

U.S. Policy Towards Iraq

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Mr. Chairman, Congressman Skelton, members of the committee; it is an honor to come before you today to offer some thoughts on current U.S. policy towards Iraq. Eight years ago today I was one of the northernmost U.S. soldiers occupying Southern Iraq and we were confronted with a similar set of questions even then.

Current Policy

As the committee is aware, since the end of Operation Desert Fox in December, the United States has undertaken a low-key but active campaign against Iraq - focused almost exclusively on challenges to the no-fly zones from Iraqi planes and anti-aircraft batteries. Public reports state that in over three thousand combat sorties flown in the past ten weeks, the U.S. has attacked over one hundred different targets with almost three hundred precision guided munitions. The administration seems quite happy with these attacks - indeed happier still with the notion of these attacks as representing the centerpiece of a new U.S. strategy towards Iraq. As one senior military officer quoted in the Washington Post remarked, "It's a strategy we fell into. It's not one that was originally planned. But it's working out very, very well for us." Several very high-ranking administration officials with whom I've spoken recently have reinforced this optimism about the success of the new policy.

I would like to offer the committee a different view on this issue. To call any military strategy a success presupposes a coherent measurement of that success. The current set of operations against Iraqi air defenses are deemed successful because, by and large, American and British planes are hitting their targets and slowly degrading Saddam's anti-aircraft capabilities. Of this there is no doubt, and we should all greatly admire the skill and professionalism of the aircrews carrying out these missions. Nonetheless, while these short-term military goals appear definable and achievable, they do not appear to be conclusively linked to an end-game in Iraq. If the U.S. is only in the business of incrementally "plinking" 1970's-era anti-aircraft batteries in Iraq, then the policy is indeed a success. If, on the other hand, those military actions are supposed to be conclusively linked to a larger and more sustainable political objective in Iraq, I'm not so sure. Using the destruction of anti-aircraft batteries in Iraq to measure the success of our policy may be as irrelevant as using body counts to measure the success of American strategy in Vietnam. The daily military actions, in and of themselves, are important tactical victories. But do they add up to a comprehensive policy? The question the President and his policy staff must answer is strategic - "to what end?"

The administration claims that containment is the official strategy and the U.S. wishes only to keep Saddam "in his box" such that he lacks the military capability to threaten his neighbors,

develop weapons of mass destruction, or destabilize the Persian Gulf region in some way. American officials have even indicated that if Saddam ceases his challenges to the no-fly zones, then what has been described as a "low-grade war against Iraq" will stop. At the same time, the President and his National Security Advisor have strongly hinted at the need for a change of regime in Iraq and joined Congress in passing the Iraq Liberation Act. There is an inherent tension between these two goals and I would argue that the administration cannot have it both ways. In the first place pursuing two different policies on the cheap greatly reduces the chances of either coming to fruition. Secondly, the administration has not constructed a policy framework for either that would prepare Congress, the American people, and our allies for a lasting solution to the problem of Saddam Hussein. American and British pilots are busy in the skies over Iraq, but little work has been done in the White House to plan for either a post-UNSCOM containment strategy or the chance to help force Saddam from power. For his part, Saddam appears to be counting on the fact that an administration with only 22 months left in office will be mostly interested in running out the clock.

Incoherent as it is, the current policy could most optimistically be explained as "playing for a break." Some analysts who agree with my thesis that American actions do not appear to be linked to a larger objective still maintain that bombing is better than nothing. Perhaps - so long as there are no American POW's in the equation. However, when you weigh the considerable danger of a Saddam Hussein with an unfettered and unmonitored weapons of mass destruction program, the current campaign is not much better than nothing. The recent bombings have not been directed towards Saddam's ability to build and deliver weapons of mass destruction or his elite forces - the two instruments with which he maintains control and could threaten the region. There is the possibility that attacking remote anti-aircraft sites may send some indirect signal to the Iraqi military that Saddam is a weak and dangerous leader. I cannot see how this could be a stronger signal than when he lost two-thirds of his army in Desert Storm, but that is the line of argument. Even then, if Saddam is weakening and Desert Fox or this current campaign is accelerating his demise, the U.S. is ill positioned to influence or take advantage of the outcome. Our lukewarm approach to a regime change in Iraq has put America in the back of the bus, not the driver's seat.

