

A Case for Not Invading Iraq

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“Saddam Hussein is a madman with weapons of mass destruction, and therefore we need to get rid of him.” We have heard words to this effect from various advocates of invading Iraq. But none of these advocates has ever laid out convincingly why they think Hussein is a mad man. In fact, I know of no evidence that he is insane. We do have a fair amount of evidence that Saddam Hussein is a bad man. I think he’s also a rational man, in the narrow sense of that word. That is, he responds to incentives. And his rational response to the dangerous incentives President Bush has set up for Hussein should make us afraid.

Economists believe that you can understand a lot of human behavior by first understanding the incentives those humans face. Consider the incentive that Bush Sr. set for Saddam Hussein. In 1991, just before the Gulf War, the elder Bush’s secretary of state James Baker stated that if Hussein used chemical weapons against the U.S.-led international coalition, Bush would consider “the strongest possible response.” Most people understood at the time that this was the Bush administration’s euphemism for nuclear weapons. Although Bush Sr. has said many times since that he never seriously considered using nuclear weapons, he didn’t have to. Hussein got the point. Whatever the wisdom of Bush’s threat, Hussein responded rationally: he refrained from using chemical weapons in the Gulf War.

But now Bush Jr. says he wants to get rid of Saddam Hussein. You could argue that this is posturing and that Bush doesn’t really mean it. But who believes that? Probably one of the most sincere beliefs George W. Bush has is that Hussein should go.

And let’s be honest here. Bush doesn’t want him to go to Switzerland. Everyone understands that President Bush wants Saddam Hussein to die. Someone who understands that particularly well is Saddam Hussein.

So now consider how Bush Jr.’s words and actions have changed the

incentives for Hussein. He has good reason to believe that President Bush wants him dead. He therefore also knows that Bush's staff is probably preparing, if it has not already prepared, plans to kill Hussein. What's Hussein's best response? If he is as evil as George W. Bush and I both think he is, then he is indifferent between dying alone and taking 1,000,000 innocent Iraqis with him. In fact, he might actually prefer to die with a splash. So a whole lot of innocent Iraqis might well die because Hussein hides out among them or fights back. Moreover, if Hussein is as evil as George Bush and I think he is, then he would prefer to take a few hundred thousand other innocent people—maybe Israelis or maybe even Americans—with him.

Therefore, if we want to avoid the deaths of many innocent Iraqis, and possibly of innocent Americans and Israelis, George Bush has two choices. The high-risk choice is to go after Saddam Hussein as soon as possible with a surprise attack. Notice that I said "go after Saddam Hussein," not "go after Iraq." In a choice between being the only target and being one of a million Iraqi targets, Hussein would much prefer the latter. For one thing, it would help him die with a big splash; for another, the U.S. killing of many innocent Iraqis would help with him achieve a legacy—the unification of the Arab and Muslim worlds against the United States. Presumably the way to go after Hussein individually would be with an assassination squad.

There's a second choice. That would be for Bush to communicate, in a credible way, that he no longer wishes to replace Saddam Hussein. In short, Bush could back off.

Both options are difficult. The first is hard because Hussein is well protected. An even more serious problem with the first option is that if Hussein were killed, he might still have time to unleash his terror. The second option is difficult because everyone knows Bush's true wishes for Hussein's future.

To pursue the second option, therefore, President Bush would have to communicate credibly that his wishes have changed. One way to do the second is for Bush to take seriously Saddam Hussein's latest offer to let in weapons inspectors. Bush and his people claim that Hussein is just trying to buy time, and they might well be right. They might also be wrong. On

August 3, Bush's spokesman, State Department undersecretary for arms control John Bolton, told the BBC, "our policy . . . insists on regime change in Baghdad" and that "That policy will not be altered whether inspectors go in or not." Which is why a good-faith move by Bush to talk to Hussein would be a credible communication that Bush's wishes have changed. If, as Bolton said, no conceivable weapons-inspection program would satisfy Bush, then we're back to my point about incentives. The incentive for Hussein, if he knows he will be dead anyway, is to hurt many innocent people.

Last June, at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, I presented the above thoughts at a lecture I gave to about fifteen Admirals and other general officers in the U.S. military. The resulting discussion was, as you might expect, quite animated. Interestingly, though, even those who most vociferously objected to my conclusion did not challenge my reasoning about incentives. The only person in the room who claimed to find a flaw stated that it was unlikely that things would proceed as far as I thought. He agreed with me that Saddam Hussein is rational. That, he said, was precisely why my pessimistic outcome would not occur. This Admiral's point was that if Saddam Hussein really did become convinced that he would be assassinated or that his country would be attacked, he would agree to let U.N. weapons inspectors into Iraq. I agreed with the Admiral that this was a likely outcome if Saddam Hussein believed that that would divert George Bush from his avowed goal of overthrowing Hussein's regime. I replied that I was not convinced that would mollify George Bush and, more important, I didn't think Hussein would be convinced either.

This Admiral's reaction was interesting. "If Saddam Hussein agreed to let weapons inspectors into Iraq," he objected, "what grounds would we have for attacking Iraq? The United States doesn't go around making war on countries just because we don't like their rulers. We obey international law."

I looked around the room and saw other Admirals nodding their heads in agreement with their colleague. "Correct me if I'm wrong," I said, "but I believe that the U.S. invasion of Panama clearly violated international law. Am I wrong about that?" There followed a long silence.

Of course it is possible that weapons inspections could proceed but that the inspectors would do a bad job. In that case, Saddam Hussein could continue developing and building weapons of mass destruction. But put this in perspective. Many bloodthirsty evil governments develop weapons of mass destruction. That fact alone doesn't mean that those governments would use those weapons on the United States. And, as noted earlier, the Iraqi government has never used weapons of mass destruction on the United States and is not even threatening to do so now, except in self-defense. There is something terribly wrong with a government that makes war on people in another country simply because that country's government develops nasty weapons. Certainly that's what the above-mentioned admirals thought.

Moreover, if the simple production of such weapons, combined with control of those weapons by an evil government, were enough justification for war, then the United States government should attack North Korea, Iran, China, and a handful of other countries.

The way to make it more likely that such weapons will be used on the U.S. is to have our government continue poking its military stick in hornets' nests around the world. That, surely, should have been one lesson from September 11. One of Osama bin Laden's biggest gripes was that U.S. troops were stationed on Saudi soil. Had it not been for the Gulf War of 1991, we wouldn't have had a toehold for our troops in Saudi Arabia and, in all likelihood, those troops would not have been there in 2001. In that case, we might not be mourning 3,000 dead people this coming September. Interestingly, it was this kind of meddling, mainly by the Reagan administration, that encouraged Saddam Hussein to turn his country into an offensive military power. The simple fact is that when a government intervenes in another government's affairs, unintended consequences, many of them bad, often result.

Of course, it's possible that Saddam really doesn't have many weapons of mass destruction. But if that's so, then why this serious discussion of invading Iraq in the first place? Either he has the weapons or he doesn't. If he doesn't, let's have our government stay out. If he does, then let's have our government think carefully about the incentives Saddam Hussein faces so that many innocent people, including some of us, don't die.