
Why Iraq Was Inevitable

Arthur Herman

ACCORDING TO an April 2008 poll in *U.S. News & World Report*, fully 61 percent of American historians agree that George W. Bush is the worst President in our history. Some of these scholars cite the President's position on the environment, or on taxes, or on the economy. For most, though, the chief qualification for obloquy lies in Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq.

In this, of course, the historians are hardly alone: five years after the launching of Operation Iraqi Freedom, both the mainstream media and America's political elites treat the Iraq war as a disaster virtually without precedent in our national experience. But while politicians and journalists are not necessarily expected to be adepts of the long view, for professional historians the long view is a defining necessity. As the English historian F.W. Maitland wrote more than a century ago, "It is very hard to remember that events that are long in the past were once in the future." Hard it may be, but the job of historians is not only to remember it but to judge events accordingly.

In this light—that is, in light of what was actually known at the time about Saddam Hussein's actions and intentions, and in light of what was added

to our knowledge through his post-capture interrogations by the FBI—the decision to go to war takes on a very different character. The story that emerges is of a choice not only carefully weighed and deliberately arrived at but, in the circumstances, the one moral choice that any American President *could* make.

Had, moreover, Bush failed to act when he did, the consequences could have been truly disastrous. The next American President would surely have faced the need, in decidedly less favorable circumstances, to pick up the challenge Bush had neglected. And since Bush's unwillingness to do the necessary thing might rightly have cost him his second term, that next President would probably have been one of the many Democrats who, until March 2003, actually saw the same threat George Bush did.

IT IS TOO often forgotten, not least by historians, that George W. Bush did not invent the idea of deposing the Iraqi tyrant. For years before he came on the scene, removing Saddam Hussein had been a priority embraced by the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton and by Clinton's most vocal supporters in the Senate:

Saddam Hussein must not be allowed to threaten his neighbors or the world with nuclear arms, poison gas, or biological weapons. . . . Other countries possess weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles. With Saddam, there is one big difference: he has used them.

ARTHUR HERMAN, *who has taught history at George Mason University and Georgetown University, is the author most recently of Gandhi and Churchill: The Epic Rivalry that Destroyed an Empire and Forged Our Age (Bantam Books). His essay, "Who Owns the Vietnam War?," appeared in the December 2007 COMMENTARY.*

Not once, but repeatedly. . . . I have no doubt today that, left unchecked, Saddam Hussein will use these terrible weapons again.

These were the words of President Clinton on the night of December 16, 1998 as he announced a four-day bombing campaign over Iraq. Only six weeks earlier, Clinton had signed the Iraq Liberation Act authorizing Saddam's overthrow—an initiative supported unanimously in the Senate and by a margin of 360 to 38 in the House. "Iraqis deserve and desire freedom," Clinton had declared. On the evening the bombs began to drop, Vice President Al Gore told CNN's Larry King:

You allow someone like Saddam Hussein to get nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, chemical weapons, biological weapons. How many people is he going to kill with such weapons? . . . *We are not going to allow him to succeed.* [emphasis added]

What these and other such statements remind us is that, by the time George Bush entered the White House in January 2001, the United States was *already* at war with Iraq, and in fact had been at war for a decade, ever since the first Gulf war in the early 1990's. (This was literally the case, the end of hostilities in 1991 being merely a cease-fire and not a formal surrender followed by a peace treaty.) Not only that, but the diplomatic and military framework Bush inherited for neutralizing the Middle East's most fearsome dictator had been approved by the United Nations. It consisted of (a) regular UN inspections to track and dispose of weapons of mass destruction (WMD's) remaining in Saddam's arsenal since the first Gulf war; (b) UN-monitored sanctions to prevent Saddam from acquiring the means to make more WMD's; and (c) the creation of so-called "no-fly zones" over large sections of southern and northern Iraq to deter Saddam from sending the remnants of his air force against resisting Kurds and Shiite Muslims.

