
SADDAM'S IMPENDING VICTORY

By Robert Kagan

“With dictators, nothing succeeds like success.” That observation, by Adolf Hitler, is not as trite as it sounds. Hitler was referring to his own successful remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936. Before he moved into the Rhineland, Hitler was securely “in his box,” as the Clinton administration would say. Pursuant to the Versailles Treaty and the Locarno pact of 1926, Germany had been forced to keep this territory demilitarized as a guarantee against renewed aggression: An unguarded Rhineland left Germany naked to a French attack. From the German point of view, this was not “fair”; it violated German sovereignty. But it was the price Germany paid for invading France and the low countries in 1914. And it was the lid on the box that contained Hitler’s grand strategic ambitions.

Hitler was determined to remove it. To do so, however, required an enormous gamble. Hitler was weak. Germany was still struggling through the Depression. And Germany’s armed forces were still in pitiful shape, hopelessly outgunned by the French. Had the French army responded in force to the remilitarization, had it simply marched into the Rhineland, Hitler would have had to retreat. As he later recalled, “a retreat on our part would have spelled collapse”—the collapse, that is, of Hitler’s rule. “The forty-eight hours after the march into the Rhineland were the most nerve-wracking in my life.”

But, of course, the French did not respond militarily. For a variety of reasons, including a significant overestimation of Hitler’s military strength, the French government and armed forces had decided that an invasion of the Rhineland was too risky. Instead, when Hitler made his move, the French sent a formal protest to the League of Nations. The British government, for its part, urged the French “not to make the situation more difficult.” Seventeen years after the Versailles Treaty, many people had forgotten why it was so important to keep German troops out of

the Rhineland. The British foreign minister said the best course of action was to “conclude with [Germany] as far-reaching and enduring a settlement as is possible whilst Herr Hitler is in the mood to do so.” Hitler’s gamble worked. His stunning success bolstered his rule at home. And he was out of the box.

For some years now, Saddam Hussein has been in a box. The settlement imposed on Iraq after the conclusion of the Persian Gulf War required him to open his country to inspection by the United Nations to determine how far he had advanced in the production of weapons of mass destruction and to ensure that all such capabilities, and such weapons, were destroyed. This imposition, embodied in the U.N. Security Council resolutions that ended the war, was not “fair”; it was a serious infringement of Iraqi sovereignty. But it was the price Saddam paid for invading Kuwait and for threatening during the war to rain chemical and biological weapons down on Israel and U.S. and allied troops.

For Saddam, whose conventional military strength had been decimated in 1991 and could not be restored for many years, weapons of mass destruction provided the quickest, surest, and indeed, the only route back to strategic dominance in the Middle East. As Rolf Ekeus, the former head of UNSCOM, the U.N.’s weapons-monitoring operation, said last year, weapons of mass destruction “make the difference between Iraq’s being a regional power and a major international power.” Finding and destroying Saddam’s ability to produce weapons of mass destruction, therefore, was an essential part of guaranteeing that Saddam could not again threaten neighboring states. The U.N. effort to rid Iraq of such weapons capabilities was supposed to put the lid on Saddam’s grand strategic ambitions.

Today the lid is about to come off. Saddam Hussein, weak, isolated, and impoverished as he is, has decided to take his big gamble. The crisis he set off last October when he blocked U.N. inspectors came to a head last week when Iraqi deputy prime minister

Robert Kagan is a senior associate at the Carnegie endowment for International Peace and a contributing editor of THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

Tariq Aziz told UNSCOM chief Richard Butler that a number of sites in Iraq—the so-called presidential palaces—would remain off-limits for two more months at least. Saddam Hussein also issued an ultimatum last week calling for the U.N. to wrap up its inspections by May and lift the sanctions. Since these demands, as he well knows, are probably unacceptable to the Clinton administration, Saddam's purpose is clear: He aims to force a showdown with the United States. He has, so to speak, marched his troops into the Rhineland and now waits to see what the United States will do.

Saddam, however, is probably resting a good bit more comfortably than Hitler could in 1936. For unlike Hitler, he has a pretty good idea of what the United States and its allies will do in response to his latest move and, more important, what they will not do.

