Taste for revenge: The drive toward war in Iraq

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [December 4, 2002](#) issue

Problem-solving requires anticipating long-range problems as well as addressing immediate crises. Columnist Molly Ivins understands this. She knows that Saddam Hussein is a problem, but she says that "there's a serious downside" to solving the Saddam problem by invading Iraq.

The downside is not just the casualties that will come with war, even given our overwhelming military supremacy. The downside is what will follow.

Some wise person said that revenge is a dish best eaten cold; revenge should never be tasty. In the recent national elections, Democrats should have explained this to a nation whose hunger for revenge is not nearly as intense as it was immediately following September 11. In those days, President Bush had a problem—how to speak and then act on behalf of a traumatized nation that had just witnessed a dastardly attack on its own people. Instead of saying that we had experienced a crime of major portions, however, and pledging to punish those responsible, the president went to war against a vague enemy termed "terrorists." That was revenge, not problem-solving.

Instead of treating the crime of mass murder for what it was, President Bush took advantage of national anger and grief and employed military might—not to bring a better government to Afghanistan, but to gain revenge for September 11. We destroyed the Taliban government and chased Osama bin Laden off to some cave where, if we are to believe the stories with which we are bombarded daily, he continues to plot future terror attacks. Then, to keep the plot churning, and with a midterm election looming, President Bush tarred Iraq as part of the terrorist conspiracy. There were hints from the White House that Saddam was connected to al-Qaeda—hints with no basis in fact, but enough to put Saddam into the mix.

Fast forward to the elections of 2002. Instead of telling voters the truth—that the attack on Afghanistan created more problems than it solved, and that the war

against Iraq would be an act of futility—Democrat candidates, desperate to verify their patriotism, saluted the president as though he were Franklin Roosevelt after Pearl Harbor. Now the Bush team predicts the failure of the UN's search for weapons of "mass destruction" and determines to "solve" the problem of Saddam Hussein with a war.

This war will not solve any problems; instead it will produce a disaster of proportions difficult to imagine. The first consequence will be the further suffering of the Iraqi people and the deaths of combatants on both sides. Then, once we have eliminated Saddam Hussein, we will witness an Iraqi struggle that will not even remotely resemble a democracy in the making, but will be Afghanistan redux, a constant internal conflict for power with very little rebuilding.

Nor will the problems end with Iraq. Under the cover of the American attack (with token UN involvement), Israel may move to finally solve its Palestinian problem. Israel is going though the motions of distributing gas masks to its citizens, but its current government strongly favors a U.S. attack on Iraq. This can only mean that Israel knows Iraq has little ability to attack its neighbors, and that Israel is prepared to rebuff any attacks that may come.

With the world diverted by the war in Iraq, Israel may move to make its occupation policy permanent, and reduce Palestinians to living in small population bantustans. There will be not more talk of a "peace process," which was never a peace process but only a front for Israeli expansion into Palestinian land.

There is talk of an even more damaging strategy. On a recent trip to the region, a group of religious journalists heard a great deal about the "transfer" of Palestinians out of the occupied areas into neighboring countries—a racist policy advocated by some in Israel's Likud ruling party, and, according to one poll, by as many as 40 percent of the Israeli public. (A popular bumper sticker in Jerusalem: "Transfer equals peace.") It sounds far-fetched, but a lot can happen under cover of war, as Palestinians discovered in 1948 when more than 750,000 of them were driven from their homes in what became the state of Israel.

Israel has long enjoyed the support of a war party of allies in the U.S.—influential leaders sprinkled through the corridors of power in the media, in conservative think tanks, in the Congress and now in the Bush administration. Joining the team more recently are the Christian Zionists who are embraced by Israeli leaders in spite of

their belief in Armageddon. (Any port in a storm, as one Israeli official observed recently.)

The U.S. war party sees the attack on Iraq, in part, as a way to make the neighborhood safe for Israel and, not so incidentally, to assure the free flow of oil to U.S. consumers. It is a scenario that could not have emerged without the emotion of revenge generated by September 11. It won't work, as the Democrats should have told voters in the November election. They did not, and now they must share the blame for a war that should not be fought.