Playing for a break - where the U.S. applies small amounts of relatively risk-free military pressure in the hopes of something good happening - can work. Some of the architects of President Reagan's policies in Central America have described their approach this way. If we have patience and good fortune in Iraq then this method could be supported. I believe that Saddam is too wily a survivor and his WMD program too dangerous and advanced for America to rely on this strategy. As we used to say in my unit - hope is not a method. More important, I will describe in this testimony two scenarios where the threat posed by Saddam in the future will grow greatly unless the U.S. takes action today. The immediate threat is not imminent, but decisions are.

Containment

A policy of containment, bombing or no bombing, is not sustainable for several reasons. First, it is inconclusive, having not yielded even the glimmer of a solution to the Iraq problem for the past eight years. Second, every indecisive round keeps pressure on Saddam, but also allows him time and breathing space to further develop weapons of mass destruction. This is especially so now that the UN inspections regime, imperfect as it was, has collapsed. Third, the continued sanctions on Iraq give Saddam legitimacy and strengthen his hold on power over the suffering Iraqi people. Fourth, the policy is expensive and demoralizing, costing the U.S. billions every year to rush troops to the Gulf and further taxing the much-stretched American military. Fifth, containment fatigue is setting in, with allies and other powers tiring of the routine and wanting to resume normal (read business) relations with Iraq.

Finally, and most importantly, the current containment policy leaves many parties other than the U.S. in charge. During all these crises, America has reacted with great gusto, but the prime determinant of the outcome has been Saddam. Occasionally, an interlocutor has been involved to give temporary direction - such as Russian Prime Minister Yvgeni Primakov last November and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in February of 1998. Given the amount of political and military capital the U.S. is spending to keep Saddam under pressure, retaining the initiative of action should be the foremost element of a strategy for dealing with a dangerous bully.

Policy Options

What is needed is a serious policy review, one that evaluates containment squarely against other options that could guide America's long term Iraq policy. Such a policy should match available military capabilities to a recognizable and definable political end-state. For a strategy to be successful, military actions must, in a sense, deliver the political goal (or at least posture the U.S. for success). Three times last year, the U.S. prepared a bombing campaign that was a good military plan, but not a strategy. As one commentator noted, even Desert Fox was "a target list in search of a strategy." One of the reasons the current policy is so inconclusive is that there is little confidence that U.S. military action, while competently undertaken and making Americans feel satisfied, will actually produce the goods. In this case, making Saddam behave as he never has in his almost forty-year reign.

A top to bottom policy review would examine options such as containment, but in different form. A broader form of containment might include a more robust inspections plan, tighter restrictions on Iraqi economic sanctions (i.e. closing the large current loopholes), an extension of the 'no-fly zone' to a 'no-drive' zone, and a clearly articulated policy on when and how military force would be used in response to Iraqi transgressions. A more narrow form of containment might abandon the UN sanctions and focus strictly on key Iraqi military capabilities that the U.S. can monitor through its intelligence networks. The veneer of a UN effort could be dropped in this case, allowing a smaller coalition of the U.S., Britain, Kuwait, and key gulf states to enforce the policy. This would allow for considerably greater flexibility in reacting to Saddam's moves.

A bolder departure from current policy might be a deterrence strategy. In this plan, the U.S. would keep a small force in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, but would basically deter major Iraqi aggression from 'over the horizon.' This plan explicitly accepts the fact that Saddam will remain in power, but de-emphasizes his conflict with the United States while clearly delineating the conditions under which U.S. power might return in order to strike Iraq. For this policy to be a success, it would have to combine a more laissez-faire approach with an iron resoluteness to use massive force when Iraq has truly stepped over the line, as it did in 1990 when it invaded Kuwait.

