
The Coming War with Saddam

Sooner than you think

BY STEPHEN F. HAYES

A curious thing seems to have happened on the way to the war against Saddam Hussein. Despite President Bush's oft-stated commitment to "regime change" in Iraq, media reports have been rife with speculation that military action is unlikely, maybe even off the table.

These reports continued to appear last week even as the second-ranking Pentagon official was dispatched to Turkey—a critical ally in any military offensive against Saddam Hussein—and spoke openly of ousting the Iraqi dictator. They have come despite numerous reports of a military build-up in key Gulf states. They have come amid credible reports that Saddam Hussein's intelligence forces have stepped up their coordination with al Qaeda terrorists, and as Saddam boasts publicly of funding Palestinian suicide bombers. They have come even as military press officers are discussing with some reporters arrangements for coverage of the coming war. Nor did they cease after President Bush plainly outlined his administration's policy of preemption in a speech delivered at West Point.

So, when a reporter asked the president at a July 8 press conference, "Is it your firm intention to get rid of Saddam Hussein?" he was understandably exasperated.

"It's the stated policy of this government to have regime change," Bush declared. "And it hasn't changed."

Three days after that press conference, a front-page story in *USA Today* claimed that Bush's national security team had decided against a preemptive strike on Iraq. "A full-scale invasion of Iraq will require significant provocation by Saddam Hussein's regime—such as invading a neighbor, fielding a nuclear weapon or attacking its minority population, top Bush administration officials have concluded." The article further asserted that the Bush team is thus "raising the bar for an invasion, though by no means has ruled it out."

And three days after that, *Time* magazine's Michael

Duffy went even further. He quoted a "top official from one Middle East ally" as saying, "Iraq is over. The window is closed." So, Duffy concluded, "President George W. Bush's team isn't so much preparing for war with Iraq as it is fighting a war with itself about whether and how to fight."

What's happening here seems clear enough. Administration officials opposed to military intervention in Iraq—a dwindling number—are losing one internal battle after another. So they're taking the fight public in an attempt to change Bush's mind.

But they're fighting a battle whose outcome was decided months ago. "It was over by the State of the Union," says one senior administration official.

In fact, the discussions truly taking place behind the scenes at the highest levels of the administration today are revealing for another reason: War with Iraq may come sooner than we think. Among the most pressing concerns are determining the size and shape of the effort; using Saddam's links with al Qaeda to make the "public case" for war with Iraq; and securing congressional authorization. But, however these issues are resolved, the basic question regarding a war to remove Saddam is not "if," it's "how and when."

The discussions inside the administration over how best to overthrow Saddam Hussein took a decidedly public turn on May 23, when *USA Today* ran a brief article suggesting deep divisions between military and civilian leaders at the Pentagon. The following day, the *Washington Post's* military reporter Tom Ricks fleshed out the debate, positing two distinct approaches. The first, attributed to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called for 250,000 ground troops. The second, said to be favored by the Pentagon's civilian leadership and Gen. Wayne Downing, a top national security adviser, favored massive air attacks to complement U.S. Special Forces on the ground working with the Iraqi opposition. This second approach was known as the "Downing plan."

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In a testament to Ricks's record of solid reporting, his article spawned several copycats and helped define a new conventional wisdom on Iraq, one that persists to this day. But several sources—both in the Pentagon and elsewhere in the national security structure—say that disagreement within the administration has been exaggerated in the media.

"It is not accurate to say that there are deep divisions between the uniformed and civilian leadership," says Gen. Peter Pace, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "It is accurate to say that there is an active, constructive, and cordial dialogue on what is a very serious topic."

Of course, there are serious discussions about how best to depose Saddam Hussein. But according to those involved, the deliberations are remarkable not for their acrimony, but for their single-minded focus—removing Saddam—and their courtesy.

"I don't believe there's any deep dissension," says a top defense official with knowledge of Iraq policy. "I've seen that before, and it can be ugly. There's always going to be a wide range of views in any administration. But I just don't see the fighting at the highest levels [in the current one]."

"I just have trouble understanding who's spinning it that way," says a senior administration official.

One possible explanation, offered by several sources, is a misinterpretation—or perhaps a misrepresentation—of the caution that is customary in planning for any use of force. Uniformed leaders are supposed to prepare for worst-case scenarios, after all. In creating combat outlines, military commanders seek out, present, and prepare for even the most horrific possible outcomes.