For the Clinton administration the options have severely narrowed. To return to the Security Council in search of yet another resolution condemning Iraq's intransigence would be embarrassingly futile. Even if the administration could persuade the rest of the Security Council to ratchet up the sanctions, Saddam would only have to hold firm for a few weeks to demonstrate the impotence of the new, tougher sanctions. How long would it be before Russia, France, and China returned to the position they took at the beginning of the crisis, that carrots work better with Saddam than sticks? Meanwhile, Saddam would have bought more time to work on his biological and chemical projects, bringing the day closer when, as British foreign secretary Robin Cook warned last week, he will have anthrax warheads on his missiles.

For these reasons, and also for domestic political reasons, the purely diplomatic option is probably no longer attractive for President Clinton. Last week, Clinton said that "something has to give." He may now begin trying to build support in the Security Council for military action. And Saddam knows this. Indeed, it may be that Saddam not only knows this;

he intends it. Saddam may well have purposely driven the Clinton administration to resorting to the military option.

If this is Saddam's plan, it is not a bad one. Such a strategy would rest on a number of fairly reasonable calculations about the diplomatic and military situation he faces.

In the first place, Saddam knows it will be difficult for Clinton to gain the kind of international support he would like for military action. The Russians have made their opposition clear, and they may well be sup-

ported in the Security Council by the French and Chinese. The Arab states are nervous about military action, at best, and may oppose it. Clinton's efforts to rally international support may, therefore, simply founder, as they did in 1993 when secretary of state Warren Christopher went to Europe to get support for military action in Bosnia and came home empty-handed. It took two more years for Clinton to work up the will to use military force in Bosnia. Saddam would be delighted to have two more years.

But suppose Clinton is undeterred by the lack of international support and decides to go in alone, or perhaps with the British as his only ally. Saddam knows, and the Clinton administration

knows, too, that Clinton's biggest problem then is the nature of the military action the Pentagon has prepared for him.

It isn't very hard to guess what form that action would take. If and when President Clinton decides to order the use of force, it will not be another "pinprick" airstrike or the launching of a few dozen cruise missiles. But it won't be the kind of massive, sustained air campaign that began Desert Storm either, with many weeks of steady bombing against a broad range of strategic targets throughout Iraq. It will most likely be a shorter campaign of bombing and missile strikes, designed chiefly to destroy as many suspected chemical and biological weapons storage and production sites as possible.

The problem is, the consequences of such an air



Kevin Chastwick

campaign, or even of a somewhat broader campaign aimed at destroying some of Iraq's conventional forces, would not be intolerable to Saddam. Above all, he would still be alive and in charge in Baghdad. The air campaign didn't kill him in Desert Storm, and the United States has not in the last six years developed missiles that can find individuals with big mustaches. Nor would he have lost the bulk of his armed forces. Finally, we would have no confidence that the air strikes had knocked out all or even most of his biological and chemical weapons program. If Desert Storm did not destroy that program, why would a much smaller air campaign do so? In any event, we would need to get the U.N. inspectors back into Iraq to verify precisely what the air strikes had and had not managed to destroy. And Saddam would still be in a position to deny them the free access they require.

In other words, we would be back to where we are today. Only worse. Having played his hole card, having employed his maximal military option, Clinton would be bereft of further options. Those in the international community who had opposed military action would be free to claim that the United States had taken its best shot and failed. Now, they would say, it was time for a different, more accommodating approach. Perhaps some would even echo Anthony Eden's sentiments of sixty years ago and propose that the world conclude as far-reaching and enduring a settlement as was possible whilst Herr Hussein was in the mood to do so. This would be an unmitigated victory for Saddam. And for a dictator, nothing succeeds like success.

The real problem today is not that President Clinton has so far refused to take military action. It is that the Clinton administration is unlikely to embrace the kind of military option that is needed. This has thoroughly undermined American strategy and diplomacy. Nervous Arab states, not surprisingly, are unenthusiastic about yet another American military action that neither kills Saddam nor destroys his capacity to harm them. From their point of view, if the United States is not going to get rid of Saddam, they are better off trying to make their own peace with him. The Russians and French are undoubtedly telling their counterparts in the Clinton administration that the planned air campaign will be worse than futile. And, of course, Clinton officials don't need to be told this. They already know it, which is surely one reason they have not so far pursued it.