As I noted, in November President Clinton tacitly endorsed an even different approach - a policy to undermine the Hussein regime, thus helping those elements in Iraq that might overthrow Saddam. This too is a departure from containment. Congress has allocated \$97 million to support the efforts of Iraqi opposition groups, although how useful that money might be is a matter of considerable debate. Having observed the Shiite rebels in action against Saddam in April of 1991, I am not optimistic that any Iraqi opposition group could mount an effective campaign against Saddam without considerable U.S. military help. As the botched Kurdish rebellion of 1996 showed, many dissident groups are more interested in fighting each other than fighting Saddam.

Without significant U.S. help on the ground, I believe that Iraqi opposition groups are just good enough to get themselves into trouble. The U.S., having encouraged them to rebel, should be willing to rescue them in the event of setbacks. Should the U.S. chose to pursue this policy, as President Clinton hinted he might, all involved must understand that it is not a free lunch.

Although, like most of you here, I wish the Iraqi opposition success and support U.S. aid to these groups, I am skeptical that Saddam can be deposed without a major U.S. political, financial, and military commitment that could involve American ground as well as air support in fighting Saddam.

Removing Saddam Hussein's Regime

Ultimately, if the U.S. is determined to remove Saddam Hussein from power there is only one sure way of doing so: invade and conquer Iraq. If we want the job done, there is no realistic way to do it on the cheap. Only U.S. armed forces have the power to defeat Saddam's military and security services, and only the willingness of the United States to employ whatever force is needed is likely to convince our friends in Europe, Asia and the Middle East to go along with the plan. Moreover, as so much of this conflict has been about preserving American prestige, it could hardly be expected that the U.S. could cheerfully bankroll, supply and even provide air cover for an Iraqi rebellion that failed or put another dictator in power. If involved at all in supporting or fermenting an Iraqi rebellion against Saddam, the U.S. would be in it up to the elbows and had better be prepared to commit tens of thousands of ground troops to a prolonged campaign if they were needed. There is no way to swim in this pool without getting wet.

That said, in the absence of a stunning Iraqi provocation, an invasion is the least probable and riskiest course of action the U.S. could currently pursue towards Iraq. A legion of headaches would confront the United States in pursuit of this course and residual problems could plague us for years afterwards. However, there are two scenarios in which an invasion of Iraq would not be our worst course of action - indeed, in one case, it may prove to be our best choice. I do not come here as an advocate for an immediate invasion and occupation of Iraq, but I do advocate thinking seriously about the possibility of such action in the event of these two circumstances.

In the first scenario, the U.S. would reinforce some limited success on the part of an Iraqi opposition movement. I wish, for the sake of our friends in the Iraqi opposition and the American public, that Saddam Hussein could be removed with only a light American touch - air support, logistics, training, intelligence, and the like. I am not sanguine about their chances under these circumstances. Moreover, if the U.S. is not prepared immediately to heavily reinforce an opposition in which we have invested our prestige, America should think carefully about being involved at all. At some point in time, Iraqi opposition groups are likely to need more help than was expected. Needless to say, the more the U.S. is involved on the front end of such efforts, the more it can influence the manner and form in which American troops may be involved further down the road. It will be much easier for the U.S. to ensure success and maintain influence if it is a key player from the beginning rather than having to come in as a key player on the heels of an imminent disaster or stalled effort. There are many questions contained herein and too many to address today. The main point I can make at this time is that these sorts of issues must be thought through, war-gamed, and planned for. I do not believe the administration is prepared in that sense.

The second scenario centers on the possibility of Saddam Hussein's Iraq being on the verge of developing nuclear weapons. Saddam has every incentive to do so, recognizing, as the Pakistani defense minister said at the time, that the chief lesson of the Gulf War was to not take on the United States unless you had nuclear weapons. Biological and chemical weapons are easier to develop and can be used to devastating effect, but they do not, as a nuclear capability would, make Iraq a world power overnight. If Saddam were close to realizing this capability, as many analysts think he is, the U.S. would face a threat more serious than that of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, both in terms of U.S. national interests and the stability of the vital Gulf region. It

is well worth thinking now about how to handle an Iraq on the brink of developing nuclear weapons. A pre-emptive invasion of Iraq might then be our least-worst course of action.