The problem, as Bill Clinton discovered at the start of his second term, was that this "containment regime" was collapsing. By this point Saddam was not just the brutal dictator who had killed as many as two million of his own people and used chemical weapons in battle against Iran (and in 1988 against Iraqis themselves). Nor was he just the regional aggressor who had to be driven out of Kuwait in 1991 by an international coalition of armed forces in Operation Desert Storm. As Clinton recognized, Saddam's WMD programs, in combination with his ties to international terrorists, posed a direct challenge to the United States.

In a February 17, 1998 speech at the Pentagon, Clinton focused on what in his State of the Union address a few weeks earlier he had called an "unholy axis" of rogue states and predatory powers threatening the world's security. "There is no more clear example of this threat," he asserted, "than Saddam Hussein's Iraq," and he added that the danger would grow many times worse if Saddam were able to realize his thoroughly documented ambition, going back decades and at one point close to accomplishment, of acquiring an arsenal of nuclear as well as chemical and biological weapons. The United States, Clinton said, "simply cannot allow this to happen."

BUT HOW to prevent it? An opportunity arose later the same year. In October 1998, Saddam threw out ten Americans who were part of a UN inspection team, and on the last day of the month announced that he would cease all cooperation with UNSCOM, the UN inspection body. On December 15, UNSCOM's director, Richard Butler, reported that Iraq was engaged in systematic obstruction and deception of the internationally mandated inspection regime. Although the UN hesitated to invoke the technical term "material breach," which would almost certainly have triggered a demand for a response with force by the world body, Clinton himself was determined to act. He had already received a letter from a formidable list of U.S. Senators, including fellow Democrats Carl Levin, Tom Daschle, and John Kerry, urging him to "respond effectively"—with air strikes if necessary—to the "threat posed by Iraq's refusal to end its WMD programs." After consulting with Great Britain and other allies, Clinton ordered Butler to pull out the remaining inspectors. On December 16, he launched Operation Desert Fox.

For four days, American and British planes and cruise missiles bombarded Iraqi sites in an effort to degrade Saddam's programs. The key objective was to knock out communication-and-control networks—and in this, a Clinton official would assert, Desert Fox "exceeded expectations." But the attacks did virtually nothing to destroy facilities suspected of housing weapons, most of which were in unknown locations. The only way to find out where they might be was by reintroducing UN inspectors, something Saddam now adamantly refused to permit.

Thus, in the end, Desert Fox proved a failure, not because of insufficient American firepower but because of Saddam's defiance—and because of a lack of forceful follow-up. True, passage of the Iraq

Liberation Act meant that the United States now had a regime-change resolution on the books and was providing a certain amount of money and aid for covert internal action against Saddam. True, too, Vice President Al Gore was a particularly strong supporter of these initiatives. But in the wake of Desert Fox, Saddam had conducted his own violent crackdown on potential opposition figures, which meant there was no hope for Iraqis to retake their country without massive outside help.

As 1999 dawned, the choices narrowed. Inspections had failed. So had air strikes and covert action. So had international trade sanctions, which imposed a new level of misery on the Iraqi people without putting any pressure on Saddam himself. The UN's Oil-for-Food Program, created in 1996 in order to allow Iraq to sell some of its oil in exchange for food and other necessary supplies, appeared to be still another failure: Iraqis continued to starve, while Saddam seemed to grow only richer.

AND SO, "starting in early 1999," as Kenneth Pollack, an official in Clinton's National Security Council, would later recount, "the Clinton administration began to develop options to overthrow Saddam's regime."

A plan for an actual land invasion of Iraq had been drawn up a few years earlier under the stewardship of Colin Powell, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was updated after Desert Fox. Although (Pollack writes) "no one thought the U.S. public would support such an invasion," this was now beginning to seem the only option.

Concurring with this judgment was Scott Ritter, an American who had served on the UN's weapons-inspection team and had become notorious for his aggressive approach to his job. In testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in late 1998, Ritter castigated the Clinton White House for failing to confront Saddam with the threat of invasion. This hardly endeared him to the President, but it did win him two warm allies in the Senate. One was the Republican John McCain. The other was the Democrat John Kerry, who outspokenly declared that since Saddam clearly intended "to build WMD's no matter what the cost," America "must be prepared to use force to achieve its goals."

