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## **SHOULD THE WAR ON TERRORISM TARGET IRAQ?**

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As Afghan opposition groups and U.S. armed forces continue their successes in the war against the Taliban and al Qaeda, the American debate has quickly turned to the question of where the fight against terrorism should go next. In his September 20 speech to the nation, and in numerous statements since, President Bush has talked about a wide-ranging campaign against global terrorism. Bush has not committed to large-scale military operations against any other countries or terrorist organizations. But he has made it clear that the broader struggle against terrorism will be a long-lasting and wide-ranging effort, and that he does not exclude the use of military instruments in regions beyond Afghanistan.

There are many potential targets for a possible post-Afghanistan phase of the war—Abu Sayyaf guerrilla bases in the Philippines, for example, as well as terrorist headquarters and training camps in Somalia, Syria, and Lebanon. But none is more consequential or more prominent in the current policy debate than Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Already, senior Bush administration officials and numerous outside analysts are making the case that the next phase in the war on terrorism should be an effort to overthrow the Iraqi regime—if necessary with U.S. military force. Some of the most notable advocates of overthrow include Richard Perle, head of the Defense Policy Board at the Pentagon, former Director of Central Intelligence James Woolsey, and, according to widespread press reports, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul

Wolfowitz. On November 26, President Bush himself appeared to raise the ante on the Iraq debate, stating that Saddam would “find out” what was in store for him if he failed to heed international demands to allow inspectors into Iraq to look for weapons of mass destruction programs. While Bush’s statement may have been nothing more than a reiteration of existing U.S. policy (as subsequently explained by the White House spokesman), it was interpreted by many as a conscious effort to remind the world of the dangers posed by Saddam and to begin to create a legal and political predicate to justify an eventual American attack against him. Those like Perle and Woolsey who make the public case that the United States should overthrow Saddam stress that it should do so regardless of whether Iraq was involved in the September 11 terrorist attacks or not.

Absent compelling evidence of Iraqi involvement with the al Qaeda network or September 11, we believe the likely costs and risks of a commitment of American military forces to a regime-change campaign in Iraq would outweigh the benefits. A US overthrow campaign would entail a large-scale military operation that the United States would probably have to undertake essentially alone; significant American casualties given the likelihood of intense urban combat and possible Iraqi use of chemical and biological agents; the increased risk of triggering terrorist attacks against American or allied targets; the likely need for a long-term American occupation of Iraq to avoid regional destabilization or a humanitarian catastrophe; and probable global opposition to what would be widely seen as an attempt to expand the American “empire.” While these costs and risks are not so high as to rule out a possible overthrow policy under certain extreme circumstances, they should be sobering to any advocate of sending U.S. troops to war to change the Iraqi regime. Proponents of US-led overthrow tend to underestimate the costs, risks, and challenges involved.

Instead of mounting a U.S. attack as part of the current campaign, the Bush administration should take advantage of its success in helping destroy the Taliban regime in Afghanistan to send an unmistakable message to Iraq: Baghdad's sponsorship of terrorism against the United States, transfer of weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups or individuals who target the United States, or the harboring of such terrorists will be considered an act of war and lead immediately to an American military intervention to overthrow the regime. Such a new "Bush Doctrine" would clarify and codify previous administration statements about states that continue to sponsor terrorism and make specific that the United States would end Saddam Hussein's rule if Iraq committed such acts. Our assumption in this argument is that Saddam—unlike the religiously motivated Taliban/Al Qaeda network—is more interested in preserving his power, his regime, and his life than in carrying out acts of terror against American interests. If that assumption proves wrong and evidence emerges of Iraqi sponsorship of terrorism against the United States, the considerable costs of a U.S. intervention to overthrow Saddam would be worth paying—whether the rest of the international community was on board or not.

### **The Costs and Risks of Attacking Iraq**

Even short of any new Iraqi acts of aggression or terror, the removal of Saddam Hussein from power would be highly desirable, and the arguments that force should be used to remove him are not trivial. Saddam has shown great determination to produce weapons of mass destruction and has a track record of ruthless aggression against his own people and several of his neighbors, including Iran, Israel, and Kuwait. He has a proven desire for vengeance—as evidenced in the attempted assassination of former President George Bush in 1993 and the murder of two sons-in-

law after they briefly defected to Jordan in 1995. Some believe that he was at least peripherally involved in the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center. There is clear evidence that terrorists, even if probably not part of the al Qaeda network, have been trained in Iraq in the past.

