear, which is a reason for devising ways to send troops to far-away places without necessarily being stationed

there permanently.

Second, some members argued that the current approach is too heavily geared toward an unending, worldwide war against terror in which we will never be completely successful. Yet threats and problems other than terrorism remain. Prior to September 11, the administration was focused on China as an emerging threat. Worrisome trends of failing states in Africa and Latin America continue to multiply. However, we seem fixated on preparing for possible smaller wars in the "arc of instability" that runs from the Andean region in the Southern Hemisphere through North Africa to the Middle East and into Southeast Asia. As a result, our course could be in a state of continuous flux, driven by events as viewed through the single lens of countering terrorism.

U.S. military deployment in Muslim nations relates to the larger debate about U.S. hegemony and a possible realignment of power. Several participants voiced concern that the reality of U.S. hegemony, when combined with a certain arrogance of tone and style, led to the trans-Atlantic dispute over Iraq, and could spawn the forming of alignments of different states opposing U.S. hegemony. One member suggested that the administration should more readily acknowledge allied cooperation — particularly from "old" Europe — in law enforcement and intelligence sharing against terrorist groups. Several members argued that NATO could play a strong role in the post-conflict reconstruction of Iraq, in addition to being a force for stability throughout the region, if the U.S. can win over the most influential members in the Organization. Another participant argued that, despite the trans-Atlantic crisis over Iraq, the Bush team has been able to maintain fairly good relations with all of the world's major powers. This has enabled the administration to press forward on many major issues such as North Korea and the Middle East peace process. In sum, as another participant noted, it is still possible for the U.S. to pursue both liberal internationalism and realism at the same time.

**THREE MILITARY PRESENCE OPTIONS**

Discussion of political objectives behind U.S. military presence in the first meeting held March 18 naturally led to the question of whether or not we have a "grand strategy". During the May 27 meeting, group member Hans Binnendijk\* laid out three possible "presence strategies" — or

\* speaking in his personal capacity, not as a representative of the National Defense University or the U.S. government

force posture options — which the administration may pursue in the post-Iraq war period in about a year.

The first option is that the U.S. will maintain a significant force presence in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of a tactic to “Drain the Swamp”. Approximately 50,000–100,000 troops will remain in the region to cajole, intimidate and, if necessary, use force in order to establish U.S. authority. The approach would be to take an aggressive posture with the three goals of combating terrorism, facing down or “rolling back” WMD threats and promoting democracy.

The second option supports a “quick exit” from the Iraq war force levels, returning to a pre-Iraqi Freedom level of about 20,000 troops in the region. This force posture would be smaller because Operation Southern Watch, the sanctions enforcement operations at sea and containment of Saddam’s regime are no longer necessary.

The third option would be somewhere between the “Drain the Swamp” and the “Quick Exit” options: in other words, “exit, with a hedge” for purposes of regional stability and use of force, if warranted, in addition to providing troops to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan. A year from now, the U.S. would still maintain 40,000–45,000 troops in the region, including residual occupation forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and the pre-war pattern of deployment in neighboring countries. Many members suggested that this, or the first option, would be the most likely scenarios. (Dr. Binnendijk emphasized, of course, that all these figures hinge upon successful stabilization and political transition unfolding in Iraq.)

#### *Grand Strategies & Political Objectives*

There was a broad consensus in the working group that the struggle against terrorism, the need to face down threats of WMD and the desire to promote democracy are legitimate, core elements of an evolving grand strategy in the Bush administration. However, some members suggested that the tools of intelligence collection and dissemination, law enforcement and “nation building” are most essential, while a military presence is a comparatively blunt and less effective instrument to achieve these ends. Moreover, it was clear that a sustained, expanded military presence could be both a force for security and a lightning rod for opposition sentiment. The fact that 15 of the 19 September 11 attackers were from Saudi Arabia underscores that the risk that permanently deployed U.S. forces could become prime targets for attack.

