

# Confronting Iraq

April 1, 2003 **Prewar predictions coming back to bite** Officials who forecast a brief conflict now say it'll be neither quick nor easy. That could open the administration to tough questions about credibility. By Susan Page, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON -- Armchair generals and media critics aren't the only people whose comments are giving heartburn to administration officials defending the progress of the war with Iraq. The officials also face questions about their own remarks made before the fighting began.

Then, Vice President Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Air Force Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke optimistically in interviews and at briefings about the prospects that the war would be short, Iraqi resistance limited and Iraqi citizens welcoming.

Now, the president has pounded the podium when asked how long the war will last -- "However long it takes," he replied Thursday with open annoyance -- and Myers said Sunday, "Nobody should have any illusions that this is going to be a quick and easy victory."

Four weeks ago, it was Myers who spoke with reporters about "a short, short conflict" against an Iraqi force that was "much weaker" than it was in the 1991 Gulf War.

The contrast in rhetoric has put the president and his aides on the defensive and raised questions about the administration's credibility. Although the battle began just 13 days ago and has put U.S. troops within 50 miles of Baghdad, the optimistic talk that launched it has contributed to a sense that the war hasn't gone as quickly or as well as expected.

"Every rule of politics is to set low expectations and exceed them," says Kathleen Hall Jamieson, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, who has studied political rhetoric. "If you set high expectations and then don't reach them, you're going to be judged as having failed."

Before the 1991 Gulf War, the first President Bush and his aides warned of a bitter battle against the Iraqi army, the fourth-largest in the world. The unexpected ease of the ground war, which lasted just 100 hours, surprised U.S. commanders and brought accolades from the American public.

In a USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll, however, just one-third of those surveyed Saturday and Sunday said the administration had given an accurate assessment of how difficult the war would be. One-third said the administration honestly thought the war would be easier than it has turned out to be. The final one-third said the administration intentionally understated the task ahead in a bid to gain public support.

In the survey, a 70% majority supported the war.

If the war has more problems, the perception that the administration wasn't candid in discussing its likely costs could provide a ready justification for those who supported it to change their minds. "As you turn against the war, you say, 'I was deceived,' as opposed to 'I was wrong,'" says John Mueller, an Ohio State University political scientist who has studied wars and public opinion.

During the Vietnam War, some congressional leaders who changed positions complained that they had been misled by President Lyndon Johnson when they debated the Gulf of Tonkin resolution of 1964, which authorized military action. The derisive term "credibility gap" dates from

that era.

Bush spokesman Ari Fleischer disputes any suggestion that the president didn't adequately prepare the public for the task in Iraq. At recent news briefings, he has carried a list of Bush's comments in speeches before the war warning that it would be difficult. "There is no easy or risk-free course of action," Bush said in a speech in Cincinnati on Oct. 7, one of the lines Fleischer has cited.

But the theme of that speech and other addresses the president delivered was not the war's likely costs but the need to act against Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. Other top officials, including Cheney and Rumsfeld, said the war would last "weeks, not months."

Influential outside advisers who urged the administration to target Saddam went even further. Kenneth Adelman, a Reagan administration official who serves on a Pentagon advisory board, said in a Washington Post column in February that the war would be "a cakewalk." Richard Perle, who chaired that board until last week, predicted in July that support for Saddam, even within the Iraqi military, would "collapse after the first whiff of gunpowder."

The president's focus and his aides' predictions came at a time the administration was trying to build support among Americans and at the United Nations.

"They had a clear strategy, theme and message, almost like an election campaign," says James Thurber, director of the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies at American University in Washington.

The administration is left with what Jamieson calls "the worst of all scenarios." It failed to win majority support in the United Nations Security Council or in world opinion, and the rhetoric it used provides fodder for those who say the American public wasn't fully prepared for the war.

But if in the end the war turns out well -- weapons of mass destruction are found and destroyed, for instance, and the Iraqi populace is grateful -- Bush will be vindicated and the public quickly persuaded, Jamieson says. "The public has very short memories."

#### Changing rhetoric of war

\* Feb. 7, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, to U.S. troops in Aviano, Italy: "It is unknowable how long that conflict will last. It could last six days, six weeks. I doubt six months."

\* March 4, Air Force Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a breakfast with reporters: "What you'd like to do is have it be a short, short conflict. . . . Iraq is much weaker than they were back in the '90s," when its forces were routed from Kuwait.

\* March 11, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, in a speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars: "The Iraqi people understand what this crisis is about. Like the people of France in the 1940s, they view us as their hoped-for liberator."

\* March 16, Vice President Cheney, on NBC's Meet the Press: "I think things have gotten so bad inside Iraq, from the standpoint of the Iraqi people, my belief is we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators. . . . I think it will go relatively quickly, . . . (in) weeks rather than months." He predicted that regular Iraqi soldiers would not "put up such a struggle" and that even "significant elements of the Republican Guard . . . are likely to step aside."

#### The war begins

\* March 20, President Bush, in an Oval Office speech to the nation: "A campaign on the harsh terrain of a nation as large as California could be longer and more difficult than some predict."

\* March 21, Rumsfeld, at a Pentagon news briefing: "The confusion of Iraqi officials is growing. Their ability to see what is happening on the battlefield, to communicate with their forces and to control their country is slipping away. . . . The regime is starting to lose control of their country."

\* March 27, Bush, at a news conference with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, when asked how long the war would take: "However long it takes. That's the answer to your question and that's what you've got to know. It isn't a matter of timetable, it's a matter of victory."

\* March 30, Myers, on Meet the Press: "Nobody should have any illusions that this is going to be a quick and easy victory. This is going to be a tough war, a tough slog yet, and no responsible official I know has ever said anything different once this war has started."

\* March 30, Rumsfeld, on Fox News Sunday, when asked whether Iraqis would "celebrate in the streets" when victory is won: "We'll see."

Source: USA TODAY research