

Iraq After Saddam Hussein

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Transcript follows:

CONAN: This is Talk of the Nation. I'm Neal Conan in Washington.

Today we're talking about the debate over Iraq. And these days, the Bush administration is hearing opposition or at least reticence to the idea of an American attack from an unexpected quarter, from the president's own Republican Party, from people like House Majority Leader Dick Armey, from Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, Brent Scowcroft, President Bush Sr.'s former national security adviser and Larry Eagleburger, the former secretary of State. So where are the fault lines in this debate?

Joining us now by phone from his office in Washington is Bill Kristol, the editor of The Weekly Standard magazine.

Good to have you on Talk of the Nation again.

Mr. BILL KRISTOL (The Weekly Standard): Thanks, Neal.

CONAN: Also with us, David R. Henderson, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution and a professor economics at the Naval Postgraduate School. He's on the phone from Monterey, California.

And nice to welcome you to Talk of the Nation.

Professor DAVID. R. HENDERSON (Hoover Institution): Thank you, Neal.

CONAN: Bill Kristol, the chorus of 'Don't do it' or at least 'Think twice before you do it' is growing louder amongst conservatives. Why do you think that is?

Mr. KRISTOL: Well, I think it's come out of the closet. The truth is people like

Brent Scowcroft--I talked with him in early February. He was unhappy with Bush's State of the Union speech. He didn't like the good-and-evil rhetoric. He doesn't like the Bush doctrine, which implies the possibility of pre-emption, which focuses on regime change. I happen to agree with the president on this. I think most Republicans do, but people are entitled to differ. I don't think it's--you know, there's an old-fashioned Republican view, which is an honorable view--I don't agree with it--a realpolitik view, don't mess around with changing regimes, don't intervene too much in countries' internal matters, containment and deterrence will work even with the most horrible tyrannies. I don't think it works post-9/11. I don't think it works with terrorist groups out there who can get access to weapons of mass destruction through dictators like Saddam, and I think the president's going to go down the road he has pretty much laid out. But Brent Scowcroft and others are entitled to make their case.

CONAN: David Henderson, are the realpolitik people of the world, the Henry Kissinger wing, if you will, of the Republican Party--first time I've ever said that, the first time anybody may have ever said that--are those the only people objecting to this policy?

Prof. HENDERSON: No, I don't think so. Although I think that Bill is right, that the realpolitik thing is part of it. But let's do a little translation here before I get to the other part of my answer. Realpolitik means take account of realities in politics, and so you definitely should take account of reality in everything. And so it certainly makes sense to do it here. But there is a kind of a view that's more based in principle than that, which is that the United States shouldn't just go around--even for people who think that we should have a very active interventionist foreign policy, which we clearly do--that the United States shouldn't go around just invading a country just in case, that that's not right.

CONAN: And, Bill Kristol, you know, that's, to some degree, what Dick Armev was saying last week.

Mr. KRISTOL: It was, and it really depends then on the seriousness with which one takes the 'Just in case' scenario. I mean, Saddam is not just any old dictator who's got an unpleasant record. He's got a very particular record of aggression. We fought a war with him. We had a cease-fire with certain conditions, which

he's broken. He's broken UN resolutions. He's determined to get weapons of mass destruction and has some, unfortunately, has links with terrorists. I think that is a special case. I agree with David. We can't go in and topple every dictator in the world.

Though I would also say that toppling Saddam and liberating Iraq from that dictatorship and with a willingness to stay there and help in the nation-building and the rebuilding, as we have done in Bosnia, will be a healthy thing. It won't be easy. It won't be the smoothest thing in the world. But just as the Balkans is much healthier now, now that Milosevic is gone, even though it's a bit of a mess and we have some troops there, it's a heck of a lot better than when ethnic cleansing was going on. So I believe will be the case in Iraq. But the core argument obviously has to do with the risks of action vs. the risks of inaction. It's a legitimate debate. People like me think the risks of doing nothing are just too great, and in this case--not in most cases--but in this case, we do have to act.

CONAN: Let's take a phone call now. Richard joins us on the line from Oakland, California.

RICHARD (Caller): Yeah. Thanks very much. I find it very interesting to see that Republicans have a curious case of amnesia about events that happened before 1990 and the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq based--well, simply yesterday, there was a front-page article in The New York Times by Patrick Tyler that officials in the Reagan-Bush administration met with Saddam Hussein when they knew very well that he was using gas against his people and against Iran. And I think the current secretary of War--I mean secretary of Defense, Mr. Rumsfeld, met with Saddam and knew that he was gassing his people and didn't say anything then. Why are these people now so intent--what has Mr. Saddam done in the last--What?--six months, 12 months to encourage this sort of enmity from the Republicans who actually supported Saddam 15 years ago?

CONAN: And, Bill Kristol, before I turn that over to you, I will point out that Secretary of State Colin Powell, who was at the White House at the time, said that report was dead wrong. But go ahead.

Mr. KRISTOL: Yeah. And I think The New York Times is now leading the crusade

against the war, and yesterday's piece was a disgraceful piece of journalism or non-journalism in my view.