Furthermore, some members remarked that the three options above were simply plans for a military presence — not necessarily grand strategies — as they do not incorporate specific political objectives other than taking out evil rulers and terrorist groups. Some working group members argued that the United States has “put the cart before the horse”: that is, we did not establish time-phased, limited, realistic political objectives prior to placing large numbers of troops in the region other than the goal to contain and later defeat unfriendly regimes. Put another way, in deposing Saddam and the Taliban we have undertaken a burden that will require large amounts of financial, military and political capital, but it was not clear whether we had thought much beyond that burden. Clarity about political purposes would be essential if the U.S. was to avoid the trap of incrementalism and acting out of sheer imperial momentum, a dangerous road which brought the Ottoman and British empires to ultimate grief.

Some members also argued that there is no guarantee that the policy of expanded military presence will be lasting, given potentially volatile domestic support, competing budgetary pressures and/or the possibility of change in the White House in 2004.

Others countered that “Draining the Swamp” is indeed a grand strategy, as it incorporates broad political, economic and social objectives. In sum, it is aimed at changing attitudes of citizens and leaders of an entire region. We need troops in the region in order to provide stability for two countries and to help start them on the road to freedom and prosperity. If the U.S. can promptly adapt to the challenging circumstances in Iraq, it may succeed in establishing a legacy that will be a model for future generations.

#### **THE DILEMMA OF PRESENCE VS. POLITICAL SENSITIVITIES**

##### *Lighter is Better*

The U.S. is torn between the need to define sustainable political objectives and the natural preference of defense planners to keep their operational options open in support of broad U.S. interests. U.S. military planners face the dilemma of providing sufficient troops to win wars while avoiding an overbearing presence that could be a lightning rod for opposition sentiment. Though military planners exert a high “demand” for large numbers of forces to fight wars, “supply” is limited by Congressional pressure to trim down base structure and Army divisions and reluctance of

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Several participants noted that, with the Department of Defense increasingly seen as the most influential and best-organized and funded arm of the U.S. government, the administration and Congress must consider the implications of having the U.S. military play so large a role for America in this volatile region.

countries to host large numbers of troops.

While some Arab leaders may see a liberated Iraq as a very positive step which will transform the whole Arab region, others are suspicious that the U.S. is upsetting the status quo in order to control and assert U.S. and Israeli demands on the Arab world. While leaders of small, dependent states (Kuwait/Qatar) take comfort from the external military presence, leaders of large, complex states (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan) are increasingly uneasy about managing the domestic politics of hosting U.S. forces. Some participants at the March 18 meeting were ahead of the curve to suggest that the withdrawal of all American combat units from Saudi Arabia would be a prudent step to begin establishing bases in countries more supportive of a U.S. military presence. As a tactic for establishing an American basing presence, some members stressed the desirability of creating informal, rather than written and specific, agreements with Muslim nations. Subtlety and ambiguity should guide the process, since a permanent, heavy U.S. footprint often has adverse consequences. In addition, members noted the importance of American soldiers to be respectful and culturally sensitive in Muslim nations in order to keep the good graces of host nations.

One way the administration may address the dilemma of limited supply and high demand for troops is to develop a much lighter, mobile military to send a relatively small “spearhead force” to reach the battlefield objective quickly. To this end, a three-tiered system of readiness as part of an ongoing “Revolution in Military Affairs” is under consideration.

*Tier 1* envisions bases in relatively small countries such as Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and Uzbekistan; other, larger countries would agree to U.S. military access and the maintaining of stocks to supplement bases in smaller countries in the form of Forward Operating Bases and Forward Operating Locations. *Tier 2*, sea basing, will deploy soldiers from speedy ships into ports of countries with which the U.S. has arrangements. This will enable troops (particularly Marines) to rapidly deploy from sea to the objective, covering a distance as much as 600 miles. *Tier 3* would involve the development of a system of permanent and temporary “hubs” in the place of large, permanent garrisons. These hubs would facilitate multiple movement options within a “lens” to make possible one-stop deployments from the U.S. to the objective. For example, the base in Guam and air bases in Germany and England would be permanent hubs. Smaller bases in distant places such as

Romania might be smaller hubs with temporary or rotational deployments. A related concept would be to deploy troops from strategic distances (such as Europe) directly to the objective (such as Iraq), in order to eliminate the need to stop in Kuwait or some other midpoint. In addition to these “tiers,” the Pentagon has proposed using “mini-tanks” light enough to be air lifted in rapid fashion to the battlefield.