Strategic pre-emption on this scale is a difficult decision because the best time to undertake the decision is early - when the threat is not manifest enough to galvanize the various actors involved. Unfortunately, the worst time to pre-emptively invade Iraq would be when Saddam actually has a nuclear capability or is close enough to shock the world. Then the international community would be motivated to take action, but against a much more formidable opponent. The audio tapes made in the oval office during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 show President Kennedy, faced with the prospect of a nuclear Castro, expressing his regret that he did not use the Bay of Pigs or some earlier opportunity to depose the Cuban leader. Similarly, much of the international community long bemoaned the failure to dispatch Hitler while he was weak, rather than paying the terrible cost to do it when he was strong. It is my fervent hope that we have no similar regrets if facing a nuclear Saddam in the future.

The Cost of Invasion and Occupation

The basic military campaign would be well within American capabilities. Planned as it would be by a cautious military, it would probably entail a worst-case scenario force of roughly 300-400,000 troops and would probably take roughly 2-4 months to deploy and prepare the forces followed by a 1-3 month war. Under reasonably optimistic assumptions, the United States would probably take only about 3-4,000 casualties (of which 1,000 might be killed in action). As in the Persian Gulf War, at least a hundred thousand reservists would need to be mobilized and the National Guard would have to be shipped off to training centers to prepare for certain eventualities.

Under a range of plausible scenarios, however, the cost in US military and Iraqi civilian casualties could increase significantly. If Saddam's loyalists chose to fight to the death rather than surrender and throw themselves on the tender mercies of the Iraqi populace, casualty figures could double or even triple as American troops would be forced to clear Iraq's cities in house-to-house fighting where our advantages in technology, tactics, and air power would be heavily discounted. If Saddam were to employ chemical or biological agents in defense of his regime - and he would have scant incentive to refrain from doing so - U.S. and Iraqi civilian casualties could rise even higher.

Nevertheless, the military costs of an invasion pale beside the political and diplomatic morass the U.S. would encounter. Defeating the Iraqi military is easy. The problem is that of the dog chasing the car-what does he do with it once he's caught it? Once an international coalition dominated by the U.S. military conquered Iraq, we would be stuck with a basket case of a country. After decades of Saddam's totalitarianism, two prior wars, years of crippling sanctions, and a U.S. invasion, Iraq would be devastated. Its economy would be in shambles, its governmental structure gone, its basic human services - the production and distribution of food, medicine, energy, and other basic necessities - would be ruined. Like Germany or Japan after World War II, the United States would have to rebuild a nation that has collapsed.

Every one of Iraq's neighbors, and a number of other European and Middle Eastern states would have a tremendous stake in the future Iraq. They would want to control who rules in Baghdad, what the new state looks like and how it is oriented. Nor are they likely to simply stand on the sidelines and offer advice. Even before the military campaign is completed, they would be maneuvering and manipulating events to try to ensure that the postwar Iraq conformed to their needs. And many of their needs would contradict one another and the likely preferences of the United States.

Turkey would want a strong central government in Iraq that kept a very tight rein on the Kurds and prevented them from exercising anything but the most nominal autonomy. Saudi Arabia would want a strong Iraqi state dominated by the (minority) Sunni population to serve as a bulwark against Iran and prevent the Shiites from enjoying power. The Jordanians would probably want a weak Iraqi state—at least weak enough so that it cannot threaten them—but that was also favorably inclined to continue to provide Jordan with cheap oil. Egypt too would probably prefer a weak Iraq because Baghdad is Cairo's greatest potential challenger for leadership of the Arab world. Both Syria and Iran would actively work for a weak Iraqi state, and may try to ensure the dominance of Iraq's Shiite majority. Russia may want a strong, independent Iraq; one independent enough to renew its former relationship with Moscow and perhaps even purchase Russian military hardware. France may not care whether the Iraqi state is weak or strong, but would certainly want to make sure that French firms were not excluded from their fair share of Iraqi contracts. In short, the United States would be beset on every side by wheedling, cajoling, pleading, subverting, and hindering allies, all intent on seeing their interests satisfied in a future Iraqi state.

