

WAR: WHICH WAY TO TURN

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Should we go to war with Iraq? If you're perplexed and confused by the issue, you're not alone. In recent months, I've found my own opinion shifting from one side to the other, a picture of indecisiveness. Only recently have I made up my mind.

The pro-war arguments cluster around four concerns: the diffusion of weapons of mass destruction, Israel's security, oil, and Iraq's human-rights record.

It's indisputable that Saddam Hussein is doing all he can to get chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. International inspectors destroyed key manufacturing facilities in the mid-1990s, but Iraq has continued to press forward with its clandestine efforts. No one should doubt that Saddam Hussein has large quantities of biological and chemical agents squirreled away in secret caches around the country. And he is actively working on delivery systems, including unmanned drones for spreading biological agents in the air.

Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction might also be smuggled out of Iraq into the hands of terrorists. Skeptics dismiss such arguments as scare-mongering. The skeptics are wrong: Although the specific case for a link between Iraq and al-Qaeda is weak, it remains true that many terrorist groups would love to obtain biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons. And Saddam Hussein might eventually decide to use such groups to attack his enemies.

One of his first targets could be Israel, whose security gets surprisingly little attention in discussion about Iraq. Saddam Hussein hates Israel, and it's entirely plausible that his long-term aim is to see it destroyed.

Then there's oil. The West, and especially the United States, should have reduced dependence on Middle Eastern oil long ago through a crash program of conservation and research for new energy technologies. But even if we had done so, this oil would still be vitally important. Once Saddam Hussein has superpowerful weapons and even relatively modest delivery systems, he'll be able to hold the world's main oil-producing region hostage, sending the world economy into a tailspin at his whim.

Last, but certainly not least, is Saddam Hussein's human-rights record. His regime is murderous and despotic, and his record of brutality against his own people defies belief.

But for every reason why war is necessary, there seems to be an equally compelling reason why it's a bad idea. Again, I identify four: the dangers of unilateralism, the risks of battle, the war's aftermath, and its potential repercussions in other countries.

America's unilateralism, accompanied by rhetoric widely perceived as sanctimonious, is alienating many of its friends. Some of these countries -- France and Turkey, perhaps -- may eventually go along, but relations will remain frayed. Over the long run, that's not good for the United States. The world is now too complex and dangerous for the United States to ensure its security by itself. And U.S. unilateralism sets a precedent that weakens the legitimacy of the international rule of law: Other countries will feel empowered to do what they want without listening to the international community.

The war itself will be fraught with dangers. The U.S. battle plan calls for fast, deep penetration, with special-operations forces inserted across Iraq to seize key infrastructure and to disable facilities suspected of making or storing chemical, biological, and nuclear components. More than 3,000 precision-guided weapons will be used in the first few days. The aim is to produce the rapid collapse of Iraqi command and control and an implosion of the defenders' morale.

But this may be wishful thinking. The Iraqis will be fighting for their country, and often in urban areas. What will the United States and its allies do if the Republican Guard takes a stand in Baghdad? Will coalition forces lay siege to the city with its five million inhabitants? And if people start to flood out, will coalition forces be able to take care of them?

Once the United States and its allies win (which they will, although the cost in blood and money might be much greater than Washington estimates), the country could tip into chaos. Iraq is fractured by hatred -- between ethnic and religious groups, and between the current regime's enforcers and its victims. The U.S. has yet to produce a credible plan for the policing, governance, and economic restructuring of post-war Iraq.

But it's the possible reaction to the war outside Iraq that concerns me most. Those who despise America in the developing world will take an attack on Iraq as a cue to mobilize. Some governments may be unable to control the pressures that erupt.

Pakistan is key. President Pervez Musharraf's control over Pakistani society is tenuous at best; anger with the United States is pervasive; and in recent elections, support for Islamic radicals surged. Pakistan has enough enriched uranium for at least 50 atomic bombs. If the Musharraf regime were overthrown, some could fall into the wrong hands. This, I believe, is the most likely route by which terrorists could obtain nuclear weapons.

So we have four strong reasons in favour of a war and four strong reasons against one. On balance, for me, the reasons against war prevail -- for the moment. To build legitimacy for action against Iraq and support the rule of law, we must build as broad an international consensus behind war as possible. Such a consensus will weaken anti-American radicalism in countries like Pakistan, should war come.

While we build this consensus, we can strengthen the inspection teams and continue poking into every nook and cranny in Iraq to find what Saddam Hussein is hiding. As long as the inspections teams are there, he will be kept off balance, and unable to move his weapons programs forward aggressively. And the United States can use the time to better determine what to do in Iraq after a war, again should it be necessary.

The Bush administration deserves credit for forcing this issue, strengthening the UN's spine, and re-establishing the credible presence of inspectors within Iraq. But Washington is in danger of overplaying its hand. Now is the time for patience.

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