#### *Reliance on the Military for U.S. Foreign Policy Objectives*

How much should the U.S. rely on the military to conduct foreign policy? Some participants stressed the importance of personal, lasting relationships based on mutual respect with key leaders in host countries. For example, during his military service, one group member met regularly with the Saudi Crown Prince over a long period of time to discuss, consult and update each other on a wide range of issues. On the other hand, several participants noted that, with the Department of Defense increasingly seen as the most influential and best-organized and funded arm of the U.S. government, the administration and Congress must consider the implications of having the U.S. military play so large a role for America in this volatile region.

While considering strategic choices about the size, location and configuration of U.S. forces in Muslim lands, many members argued that the U.S. must not lose sight of the reality that our forces could find themselves deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq and engaged in occupation, stability and peace operations for many years to come. The demands of patrolling outlying areas, manning checkpoints, and policing unsettled neighborhoods will create non-discretionary political and financial requirements for certain — still unknown — levels of U.S. military presence. Whether we wish to acknowledge it or not, this reality will help shape official appetites for an expansive Pax Americana in the Muslim world. It may also shape attitudes toward the merits of supporting allied and UN peace operations as one part of the answer.

#### *The Importance of Policies*

It was widely accepted in the group that key U.S. policies — on Israel-Palestine, on Afghanistan and on Iraq reconstruction — will have a determining impact on the future acceptability of U.S. military presence. The substance and seriousness of U.S. engagement in these policy arenas will send powerful signals to Arab societies and lead-

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ers concerning U.S. intentions and motives. An international coalition to maintain stability in Iraq may avoid the specter of American occupation. The uncertainty here is whether coalition forces under this “economy of force” arrangement will have enough capable manpower to reduce the U.S. profile and burden while maintaining needed stability.

An obvious difficulty in conducting our policies in the Muslim world is that the motives behind U.S. policies are viewed with a great deal of suspicion, especially regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The standard regional narrative features highly critical interpretations of American policy — even before the Iraqi regime change policy became established fact. Now, according to one participant, the U.S. is in danger of marginalizing the influence and contributions of moderate Muslims (at home and in the Middle East) because of controversial tactics in the war on terrorism — such as racial profiling in the U.S. — and from U.S. stances which have been sharply biased in favor of Israel’s own conduct vis à vis the Palestinians. Participants generally agreed on the vital importance of Washington’s re-engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in order to gain the trust, or at least implicit support, from Muslim societies and governments. Failure to do so risks stoking volatile sentiments stirred up by the shocking visuals of a U.S. military campaign which blew away one of the region’s most entrenched regimes in a few short weeks. Still, it was recognized that even a successful American-brokered peace accord would not entirely erase the deep, complex motives for anti-U.S. sentiment behind terrorist attacks.

#### DRIVERS, SCENARIOS AND SURPRISES

Working group members focused on a range of unintended and unforeseen consequences of an expanded U.S. military presence in the Muslim world. It examined possible future scenarios (and the drivers behind them) as well as potential surprises which could flow from scenarios.

##### *Key Drivers*

1. Perceptions of U.S. power: is the U.S. seen as weak, fickle, overexposed, and vulnerable to regional opposition forces, or is it seen as a triumphant hegemonic power with the necessary strategic skill and staying power to seize and hold the initiative in a turbulent area of the world? A key element in this driver is the degree to which we can convince others and ourselves that we

know what we are doing in undertaking a complete makeover of two nations, possibly sparking a process of additional regime changes in the region.