The American people would no doubt demand that democracy be established in Iraq. After all, American soldiers would have died to conquer the country and it would be highly unpalatable to the U.S. public for those soldiers, sailors, and airmen to have died simply to replace one dictator with another. This too could arouse the vehement opposition of regional states, most of whom are autocracies of one form or another and who probably would be alarmed at a democratic precedent in their part of the world. They might openly oppose or covertly subvert a democratic Iraqi government. In addition, the Iraqi people may not be ready for pluralism, and a U.S.-installed democracy might collapse into a new autocracy.

Moreover, who is to say the U.S. would be pulling the strings through this political cauldron of an occupation? In order for the occupation to garner local and international political support, the UN or a regional organization such as the Arab league would have to provide some kind of transitional authority that would govern Iraq and provide basic services in between the initial U.S. military occupation and the restoration of some form of Iraqi government. As with the UN operation in Somalia in 1993, the U.S. would be heavily vested, politically and militarily, but not necessarily 100 percent in charge. There is no guarantee that if the rebuilding of Iraq were left to the UN or the Arab league it would turn out democratic, stable, or well-disposed toward the United States.

A Nuclear Saddam

As challenging as this endeavor may seem, it may not be as bad as a future with a nuclear-armed Iraq. Not all proliferation is equally bad. We worry much less about India, Pakistan or Israel possessing nuclear weapons than North Korea or Libya. Saddam Hussein is arguably the most dangerous man in the world, even without a ready nuclear capability. If Saddam were to acquire nuclear weapons, the world would suddenly become a very dangerous place.

Certain facets of Saddam Hussein's personality make Iraqi possession of nuclear weapons almost uniquely dangerous. In the past, the U.S. has been able to count on nuclear-armed states behaving within certain established parameters. Even when these states were adversaries - such as the USSR or China - this knowledge provided some margin of security. But the world has never had to deal with a nuclear - armed state led by someone like Saddam Hussein before. The entire corpus of arms control regimes, confidence building measures and deterrence logic that underpinned the nuclear age thus far could prove meaningless to Saddam. Like the terrible dictators of our past, he plays by different rules.

This is not to say that Saddam is "undeterrable." On numerous occasions in the past, he has demonstrated that when faced with superior force and a willingness to use that force, he will back down. Indeed, Saddam refrained from employing biological or chemical agents against either Israel or the forces of the U.S.-led Coalition during the Gulf War because he was deterred by the Israeli and American (and French and British) nuclear arsenals. But that card might be removed should Iraq's nuclear program realize its objective.

Deterring Saddam is much more difficult than deterring other leaders. Moreover, what deters Saddam is often difficult for others to discern. Because Saddam has such disregard for lives other than his own, threatening to kill large numbers of his people per se is meaningless to him and therefore inadequate to deter him. It becomes a deterrent only if Saddam believes that so many deaths would prompt some kind of move against him - by the Iraqi military, the Iraqi people, his loyalists, etc., - that would threaten his control over Iraq. However, if Saddam calculates that he runs no such risk, or that he runs a greater risk of being ousted if he backs down, he will not be deterred. A good example of this problem was his decision not to withdraw from Kuwait in the fall of 1990. Saddam recognized that tens of thousands of Iraqis would die in a war with the U.S.-led coalition, but this mattered little to him because he feared that if he were to retreat from Kuwait his supporters would turn on him. Thus, he chose to gamble that he could win the war despite the certainty that Iraq would take heavy losses.