"The Joint Chiefs did put a briefing together about possible shortages, but they're paid to be cautious," says one administration official involved in the planning. "That certainly wasn't a no-go, and if it was meant as one, that's not how it was received by the president."

General Tommy Franks, who has briefed Bush on Iraq planning at least three times—most recently last Wednesday—presented two very specific concerns. First, he raised the possibility that Saddam will launch chemical and biological attacks—likely enough, since his weapons of mass destruction are crucial to the *casus belli*. A second concern is the possibility of extended warfare in the streets of Baghdad, involving U.S. troops and the few troops sufficiently loyal to Saddam to fight to the death. Franks, though, has been consistently reassuring on the second point.

The troop numbers—widely reported to range between 200,000 and 250,000—were Franks's first best estimate. And while the debate about the size of the forces needed remains "fluid," no one on either the civilian or military side—including Downing, who left the adminis-

tration last month amid reports that his plan for a smaller operation had been rejected—raised serious objections to those initial numbers. "Even Downing didn't believe in the so-called Downing plan," says one top official. "Pre-September 11, I don't know anyone who said we should send ground troops to Baghdad. Post-September 11, I don't know many who oppose it."

If reporters and mid-level leakers haven't yet figured out that a war with Iraq is just short of inevitable, Turkish prime minister Bulen Ecevit has. After his meeting with Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz last week, Ecevit told a Turkish television network, "The American administration is not hiding that it is determined on a military intervention against Iraq."

And, most important, the likelihood of the coming war hasn't escaped Saddam Hussein. In early March, during one stage of the farcical but nonetheless continuing discussions about resuming U.N. weapons inspections, Iraqi foreign minister Naji Sabri delivered a letter to U.N. secretary general Kofi Annan and the Security Council. "How will the relationship between Iraq and the council be normalized under the present declared U.S. policy which aims at invading Iraq and overthrowing its national government by force?"

That the Iraqi dictator believes an American attack is coming—remember, he insists the Gulf War, "The Mother of All Battles," continues to this day—explains much.

On November 22, 2001, the *Ummat*, a Pakistani newspaper with close ties to the Taliban and al Qaeda, published a shocking report. It claimed that Taha Husseyn, a high-ranking Iraqi diplomat, had traveled to Kandahar for a meeting with Mavlana Jalal ud-Din Haqqani, a Taliban representative. According to the paper, Husseyn was dispatched by Saddam Hussein to offer whatever support he could—arms, money, sanctuary—to Osama bin Laden and Mullah Mohammed Omar.

Although major U.S. news outlets, including the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, had cited the *Ummat*'s reporting after September 11, none of them repeated this development. Of course, it's nearly impossible to assess the credibility of such reports. (The paper today regularly runs front-page pictures of bin Laden, along with his hateful exhortations to harm Jews and Americans.) Still, if the report of a Saddam-al Qaeda alliance were true, successfully prosecuting the war on terrorism would become even more urgent.

Why, skeptics might ask, would Saddam essentially invite the war to Iraq? It's a fair question, but one with an obvious answer: Saddam has long viewed U.S.-led attacks as inevitable.

According to intelligence reports, Saddam began moving military assets inside Iraq within hours of the September 11 attacks. By late November, the time of the *Ummat* report, he had already reshuffled his top leadership, rearranged his defenses, and prepared a line of succession. His rhetoric since September 11—on everything from the U.S. war on terrorism, to weapons inspections, to funding Palestinian suicide bombers, to U.N. sanctions—has been defiant, almost provocative.

So, the thinking goes, he reaches out to Islamic extremists in a blatant effort to unite the Arab world against the West. Implausible? Maybe. But it's a scenario with historical precedent.