Although Saddam and al Qaeda are adversaries in many ways—Saddam is a committed secularist, except where it suits him to pretend otherwise, and al Qaeda claims to be motivated by religion—it is not implausible that they would join forces to attack the United States. The meetings in Prague between an Iraqi intelligence official and hijacker Mohammed Atta in 2000 and 2001 show that at least a limited form of contact has already occurred. Given all this, plus the fact that a once prosperous Iraqi society is being decimated by Saddam's brutal regime, his continued hold on power is deeply unsettling, and no civilized observer could wish it to endure.

Even as we contemplate the many potential benefits of removing Saddam from power, however, we should not overlook the likely costs, risks, and consequences of an attempt to do so.

*Airpower and Opposition Forces Alone Would Not Suffice.*

Despite the claims of many regime-change proponents, we should be under no illusion that Saddam could be quickly overthrown by the application of U.S.-airpower in support of a ready-made, armed opposition. While improvements in US air capabilities since the Gulf War—including Global Positioning System (GPS)-guided bombs and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) coupled to command centers and manned aircraft via near-real-time communications systems—have been significant, they would almost certainly not be enough to make possible victory by airpower alone. GPS-guided bombs are generally not accurate enough to destroy armor, UAVs are limited in number and can often be shot down, and Saddam would be sure to position as much of his force (and weapons of mass destruction) in crowded cities, schoolyards,

and hospitals, greatly complicating US targeting options. The “tank-plinking” that was possible using laser-guided bombs against stationary Iraqi tanks in the Kuwaiti desert in 1991 would be difficult to replicate in the complex terrain and more built up areas in central Iraq. In other words, the recent Afghanistan model—where U.S. airpower worked successfully in tandem with powerful opposition forces on the ground—almost certainly does not apply. Instead, significant American ground forces would be necessary to overthrow Saddam—even if for no other reason than to persuade potential defectors within Iraqi ranks to switch sides.

Iraqi opposition forces—consisting mainly of the Kurdish Democratic Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Iran-based Supreme Council for Islamic Resistance in Iraq, and a coalition of smaller elements led by the London-based Iraqi National Congress—are deeply divided and have a history of infighting. Even if aggregated, they number perhaps one-tenth the strength of Iraqi armed forces (they would be outnumbered more than 2 to 1 just by Saddam’s most dedicated fighters, his Special Republican Guard and Republican Guard forces, totaling about 100,000 personnel). Moreover, to overthrow Saddam, American forces would have to fight in the forested and built-up regions of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley and in Baghdad. U.S. forces would also be facing an enemy with a decade of experience dealing with American aerial attacks.

By contrast, in Afghanistan, Taliban forces were often exposed in trench lines on open desert, where US special operations forces could approach them and direct air-strikes against them, and their resupply caravans had to traverse roads in open country, making themselves relatively easy targets for American airpower. Despite the 1980s war against the Soviet Union, Taliban forces also had no experience facing a modern air force, and appear to have done a poor job of establishing redundant command-and-control infrastructure that could survive a U.S.

attack. Finally, Saddam's Republican Guard and Special Republican Guard are probably more akin to Arab fighters in Afghanistan than the Taliban, in terms of their willingness to fight for an Iraqi regime under which they have immense privileges and a real fear of being killed if they try to surrender. During the Gulf War, unlike the many Iraqi conscripts who refused to fight or surrendered easily, Saddam's elite troops fought hard. Even if U.S. ground forces began an operation only by protecting an enclave or two in remote Iraq to help the opposition mobilize and train, they would have to be deployed immediately in considerable numbers—and would eventually end up having to engage Iraqi armed forces directly if the ultimate goal was the removal of Saddam Hussein.

To be sure, if convinced that Saddam's regime were on its way out, much of the Iraqi army—and perhaps even some of the Republican Guard—would probably ultimately be ready to “tip” to the opposition. Just as the Taliban collapsed rapidly in most of Afghanistan in early November, a resistance force could produce defections from the Iraqi army and induce a large number of Iraqi villagers to join the opposition. But we should also remember that significant defections from the Taliban only began once it was clear that the Northern Alliance—backed by massive American airpower, U.S. and other allied special forces on the ground, and cooperation from many regional neighbors—was going to prevail. Thus, an effort to overthrow Saddam via the Iraqi opposition with U.S. airpower alone could end up looking a lot more like Afghanistan during October—when the Northern Alliance was struggling and opposition leaders like Abdul Haq were captured and executed by the Taliban—than during November. More to the point, perhaps, it could look like the last decade, during which time the United States has often seen its Iraqi allies killed when Saddam calculated that they were getting too strong. Counting on the Iraqi army to quit in the absence of a credible American commitment to march on Baghdad

would likely be a recipe for failure. Thousands of friendly forces could again be slaughtered, Saddam could still hold onto power, and the international coalition against terrorism could be dismayed and increasingly fractured by what it would correctly view as not only unilateralist but feckless American leadership.