The dirty little secret, then, is that Clinton's diplomatic efforts are failing because they are not really backed by the threat of force. Because the proposed

military action is inadequate, it cannot threaten Saddam into compliance. Because Saddam cannot be threatened into compliance, the Clinton administration must resort to a diplomatic strategy that every day looks more like simple appeasement. It is not Saddam who is playing the weak hand, therefore, but Clinton. And it is not Saddam who is now in a box, but the United States.

There is only one way for the United States to get out of its box, and that is to change the goals of American policy in Iraq and to change radically the type of military action we intend to use against Saddam.

Before the Clinton administration found itself in its current helpless condition, senior officials and spokesmen used to declare ritualistically that they would never agree to lifting all the sanctions against Iraq so long as Saddam remained in charge. As Secretary of State Albright said last March, "Our view, which is unshakable, is that Iraq must prove its peaceful intentions. And the evidence is overwhelming that Saddam Hussein's intentions will never be peaceful." This was a rather circuitous but not especially subtle way of saying that the United States hoped the sanctions would eventually force Saddam from power, that U.S. policy aimed ultimately at Saddam's removal. It is a measure of how far the Clinton administration has traveled toward appeasement since last November that the insistence on peaceful intentions has been dropped. Recently national security adviser Sandy Berger compared Saddam to a prisoner who was serving a sentence—the implication being that some day he would be released.

But the Clinton administration was right the first time. The evidence *is* overwhelming that Saddam's intentions will never be peaceful—and far more so today than when Albright made her statement a year ago. It turns out that the international strategy for preventing Saddam from obtaining weapons of mass destruction was flawed from the beginning. As Rolf Ekeus has noted, the assumption when the U.N. inspections regime was established in 1991 was that Baghdad would be eager to get Iraqi oil flowing again, and so would be willing to cooperate with UNSCOM to resolve rapidly the problem of weapons of mass destruction. Over the past six years, this assumption has proved to be mistaken. Saddam has shown beyond any doubt that he is determined to produce weapons of mass destruction as a means of regaining his strategic dominance of the Middle East, and that he cannot be deterred by sanctions or oil embargoes, or even by airstrikes.

Which leads us to the conclusion that has so far been assiduously avoided, both by the Clinton admin-

istration and by members of Congress in both parties, even the hawkish: The only solution to the problem in Iraq today is to use air power *and* ground power, and not to stop until we have finished what President Bush began in 1991. An air campaign is not enough. Only ground forces can find and destroy weapons-production facilities with a high degree of confidence that they have been destroyed. Only ground forces can provide the time and the access for inspectors to go in and insure that the job has been done. And, above all, only ground forces can remove Saddam and his regime from power and open the way for a new post-Saddam Iraq whose intentions can safely be assumed to be benign.

Impossible? Unthinkable? It shouldn't be, if we reckon the risks and difficulties of an invasion of Iraq against the risks and difficulties of allowing Saddam to get out of his box and wield weapons of mass destruction—as he is sure to do in a matter of months if we remain on the present course.

A successful invasion of Iraq is certainly not beyond the capacities of the American military. Saddam's conventional forces are weak, demoralized, and probably not very eager to take on American forces

again. Remember, it is precisely because of the weakness of his conventional forces that Saddam is so desperate to acquire weapons of mass destruction. The Iraqi army is nothing like what it was in 1990.

As for the problem of gaining international support for an invasion, the United States would probably have a better chance of getting the necessary support from Saudi Arabia if the Saudis knew that this time the Americans were going to finish Saddam off once and for all. The Russians and French would object, but they would also object to futile air-strikes. If we're going to have a breach in the Security Council over Iraq, let's at least have it over a promising military effort rather than a doomed one.

It is true, moreover, for superpowers as well as for dictators that nothing succeeds like success. A successful intervention in Iraq would revolutionize the strategic situation in the Middle East, in ways both tangible and intangible, and all to the benefit of American interests. Continued failure to take such action against Saddam will progressively erode our strategic position and will put the world on notice as the 21st century begins that the Americans, like the French and British of the 1930s, have lost their nerve. ♦