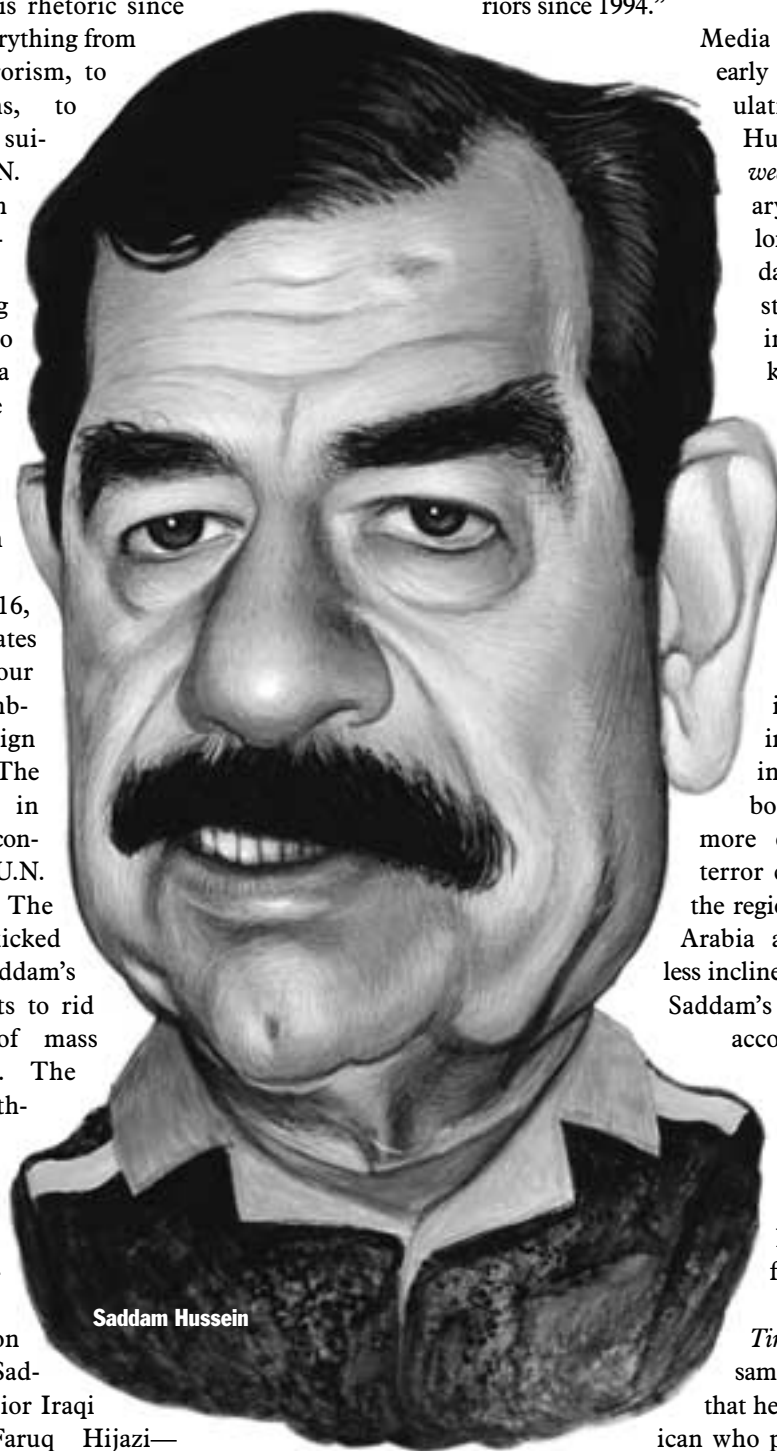
On December 16, 1998, the United States and Britain began four days of sustained bombing in Iraq—a campaign known as Desert Fox. The bombing came in response to Saddam's continued flouting of U.N. weapons inspections. The inspectors had been kicked out after years of Saddam's thwarting their efforts to rid Iraq of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The inspectors had left without accounting for significant pockets of Saddam's WMD arsenal, particularly his bio-weapons program.

Five days later, on December 21, 1998, Saddam dispatched a senior Iraqi diplomat named Faruq Hijazi—remember that name—to Afghanistan to offer asylum to Osama bin Laden. Although there had been reports of previous meetings between representatives of

bin Laden and Hussein, this one carried special import. Hijazi is the former head of Saddam's intelligence operation and, according to Rome's daily *Corriere della Sera* (which broke the story), "the person who has been responsible for nurturing Iraq's ties with the fundamentalist warriors since 1994."

Media reports in late 1998 and early 1999 brimmed with speculation about a bin Laden-Hussein partnership. *Newsweek* magazine, in its January 11, 1999, issue, ran a long article headlined "Saddam + Bin Laden?" The story quoted an "Arab intelligence source" with knowledge of Saddam's plan. "According to this source, Saddam expected last month's American and British bombing campaign to go on much longer than it did. The dictator believed that as the attacks continued, indignation would grow in the Muslim world, making his terrorism offensive both harder to trace and more effective. With acts of terror contributing to chaos in the region, Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait might feel less inclined to support Washington. Saddam's long-term strategy, according to several sources, is to bully or cajole Muslim countries into breaking the embargo against Iraq, without waiting for the United Nations to lift it formally."