For these reasons, if we want to overthrow Saddam, a large-scale U.S. force akin to Desert Storm II in capability would probably be needed. At a minimum, it would have to be prepared and deployed, even if it were ultimately not used. U.S. forces might not need to total 500,000—roughly the number that was deemed necessary to evict the Iraqi army from Kuwait in 1990—but it would have to be large and credible.

*The United States Would Essentially Be Acting Alone.*

If it decided to overthrow Saddam Hussein in the absence of evidence of his involvement in the September 11 terrorist attacks, the United States would run the risk of having to undertake this enormous military and political challenge essentially alone. Even allies as close as Great Britain, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have already expressed their opposition to an attack on Iraq as part of the current campaign. They worry that we might attack just long enough to hurt the Iraqi people without jeopardizing Saddam's hold on power; alternatively, they worry that if we did overturn Saddam, Iraq would be left in chaos, with the possibility that its borders would be destabilized in the Kurdish north and Shiite southeast. Turkey and Saudi Arabia in particular are hardly enthusiastic about an option that would rely on American armed support for Kurdish and Shia opposition groups; gaining their support might eventually prove possible, but it is far from guaranteed and would at best come only at a very high diplomatic and/or financial price.

The lack of likely allies poses significant problems. Without British support, the military operation would likely be a unilateral American action; without Russian, Chinese and French support, it would have to be done without sanction by the UN Security Council; without Saudi and Turkish support, it might have to be staged entirely from tiny Kuwait (and this is assuming Kuwait would be supportive under such circumstances, which is hardly a certainty). Building up an invasion force with its limited facilities could easily take half a year. If the unilateral operation went badly, countries that had opposed its launching would be unlikely to help bail the Americans out.

A lack of international support in itself should not automatically be an impediment to action. If the costs of inaction were high enough, American interests might require the United States to act unilaterally. Moreover, we should not forget that allied support itself is likely to be largely a function of other countries' perception of the level of U.S. determination and the prospects for American success. Just as potential opposition forces within Iraq are only likely to take up arms against the regime if they are convinced the United States will not abandon them in mid-fight, potential allies in Europe and in the Arab world will only support a U.S. policy of regime change if they are convinced that Washington will pursue that policy to a successful conclusion. The American legal case for action—Saddam's refusal to comply with UN Security Council Resolution 687 that calls for a verified end to Iraqi WMD programs—gives Washington at least some basis for legitimate unilateral action. The material benefits that would accrue to countries like Turkey, Russia, Jordan and France if a post-Saddam Iraq could be stabilized would give at least those countries a strong incentive to support the U.S. goal. Citizens of many other countries could sleep better at night knowing there was one less threat to their oil lifeline from

the Persian Gulf. And Arab states would be relieved when sanctions were lifted on a post-Saddam Iraq.

In short, there are circumstances in which it would be necessary to undertake action against Saddam regardless of the initial level of international support. But we should not delude ourselves: the lack of such support would constitute a major obstacle to a successful operation. And we could substantially weaken the international coalition against terrorism, losing support in the realms of intelligence sharing and international law enforcement and financial crackdowns on terrorist assets, if we undertook an irresolute and ultimately unsuccessful operation. It only makes sense to use force against Saddam if we mean to finish the job.

#### *The Risk of American Casualties and Terrorist Attacks Would Grow*

Even if the United States somehow managed to convince key allies like Saudi Arabia and Turkey to allow the use of their bases for troop deployments and airstrikes, defeating Iraq would still be difficult. Elite Iraqi forces would probably be at least as effective as were the Mogadishu militias in urban combat, quite possibly causing at least one U.S. casualty for every 10 they suffered. That fact alone could lead to hundreds or even several thousand American deaths.