2. Seriousness and commitment of the U.S. toward policies related to: (a) Arab/Israeli conflict and the peace process; (b) the democratization initiative in the region; (c) U.S. success in launching and managing the Iraqi post-conflict phase including its stability/security, economic/financial, governance/legal, and energy dimensions; (d) addressing our partners’ local and regional security interests. “Style of presence” will also determine the staying power of U.S. policies. Soldiers and local civilians will need to learn to keep within boundaries of respect for local customs and beliefs as well as respect for American values.

3. The degree of success by the administration in addressing the tension between needing a substantial number of troops while preferring a leaner presence will be a driver of future scenarios. The Bush administration is considering inventive ways to bring troops from long distances to trouble spots, and to establish or maintain bases in smaller, more welcoming countries.

4. Whether Iraq is perceived as a win in U.S., Western and Arab eyes will shape future scenarios. A few factors defining this driver are successful post-conflict reconstruction (which is dependent on support from friends of the U.S.), whether democratization takes root, finding WMD, and traction in the Middle East peace process. Of course, staying power for U.S. policies depends in part on continued domestic support as reflected in the outcome of the 2004 presidential elections.

##### *Possible Future Scenarios*

1. **NO FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE.** Despite post-September 11 defeats of the Taliban/al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, which brought a significant expansion of U.S. military forces into the region, fundamental challenges to U.S. interests and to regional stability will continue to plague the Middle East. Monarchies (as opposed to democracies), high unemployment, and dissatisfaction with leadership throughout region will still be the norm, while nationalism and cultural differences continue to intensify and divide. Other than Iraq, there will not be a fundamental breakpoint in the Islamic world to let us know whether things are going well or badly. Mood in the U.S. will be quite divided among elites, especially foreign policy and media opinion leaders, with subjective reactions as to whether U.S. has gained or lost influence even as



The greatest surprise, to many members of the group, will be if the peoples of the Middle East, South Asia and North Africa come to view U.S. policy on regime change, WMD, and terrorism as constructive.

U.S. hegemonic power becomes ever more evident in the region. Opinion polls send a split message of continued respect for Bush Administration decisiveness and “clarity” on terrorism and foreign policy issues together with increasingly critical opinion on domestic issues including the economy.

**2. MUCH GOES BADLY IN IRAQ AND ELSEWHERE.** A number of “bad” options are still possible: attacks on U.S. or coalition troops stationed in the Middle East escalate, which evoke the tragedies of Lebanon; Kurds fight Turks, Shiites massacre Sunnis and intra-Shiite faction fighting increases; Afghanistan continues to be ungovernable, while al Qaeda regroup to orchestrate further attacks on coalition troops in that nation; Iran successfully blames the U.S. for internal governance failures and turns popular sentiment against us, which leads to additional American deaths in Iraq. Elsewhere, the Palestinian political transition collapses amidst a new bout of suicide terror, which causes the nascent Israeli-Palestinian peace process to collapse. Rulers of one or more regional regimes friendly to the U.S. may be deposed, and domestic politics of G.C.C. countries look headed toward heightened instability while the tensions build between India and Pakistan. North Korea continues to test and provoke the U.S. while Washington attempts to identify a means of containing/detering a de facto nuclear rogue and avoids the words “regime change”. Implicit in all of these worrying scenarios is the possibility that events will interact and connect to create more surprises. For example, a terrorist attack in any Gulf nation could make an economy slump that would drag down the entire region into instability.

