

FOREIGN AFFAIRS



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Letters to the Editor

To the Editor:

It is wrong to dismiss criticism of America's current Iraq policy as partisan, just as it would have been wrong to dismiss opposition to the Gulf War as mere politics ("The Rollback Fantasy," January/February 1999). Many Democrats in Congress supported President Bush's decision to go to war. Daniel Byman, Kenneth Pollack, and Gideon Rose do not advance serious discussion of Iraq policy by portraying those of us who advocate more forceful U.S. action as "cynically playing politics." While they take pains to point out the Republican affiliations of many former officials who have signed letters to the president on Iraq, the authors neglect to mention that the coauthor of one of those letters (and of this one) is a Democratic former congressman. They also do not mention that Democratic Senators Robert Kerrey (Neb.), John Kerry (Mass.), and Joseph Lieberman (Conn.) have prominently taken the same position. Finally, they ignore the fact that the Iraq Liberation Act passed by overwhelming bipartisan majorities in both houses of Congress.

It should be made clear that our views do not correspond with those of the unnamed "many advocates" who, according to the authors, contend that Saddam

Hussein could be replaced "at relatively low cost—even . . . without committing American ground troops." Overthrowing Saddam would be a formidable undertaking, not one without problems and perils. But the risks of the gradual collapse of current U.S. policy are worse. The United States should be prepared to commit ground forces to protect a sanctuary in southern Iraq where the opposition could safely mobilize.

The authors critique three "strategies" for overthrowing Saddam, none of which resembles what we would consider a serious approach—although such an approach would incorporate elements of each. A serious strategy would be based on the notion that if the United States demonstrated a readiness to more strongly support the forces of rebellion—with military action if necessary—those forces would prove much stronger and the Iraqi regime much weaker than they are today. Saddam has lost substantial control of northern Iraq because of very modest American efforts; a much stronger push in the south could produce significant results.

An effort to overthrow Saddam would not begin, as the authors suggest, by attempting to seize and hold a vast area of southern Iraq with 10,000–20,000 lightly armed opposition troops, in the face of Saddam's forces and without U.S.

military intervention. Rather, it would start with limited objectives and the much more direct commitment of U.S. force and would develop depending on how resistance spread and whether Saddam's troops stayed loyal. These factors cannot be known in advance. The possibility of serious internal opposition cannot be dismissed with the categorical assurance of Byman, Pollack, and Rose.

One should not underestimate one's opponents or overestimate one's friends. The authors do the opposite. They overstate the analogy with Cuba, where U.S. planners were surprised by the absence of popular opposition to Fidel Castro. The more relevant experience is that of Iraq itself, where U.S. policymakers were surprised by the extent of the popular post-Gulf War uprisings against Saddam and where dissatisfaction with his regime is still widespread.

The authors exaggerate Saddam's strength. They base their calculations of the airpower needed to free Iraq on the assumption that Iraqi divisions would march blindly, one after another, into the bombs of the U.S. Air Force. Theoretically this might happen, but during Operation Provide Comfort the Iraqi army surrendered the northern third of the country to a small U.S. ground force and lightly armed Kurdish guerrillas because they had lost the stomach to fight.

Assuming the worst case—about opposition strength or regime weakness—can produce better plans for dealing with those outcomes. But it can also paralyze, as it did in Bosnia. Mistakenly believing that the Serbs were too strong and the opposition too weak for U.S. intervention to make a difference led to three long years of inaction and thousands of unnecessary deaths. Besides, to be consistent, the authors should apply a worst-case analysis to their preferred policy of containment. If that collapses—or when it collapses—the United States will face a Saddam who has new nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons and a renewed capacity to conduct conventional warfare and terrorism, and who is bent on avenging his 1991 defeat. That would risk many more lives than trying to overthrow Saddam by force.

Neither side of this debate has a monopoly on responsible judgment; neither course of action is free from significant dangers. On balance, however, containment entails much greater long-term risks than using force to help the Iraqi people rid themselves and us of this tyrannical menace.

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