In addition, Saddam might well authorize use of chemical and biological agents against U.S. forces if his hold on power was threatened, increasing casualties further. The precise state of Iraq's CW and BW programs is of course not known, but it is almost certain that Baghdad has both. Saddam, after all, has apparently been willing to risk the indefinite maintenance of isolation and economic sanctions in order to prevent inspectors from fully dismantling his CW, BW and possibly even nuclear weapons programs. He kicked out international weapons inspectors in 1998 when they seemed to be getting close to uncovering the full extent of his

biological weapons program, and U.N. weapons inspectors have now been absent from Iraq for three years.

The risks would not be confined to the battlefield. Saddam might also turn to terrorism against the United States or its allies—in Europe, Israel or elsewhere in the Middle East—in a desperate attempt to save his life or in a determination to bring down as many of his enemies with him as possible. It is worth remembering that during the 1990-91 Gulf War Saddam calculated that the Americans would not be prepared to accept significant casualties, and it is not clear that he has been persuaded otherwise by American policy toward a range of conflicts since then. Saddam is almost certainly wrong in this assumption, but he would not find that out until it was too late. With his back against the wall, he might judge that he had little choice but to use his weapons of mass destruction—whether against troops in the field or civilians far away—in a last-ditch attempt to turn the Americans back.

All told, the costs to the United States could be several thousand dead soldiers and potentially just as many or more victims here at home. These likely costs are finite, and far smaller than those suffered in Korea or Vietnam, but they are nonetheless quite large—quite possibly exceeding casualties in the September 11 attacks.

### *What To Do After Victory?*

Even in the face of all these obstacles, risks, and costs, the United States would almost certainly ultimately prevail in an attempt to unseat Saddam Hussein. But even then, the question of what to do after victory would arise, a question we have not yet answered successfully in Afghanistan. This is much the same question that deterred the first Bush administration (which included many of the same key actors that are in power today) from continuing on to Baghdad in 1991, and

there are no better answers to it today. The choices would be stark. On one hand, after taking Baghdad and removing Saddam's regime, the United States could seek to install a new opposition-led government to power and quickly withdraw its troops. Given the weaknesses and divisions of the opposition, however—let alone the fact that this leadership would be tainted by its dependence on the United States—it is far from certain that it could last. The prospects for rebellions and infighting among Shia in southern Iraq and Kurds in the north would be great. This sort of post-Saddam Iraq could, ironically, become a failed state along the lines of pre-2001 Afghanistan, with similar prospects for humanitarian suffering and a similar risk that part of the country would become a safe haven for terrorists.

The alternative would be a painstaking effort to build new political institutions, with as much help as possible from an international community that would not have been very supportive of the intervention in the first place. Such an effort could require a multi-year occupation by as many as 100,000 or more U.S. military forces, implying annual military costs of at least \$20 billion to \$30 billion. (In Bosnia, 1/8 the size of Iraq and with 1/6 the population, NATO deemed it necessary to deploy over 50,000 peacekeeping troops, at a cost of some \$10bn per year; six years later nearly 20,000 troops remain). Residual terrorist attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq could be expected—as could considerable Arab resentment against the extended American presence. Again, the path to success could probably be found, but the costs would be considerable.

### **A Deterrable Regime**

Instead of incurring these high costs and significant risks, the United States should follow a different course—a reinforced policy of deterrence. As threatening and dangerous as Saddam

Hussein may be, the track record suggests that he can be dissuaded from undertaking actions that he believes would likely lead to his overthrow. During the Gulf War, he desisted from using the weapons of mass destruction we now know he had, knowing (following explicit threats from U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney) that to do so would almost surely lead to his downfall. He moved brigades southward towards Kuwait again in 1994, only to pull back once the Clinton administration made clear its willingness to respond (through Operation “Vigilant Warrior,” a deployment of tens of thousands of troops). He interfered with the work of foreign weapons inspectors frequently, and ultimately expelled them, but never killed any or otherwise took actions that would lead to more than a short spurt of bombing by U.S. and U.K. forces. He brutally attacked Shiite resistance forces in southern Iraq in 1991, after it became clear that the first Bush administration would not interfere to stop such operations, but generally avoided brutality against Kurds in the north once the United States made clear its commitment to their security. In 1996, he did direct an incursion into Kurdish parts of Iraq—but only *after* internecine warfare among Kurds, and an explicit invitation to him to intervene by one of the Kurdish factions, made it unlikely that the United States would be in a position to oppose him.