**3. NET IMPROVEMENT.** A number of possibilities for net improvement exist. Residual U.S. presence following the withdrawal of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia and downsizing of troop numbers in Iraq results in a net improvement in regional security, with people in the region feeling that they are better off than before. There will be less chance of war and internal instability, while a process of reform will have been stimulated in key countries including Saudi Arabia. The international coalition of troops in Iraq provides the needed stability for the Iraqi economy and social institutions to gain solid footing. A sense of national consciousness and cohesion in Iraq overcome initial indications of factionalism and chaos following the fall of Saddam. Syria and Iran “do the right thing” by reining in radical Islamist groups. Washington succeeds in mobilizing effec-

tive multilateral pressure to rein in Iran’s nuclear development. Popular protests against the clerical regime in Iran spur the type of democratic change (minus the seeds of instability) that the U.S. had hoped to engender in the Middle East by occupying Iraq and Afghanistan. By increasing its level of engagement in the Israel-Palestinian problem, the U.S. is pleasantly surprised that the new Palestinian leadership becomes a reliable player in the peace process. Vajpayee’s initiative to re-engage Pakistan cultivates various confidence-building measures to yield a de-escalation of tensions over Kashmir. Meanwhile, the U.S. continues a significant worldwide roll-up of al Qaeda leadership and patches up relations with key allies that enable NATO to become an operating force for good in the region.

Of these scenarios, a number of participants thought the first most likely (with some “bad” situations from scenario 2 mixed in), but others held out hope for several of the more optimistic outcomes in scenario three.

#### *Potential Surprises*

Members considered which surprises would arise out of the sustained U.S. military presence given the drivers and scenarios listed above.

- NATO nations, recognizing the dangers that are beginning to regroup within Afghanistan, commit the needed military resources to stabilize the nation, including major centers beyond Kabul.
- Bifurcation and gradual further erosion of NATO among those who want to follow the U.S. lead and those who do not.
- Stability further deteriorates in Afghanistan and never truly takes hold in Iraq — despite U.S. military presence in both, leading to potential political repercussions and reversals in the U.S.
- Recent bullying tactics by the U.S. may have sown seeds of a “coalition of the unwilling” seeking to counterbalance American initiatives, the prospects of which will bring about a number of unexpected results. Aside from some recalcitrant European states, Russia, Turkey and Mexico could turn out some more surprises.
- Iran could withdraw from the NPT, or could act with complicity in terrorist attacks on U.S. troops. It could attempt to work with disaffected European states and Russia to deny legitimacy to the coalition-backed interim Iraqi authorities, forcing an American and British political response that would lead to further military confrontation.
- North Korea could take advantage of U.S. dis-

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traction by taking increasingly aggressive steps at proliferation. Separately, hotspots in Africa, Latin America or Southeast Asia could pose new challenges as we seek solutions for dealing with failed or failing states and demagogic nationalists.

- Even if we do well in “Draining the Swamp,” we could still lose if catastrophic terrorism succeeds. A WMD attack on U.S. soil or toward U.S. soldiers overseas would bring calls for retribution from the American public, which in turn may create a downward spiral of retaliation elsewhere. The impact could stiffen U.S. resolve to act as judge, jury, and posse in the war on terrorism, but it could have a further, devastating impact on market confidence.

- The U.S. could overreach in its various military commitments. We are currently deploying very large numbers of reservists, which impacts on the American economy and its social fabric, not to mention the willingness of taxpayers to

support it.

- Withdrawal of combatant troops from Saudi Arabia could create demand among other key countries such as Kuwait for a U.S. withdrawal from their lands as well. This could complicate military readiness arrangements for Pentagon planners.

- Internally driven regime change takes place in Iran with minimal loss of life.

- This war against Iraq and Bush-led Middle East peace initiative may have opened a window for dialogue between citizens and leaders of some of the most troubled spots in this region, creating lasting goodwill.

- The greatest surprise, to many members of the group, will be if the peoples of the Middle East, South Asia and North Africa come to view U.S. policy on regime change, WMD, and terrorism as constructive. ■

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*... As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know.  
We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are  
some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns —  
the ones we don't know we don't know.*

— SECRETARY OF DEFENSE DONALD H. RUMSFELD NEWS BRIEFING, FEBRUARY 12, 2002

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