RICHARD: You know, the fact...

Mr. KRISTOL: I mean, you know, we obviously helped Iraq at times in the war against Iran. We did not help them use poison gas, and the claim that Pat Tyler makes in the piece is that we, quote, "acquiesced"--whatever that means--in Iraq. We protested vociferously at the time--Secretary of State Shultz did. Anyway, maybe we should have protested more. Fine. I'm willing to acknowledge that we weren't aggressive enough in fighting against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the past. That doesn't mean we shouldn't do it in the future.

The other thing that happened between 1988 and 2002 is the war in 1990-'91 and the discovery at the end of that war that Saddam was much further along in the development of nuclear and biological weapons than we might have thought. So I'm willing to acknowledge that in 1988, I probably wasn't as aware of how dangerous Saddam was as I should have been. That doesn't mean we sit back and do nothing now.

CONAN: David Henderson, the issue of weapons of mass destruction--you say it cuts both ways.

Prof. HENDERSON: Well, yeah. First of all, I want to point out that whatever else Saddam Hussein does--and I hope you understand I am no defender of Saddam Hussein; I agree with Bill that he's a very evil man--but whatever he's done, he's never actually done anything to the United States, and that's relevant in the whole idea that there is this just war doctrine which isn't talked about much anymore. But the general idea is you have a right to attack someone who attacks you, and he's never done that, and it's hard to create a scenario in which he does.

But the point is let's say that he does have these weapons of mass destruction--and this is a point I made in my article, which I'm sure is what got me on this show--if he does have these weapons of mass destruction and he is an evil man--I think we agree on that--I think we also agree he's probably not a madman. In other words, he makes some bad mistakes. He shouldn't have tried to knock off

Bush I, even from his own viewpoint, but he did. But he makes very calculated decisions. So if he feels himself in a corner, why does he suddenly become a good man and decide not to try to take a lot of people with him? So if he really is this guy holding on to weapons of mass destruction, we shouldn't be talking about it like this is just some easy thing to do or just even if it's a hard thing to do, that the only people on our side who are at risk are our soldiers. We could be at risk, too. Israel could be at risk, too.

CONAN: William Kristol, this has to be something that is of deep concern, and I'm not suggesting for a moment that anybody on your side of the argument thinks it actually is going to be an easy thing to do.

Mr. KRISTOL: No. I'm worried that it won't be, and I very much agree with David that we need to be serious about the risk, and the risk includes risks to civilians here in the United States. But look, you know, the alternative is to sit back and--What?--wait till he develops more effective weapons, then puts us at even greater risk five years from now? So basically, at that point, the situation becomes acquiesce in Saddam with all matter of weapons and feel that somehow we can live with that, we can be confident he won't smuggle them out to terrorist groups and let them use them, as opposed to going in now when at least we have a reasonable shot, I think, at getting him before he's had a real chance to rebuild. It's been four years since the inspectors left. I wish we had done this, frankly, in 1998, and President Clinton thought about it. He did a little bit of a military action. He pulled up short. Other things were going on then.

But, no, look, I totally agree that we need to be serious about the risk, and there's probably been a little bit too much sort of talk on my side of the argument about, oh, this will be easy, the Iraqi army isn't much. I do think that we can make it hard for him to use those weapons by making clear to any military commander who does use them at Saddam's behest that he's finished and, conversely, by making clear that people who disobey an order to use these weapons will be--you know, we will try to watch out for and protect. But, no, there's a real risk. There's no question about it.

Prof. HENDERSON: Neal, can I reply to that?

CONAN: Very quickly.

Prof. HENDERSON: Yeah. Let's say he does get more weapons of mass destruction in five years, which I think is likely, you know, if we don't get inspectors in there. Still, you have to make the case why he becomes a threat to the United States? I mean, if you were a dictator in Iraq or anywhere else in that part of the world, you would want weapons of mass destruction, too. I'm not justifying that. I'm saying that is just a fact of reality, and so the fact that he acquires weapons of mass destruction doesn't automatically make him a threat to us. And people have tried to establish a link between him and the terrorists, and there was all kinds of incentives in the world to do that in September and October, completely failed.

CONAN: Bill Kristol, very quickly, if push comes to shove and the president asks the American people to unite behind him for an attack against Iraq, do you anticipate that he would have any difficulties bringing his own party along?

Mr. KRISTOL: No. And I don't think he'll have much difficulty with the Democrats either. I think he'll have strong bipartisan support. And I think it will happen and it will happen for the reason that David sort of alluded to, which is if you let it go for five years, every dictator in the world is going to decide his ticket to safety is to develop weapons of mass destruction. You're then looking at a world which I think is just intolerably dangerous and unsafe, and we can't even retreat and hide behind the oceans at that point.

CONAN: Bill Kristol, editor of The Weekly Standard magazine. He was with us by phone from his office in Washington. Good to talk to you, as usual.

Mr. KRISTOL: Thanks.

CONAN: David Henderson, a pleasure to meet you.

Prof. HENDERSON: Thank you, Neal. Same here.

CONAN: David Henderson, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, a

professor of economics at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, and he spoke to us from his office in Monterey.