Because Saddam consistently exaggerates his own strength and his adversaries' weaknesses, possession of nuclear weapons is likely to encourage his propensity toward risk-taking. In the past, improvements in Iraqi military power have always emboldened him to take ever more reckless foreign adventures. For instance, in 1975, when Iraq was weak, Saddam backed down in the face of the Shah's U.S.-equipped military. Iraq then went on a massive military modernization and expansion program, so that by 1980, after the Iranian revolution (which also greatly weakened the Iranian military), he gambled on an invasion of Iran. Similarly, Iraq emerged from the Iran-Iraq war with a massive conventional military as well as a large arsenal of BW and CW weapons and ballistic missiles. These new capabilities were critical to Saddam's decision to invade Kuwait and then try to hold it against the U.S.-led Coalition.

If Saddam were to acquire nuclear weapons, there can be no doubt that he would attempt to use them to achieve tangible foreign policy gains. As he has done so often in the past, Saddam almost certainly would miscalculate the risks and again embroil Iraq, the Middle East, possibly Europe, and probably the United States in a new war-one in which Saddam had nuclear weapons to add to his side of the balance sheet.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the danger posed by a nuclear-armed Iraq is to compare it to North Korea. Because we were unable to enforce an Iraq-like set of restrictions on North Korea, Pyongyang was able to develop nuclear weapons despite Western efforts to control proliferation. Today, we live with great unease about how North Korea will behave with its nuclear arsenal and have gone to great lengths to "buy" it from them. Yet North Korea is almost peaceful and cautious when compared to Saddam's Iraq. North Korea has mostly contented itself with limited terrorism and subversion in the 45 years since the end of the Korean War. Moreover, it appears to have no ambitions outside the Korean peninsula-if it still harbors those old designs at all.

By contrast, Iraq has fought four major wars, attacked or threatened to attack seven different nearby states, and provoked countless smaller clashes in the thirty years since Saddam's Ba'athist regime took power. If we are nervous that deterrence alone will not be enough to prevent North Korea from employing its nuclear arsenal, we should be downright terrified of how Saddam would behave with nuclear weapons of his own. Many in the foreign policy community criticized Washington's buy-out of North Korea as caving in to international blackmail. Whatever Pyongyang's goals, there can be little doubt that Saddam would try (at the very least) to use his own nuclear arsenal in grand-scale extortion of his neighbors and the U.S. In these circumstances, the United States would be confronted with a variety of bad options. We could

learn to live with Saddam's nuclear arsenal and hope that our deterrent was so overwhelming that even Saddam would understand it. Or we could invade Iraq before Saddam has completed development of the weaponry. Doing so would have the advantages of dismantling the Iraqi WMD program once and for all, and removing Saddam from power. Under these conditions, even the litany of problems the U.S. would have to address in an invasion might be a lesser burden than living in a world in which Saddam Hussein possessed nuclear weapons.

An invasion of Iraq would only be warranted under these most extreme circumstances. Unfortunately, the most extreme circumstances are entirely plausible. Invading Iraq would not be another Grenada, Panama, or Desert Storm. It would represent the deepest, most immediate, and most protracted investment of American lives, diplomacy, prestige, and political capital since Vietnam. It could, in these relatively benign strategic times, be the defining moment of one or more American administrations. Faced with the specter of a nuclear Saddam, it is a moment worth contemplating.

Real leadership from an American President can shape the will and ambitions of the international community. President Clinton or his successor should not be tempting into kicking the Iraq can down the road yet again. Instead, the President should invest the political capital necessary to make the case against Saddam and mobilize domestic and international opinion in the direction of removing him. If Hussein is dangerous enough for the world laboriously to keep in a box, he is dangerous enough to expel from Iraq. The campaign to build the case for undermining and overthrowing Iraq will be long, difficult, and accomplished only with much diplomatic sweat, military muscle, and the blood of many involved. Having undertaken some limited military action in the past weeks, perhaps President Clinton answered in his mind the question of whether it was worth fighting for. That same question should be put before Congress. If the answer is yes, the fight should at least accomplish something important.