In an interview with *Time* magazine around the same time, bin Laden warned that he "would target any American who pays taxes to his government." Asked about Iraq, he was blunt: "There is no doubt that the treacherous attack has confirmed that Britain and America are acting on behalf of Israel and the



Saddam Hussein

Jews, paving the way for the Jews to divide the Muslim world once again, enslave it and loot the rest of its wealth. A great part of the force that carried out the attack came from certain Gulf countries that have lost their sovereignty.”

This recent history acquired new relevance when, shortly after the September 11 attacks, Czech intelligence reported a meeting in Prague between a senior Iraqi diplomat named Ahmed Khalil Ibrahim Samir al-Ani and lead hijacker Mohamed Atta. Although U.S. intelligence sources are divided on the reliability of this intelligence, the Czech government stands by it. “The meeting took place,” Hynek Kmonicek, Czech ambassador to the U.N., told the *Prague Post*. At the time of the meeting, in April 2001, Kmonicek was a deputy foreign minister. When he asked the Iraqi chief-of-mission what exactly al-Ani did for the Iraqi government, the top diplomat had no answer. “He didn’t know [what al-Ani was up to],” Kmonicek said. “He just didn’t know.”

Other European newspaper reports—in Germany’s *Bild* and Britain’s *Observer*—claimed that Atta also met in Prague with Faruq Hijazi, the same man who had allegedly offered asylum to bin Laden in 1998. Shortly after the Prague meetings were disclosed, Saddam summoned Hijazi, then his ambassador in Turkey, back to Iraq, though the Iraqi government claimed the recall had nothing to do with reports of his involvement with al Qaeda.

This series of reported contacts between bin Laden and Saddam gained credibility this spring with the publication of an article in the *New Yorker*. Reporter Jeffrey Goldberg visited Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq to document Saddam’s gassing of villages there in the late-1980s. What Goldberg found was stunning: numerous firsthand accounts of active coordination between Saddam’s top intelligence service, the Mukhabarat, and al Qaeda. Although Goldberg peppers his article with disclaimers—“I was wary; the Kurds have an obvious interest in lining up on the American side in the war against terror”—he nevertheless builds an arresting case.

Sometime after September 1, 2001, a new al Qaeda group called Ansar al-Islam began operating in northern Iraq. Writes Goldberg, “The allegations include charges that Ansar al-Islam has received funds directly from al Qaeda; that the intelligence service of Saddam Hussein has joint control, with al Qaeda operatives, over Ansar al-Islam; that Saddam Hussein hosted a senior leader of al Qaeda [bin Laden’s number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri] in

Baghdad in 1992; that a number of al Qaeda members fleeing Afghanistan have been secretly brought into territory [in Iraq] controlled by Ansar al-Islam; and that Iraqi intelligence agents smuggled conventional weapons, and possibly even chemical and biological weapons, into Afghanistan.”

In a Kurdish prison, Goldberg interviewed an Iraqi intelligence officer named Qassem Hussein Muhammad, who had been captured by the Kurds. Muhammad said that he was sent to northern Iraq by Saddam’s Mukhabarat to find Abu Wa’el, a top official in both the Mukhabarat and Ansar al-Islam. “[Abu Wa’el] is an employee of the Mukhabarat,” Muhammad told Goldberg. “He’s the actual decision-maker in [Ansar al-Islam], but he’s an employee of the Mukhabarat.”

Goldberg interviewed another man, an Iranian Arab named Muhammad Mansour Shahab, who claimed to have smuggled weapons from Iraq to al Qaeda’s base in Afghanistan. Shahab detailed his work running weapons—which Goldberg suggests may have included chemical and biological weapons—to Afghanistan. Then, Goldberg asked how long al Qaeda and Saddam had worked together. He was told, “There’s been a relationship between the Mukhabarat and the people of al Qaeda since 1992.”

Investigators working on a frightening PBS documentary called *Saddam’s Ultimate Solution*, which aired two weeks ago, expanded on and corroborated much of Goldberg’s reporting.

Administration officials are understandably wary of commenting on reports that suggest cooperation between bin Laden and al Qaeda. But while they would not speak on the record about links between Saddam and al Qaeda, they take such coordination seriously enough to have assigned a team of intelligence investigators at the Pentagon to explore it. That effort involves an exhaustive review of past intelligence reports for missed clues to a Saddam-al Qaeda connection. According to sources familiar with the project, the findings thus far are “solid,” and the ties are significantly deeper than these public reports show. Still, there is no “smoking gun”—something tying Saddam directly to September 11. Other published reports suggest a similar effort is underway at the CIA.

