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The Right Way to Change a Regime

By JAMES A. BAKER III

PINEDALE, Wyo. — While there may be little evidence that Iraq has ties to Al Qaeda or to the attacks of Sept. 11, there is no question that its present government, under Saddam Hussein, is an outlaw regime, is in violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions, is embarked upon a program of developing weapons of mass destruction and is a threat to peace and stability, both in the Middle East and, because of the risk of proliferation of these weapons, in other parts of the globe. Peace-loving nations have a moral responsibility to fight against the development and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction by rogues like Saddam Hussein. We owe it to our children and grandchildren to do so, and leading that fight is, and must continue to be, an important foreign policy priority for America.

And thus regime change in Iraq is the policy of the current administration, just as it was the policy of its predecessor. That being the case, the issue for policymakers to resolve is not whether to use military force to achieve this, but how to go about it.

Covert action has been tried before and failed every time. Iraqi opposition groups are not strong enough to get the job done. It will not happen through internal revolt, either of the army or the civilian population. We would have to be extremely lucky to take out the top leadership through insertion into Iraq of a small rapid-strike force. And this last approach carries significant political risks for the administration, as President Jimmy Carter found out in April 1980.

The only realistic way to effect regime change in Iraq is through the application of military force, including sufficient ground troops to occupy the country (including Baghdad), depose the current leadership and install a successor government. Anyone who thinks we can effect regime change in Iraq with anything less than this is simply not realistic. It cannot be done on the cheap. It will require substantial forces and substantial time to put those forces in place to move. We had over 500,000 Americans, and more soldiers from our many allies, for the Persian Gulf war. There will be casualties, probably quite a few more than in that war, since the Iraqis will be fighting to defend their homeland. Sadly, there also will be civilian deaths. We will face the problem of how long to occupy and administer a big, fractious country and what type of government or administration should follow. Finding Saddam Hussein and his top associates will be difficult. It took us two weeks to locate Manuel Noriega in Panama, a small country where we had military bases.

Unless we do it in the right way, there will be costs to other American foreign policy interests, including our relationships with practically all other Arab countries (and even many of our customary allies in Europe and elsewhere) and perhaps even to our top foreign policy priority, the war on terrorism.

Finally, there will be the cost to the American taxpayer of a military undertaking of this magnitude. The Persian Gulf war cost somewhere in the range of \$60 billion, but we were able to convince our many allies in that effort to bear the brunt of the costs.

So how should we proceed to effect regime change in Iraq?

Although the United States could certainly succeed, we should try our best not to have to go it alone, and the president should reject the advice of those who counsel doing so. The costs in all areas will be much greater, as will the political risks, both domestic and international, if we end up going it alone or with only one or two other countries.

The president should do his best to stop his advisers and their surrogates from playing out their differences publicly and try to get everybody on the same page.

The United States should advocate the adoption by the United Nations Security Council of a simple and straightforward resolution requiring that Iraq submit to intrusive inspections anytime, anywhere, with no exceptions, and authorizing all necessary means to enforce it. Although it is technically true that the United Nations already has sufficient legal authority to deal with Iraq, the failure to act when Saddam Hussein ejected the inspectors has weakened that authority. Seeking new authorization now is necessary, politically and practically, and will help build international support.

Some will argue, as was done in 1990, that going for United Nations authority and not getting it will weaken our case. I disagree. By proposing to proceed in such a way, we will be doing the right thing, both politically and substantively. We will occupy the moral high ground and put the burden of supporting an outlaw regime and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction on any countries that vote no. History will be an unkind

judge for those who prefer to do business rather than to do the right thing. And even if the administration fails in the Security Council, it is still free — citing Iraq's flouting of the international community's resolutions and perhaps Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which guarantees a nation's right to self-defense — to weigh the costs versus the benefit of going forward alone.

Others will argue that this approach would give Saddam Hussein a way out because he might agree and then begin the "cheat-and-retreat" tactics he used during the first inspection regime. And so we must not be deterred. The first time he resorts to these tactics, we should apply whatever means are necessary to change the regime. And the international community must know during the Security Council debate that this will be our policy.

We should frankly recognize that our problem in accomplishing regime change in Iraq is made more difficult by the way our policy on the Arab-Israeli dispute is perceived around the world. Sadly, in international politics, as in domestic politics, perception is sometimes more important than reality. We cannot allow our policy toward Iraq to be linked to the Arab-Israeli dispute, as Saddam Hussein will cynically demand, just as he did in 1990 and 1991. But to avoid that, we need to move affirmatively, aggressively, and in a fair and balanced way to implement the president's vision for a settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute, as laid out in his June speech. That means, of course, reform by Palestinians and an end to terror tactics. But it also means withdrawal by Israeli forces to positions occupied before September 2000 and an immediate end to settlement activity.

If we are to change the regime in Iraq, we will have to occupy the country militarily. The costs of doing so, politically, economically and in terms of casualties, could be great. They will be lessened if the president brings together an international coalition behind the effort. Doing so would also help in achieving the continuing support of the American people, a necessary prerequisite for any successful foreign policy.

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