There is admittedly evidence of Saddam’s risk-taking and recklessness. He did not withdraw from Kuwait once a U.S.-led response seemed inevitable; he did not even pursue the option of partial withdrawal by holding onto contested oil fields while liberating Kuwait City and other major population centers. He set fires to oil fields and took other actions that Washington had strongly warned against. He still has not freed all Kuwaiti prisoners of war. He has resisted weapons inspections even at the cost of some \$150 billion in oil revenue and an ongoing U.S. military presence over Iraqi skies. And of course, he tried to assassinate a former American

president. But none of these decisions, he rightly calculated, seemed likely to lead to his overthrow (with the possible exception of the last, had it been successful—perhaps explaining why Saddam appears not to have attempted to assassinate Mr. Bush a second time). Hence we conclude that, on balance, Saddam Hussein is a ruthless and brutal dictator, but also that he is also bent on self-preservation, and thus that he is deterrable.

Saddam, of course, might think he could support al Qaeda or a similar organization and not be caught doing so. Under such circumstances, deterrence clearly could fail. However, Saddam knows that we have tracked several meetings between his agents and the al Qaeda organization over the last decade. He knows that, while small transfers of biological or chemical agent might elude our intelligence capabilities, larger shipments of such weapons or the technologies needed to produce them often would not. In the case of anthrax and certain other biological weapons, he knows that we can sometimes identify the source of a weapon based on its genetic content, particle size, chemical coating, or other attributes. These facts would further lower his chances of getting away with major help to terrorists and increase the risks he would be taking by doing so. To be sure, there is a chance he could succeed in escaping detection—but a better chance, on balance, that we would figure out what he was up to. For a person like Saddam who cherishes his hold on power, the odds would probably not seem favorable, and the tangible gains of potential success not that great.

## **Conclusion**

The United States should not now mount a large ground operation to overthrow Saddam Hussein, given the likelihood that it would entail significant American troop casualties as well as an increased likelihood of terror attacks against the United States. Anything short of a ground

invasion, however, would be likely to fail. Despite his brutality, almost all available evidence suggests that Saddam Hussein can be deterred because he values his hold on power and his own life more than any ideological goal and more than revenge against the United States. Future acts by Saddam, or further evidence about his links with al Qaeda, could lead to a different assessment, and we have little doubt that the American people would support a campaign to overthrow Saddam in such circumstances despite the likely casualties. At present, however, he appears to be contained every bit as well as the North Korean leadership—and much more tightly than was the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

This is hardly a case for complacency, however. The United States needs to complement its containment policy by making it unmistakably clear to Saddam Hussein that Iraqi sponsorship of terrorism against the United States or the transfer of weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups would lead to a concerted U.S. campaign to overthrow his regime. While the exact threshold for when an overthrow policy would be triggered might be hard to define precisely (indeed there could be some merit in a small measure of ambiguity for the sake of deterrence), certain “triggers” could be made very explicit: any transfer of weapons of mass destruction to al Qaeda; direct complicity in the September 11 attacks or any such attacks in the future; involvement in the anthrax attacks; or harboring groups that carry out terrorism against the United States. (Bush could also make clear that a range of other Iraqi actions unrelated to terrorism—the production or acquisition of a nuclear weapon; another attempted invasion of Kuwait; an attack on Israel; or the use of force against American troops—would also be considered redlines that would produce a policy of overthrow.) To back up the new strategy, the United States should continue keeping adequate military forces available for the job on potentially short notice, develop concrete plans to work with opposition groups for a strategy of

overthrow, and mount a diplomatic case with key allies to win their support should an invasion become necessary.

At the same time, the Bush administration should accelerate efforts to persuade Russia and some of Iraq's neighbors to move forward with a new sanctions regime that would crack down on Iraqi smuggling, focus sanctions more specifically on the Baghdad leadership and WMD capabilities, and make civilian goods even more available for easy import into Iraq than at present. The price of winning support for such measures might well be economic compensation for some of Iraq's neighbors and tolerance for certain Russian arms sales (such as those of most conventional arms to Iran), but the effort would be worth it. The US administration should make it clear to the rest of the world that it cares a lot more about the well-being and future of the Iraqi population than does Saddam Hussein, and it should hold out a vision of American support for a future Iraq under a different regime. Reinforced deterrence and smarter sanctions will not make the Persian Gulf region risk-free or immediately free the Iraqi people from a brutal dictatorship. But they will serve the core goal of helping to prevent future terrorist actions like those of September 11 at a reasonable military and strategic cost.