Sources say the links with al Qaeda will not likely be a central part of the coming “public case” against Saddam. They don’t have to be. Most polls taken since September 11 show that nearly 7 in 10 Americans favor military action in Iraq. A Gallup poll taken in late June found 61

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percent of those surveyed favor sending U.S. ground troops to do the job, while 83 percent said removing Hussein is “very important” or “somewhat important.” As for our soldiers, they appear eager to confront the Iraqi dictator. When Bush addressed 10,000 Army troops from the 10th Mountain division on Friday, one soldier interrupted with an enthusiastic “Let’s get Saddam!” The building erupted in a loud chorus of cheers.

The president and his top national security advisers believe that Saddam’s development of weapons of mass destruction alone is enough to justify the coming war. Sources point to President Bush’s speech at the German Bundestag on May 23 as evidence. Bush never mentioned Iraq directly, but aides say his meaning was clear.

“The evil that has formed against us,” said the president, “has been termed the new totalitarian threat. The authors of terror are seeking nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. Regimes that sponsor terror are developing these weapons and the missiles to deliver them. If these regimes and their terrorist allies were to perfect these capabilities, no inner voice of reason, no hint of conscience would prevent their use.”

When I first started asking questions about congressional authorization for the use of force in Iraq, I focused almost exclusively on when that request would come from the administration. Would the White House go to Congress before the midterm elections? Would Senate Democrats vote to authorize force in Iraq knowing that doing so would boost President Bush and Republicans politically? Could they afford to vote against it? Given the president’s rhetoric about the serious potential threat from Saddam and his terrorist allies, can the administration wait until after the new Congress is sworn in, in early January, as the first President Bush did when he sought authorization for the Gulf War?

My questions were frequently answered with a question: Who says we need congressional authorization?

Although no decision has been made about whether to seek congressional authorization—a point emphasized repeatedly in my discussions with administration officials—a robust debate on that sensitive subject is underway.

The argument against seeking authorization is relatively simple: We don’t have to and it’s strategically unsound. On the first point, even some Capitol Hill Democrats privately concede that Saddam, in rebuilding his WMD program and locking out inspectors, has rather obviously flouted the terms of the cease-fire he agreed to at the end of the Gulf War. The law authorizing force in the Gulf War—Public Law 102-1—is still in effect.

But the second point is a bit flimsier. By seeking authorization, the argument goes, the administration would telegraph its intentions to Saddam and eliminate the element of surprise. But such thinking ignores the fact that Saddam has long anticipated an attack. President Bush has spoken of regime change *ad nauseam*, and the *Washington Post* has carried several front-page stories on the president’s authorization of covert attempts to kill Saddam.

Missing from that calculus, of course, is a third reason for forgoing a vote: that Congress might actually reject the use of force. Virtually no one—in the administration or in Congress—suggests such an outcome is conceivable. Indeed, several key Democrats, including Senate majority leader Tom Daschle, House minority leader Dick Gephardt, Senate Foreign Relations chairman Joe Biden, and Senator Joe Lieberman, have already voiced support for military intervention in Iraq.

Those who favor seeking congressional authorization make their case in political terms. They say it’s crucial that the Congress—and by extension the American public—be invested in the decision to remove Saddam.

Regardless of how the authorization debate unfolds, Senate Democrats are moving to give the issue a public hearing. Biden already has plans for two sets of hearings on Iraq. The first, scheduled for July 31 and August 1, will include a wide range of experts speaking primarily to three matters: identifying the threat, examining possible responses, and discussing a post-Saddam Iraq. “The senator believes it’s time to start a wider national dialogue on a potentially critical decision to go to war,” says Norm Kurz, Biden’s communications director. “We need to educate the American public on the risks of both action and inaction on Iraq.” The administration has indicated it will not participate in these initial hearings, but will likely send representatives to the second set of hearings, tentatively scheduled for some time after Congress returns from its August recess.

On March 11, the six-month anniversary of the September 11 attacks, President Bush spoke at a White House ceremony honoring the victims. He used the occasion to announce: “We have entered the second stage of the war on terror—a sustained campaign to deny sanctuary to terrorists who would threaten our citizens from anywhere in the world.”

Later in the same speech, the president previewed what might be the third stage of the war on terror: “Every nation in our coalition must take seriously the growing threat of terror on a catastrophic scale—terror armed with biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons. America is now consulting with friends and allies about this greatest of dangers, and we’re determined to confront it.”

What will he say on September 11? ◆