But nothing would happen in 1999. At the end of the year, the UN passed Resolution 1284—an effort to get Saddam to accept a new inspection regime, called UNMOVIC, in exchange for lifting sanctions on all goods for civilian use. Yet, weak as the resolution was, it led to a split in the Security Council, with four members—including France, Russia, and

China—abstaining from the vote. That split would become permanent. By 2000, life at the Security Council would turn into a constant battle of wills, with the U.S. and Great Britain in one corner and Russia, France, Germany, and China in another. Although George W. Bush would later come to be blamed for wrecking the coalition that had fought the first Gulf war, the reality is otherwise: the wreck occurred three years before he became President.

All the same, as the military historian John Keegan has pointed out, Resolution 1284 did signal the beginning of the end of Saddam Hussein. By refusing to re-admit inspectors, even under a relaxed sanctions regime, Saddam made it unmistakably clear that only a credible threat of military force would make him budge, and only the exercise of military force would ever get him out.

Unfortunately, by this time Clinton had lost whatever limited appetite for armed confrontation he might earlier have entertained. According to Pollack, the lengthy campaign to dislodge Slobodan Milosevic in Kosovo had given the White House a taste of might go wrong in open-ended military operations, and Clinton's advisers "were not looking to back into a war with Saddam the way they had backed into one with Milosevic." Besides, the proposed invasion plan called for 400,000-500,000 troops and six months of laborious preparation, which would stretch to the breaking point an American military that, thanks to Clinton-era cuts, was now little more than half the size of the one that had fought Desert Storm.

In his final year in office, Clinton decided that his contribution to Middle East peace would lie not in the removal of Saddam Hussein but in a grand attempt to resolve the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel. With this, he missed his last chance to deal forcefully with the man he was publicly committed to overthrowing. Worse, by focusing his energies on a futile effort to placate Yasir Arafat, he diverted American attention not only from Saddam but from the mounting challenge represented by Osama bin Laden—not to mention the possibility that these two sinister figures might some day find common ground. As Clinton's administration ended and George W. Bush's began, Iraqi defectors were claiming that Saddam had set up camps in which terrorists connected with bin Laden were training to attack the United States.

CONFRONTING THE same threat faced by the Clinton administration, and the same policy predicament, the incoming Bush team arrived at the same conclusion—namely, to do nothing.

Bush's advisers, like Clinton's, were split. In the Defense Department, some, like Paul Wolfowitz, seemed (according to Pollack) "obsessed" with getting rid of Saddam—though in point of historical fact Wolfowitz's position was not strikingly dissimilar to Al Gore's. For others, like Secretary of State Colin Powell, Iraq "simply did not measure up" to China or Russia or Europe on the scale of international importance.

Most, like Vice President Cheney, were in the middle. They saw plainly enough that containment was not working, and they also saw the long-term benefits of regime change. But they recognized as well that (to quote Pollack again) "toppling Saddam was going to be difficult, potentially costly, and risky." The net result was that by the summer of 2001, despite the almost complete collapse of the sanctions regime, "it had become clear that the administration was not going to pursue a radically new approach to Iraq."

Then came September 11. A hitherto obscure terrorist threat emanating from the Arab-Muslim world had reached out to commit mass murder against Americans on their own soil, and in so doing had changed everyone's priorities. Hillary Clinton, the new junior Senator from New York, put it this way in an interview with Dan Rather two days after 9/11, using starkly confrontational language of the sort for which President Bush would soon be pilloried: "Every nation has to be either for us, or against us. Those who harbor terrorists, or who finance them, are going to pay a price."

As for the administration, it had come to understand something else—namely, that its responsibility extended beyond the clear and present danger presented by nations, like Afghanistan, guilty of harboring terrorists. It had to prepare for future threats as well. In that regard, Iraq moved quickly to the head of the list.

As Douglas Feith explains in *War and Decision*, the recently published memoir of his days as Under Secretary for Policy in Donald Rumsfeld's Defense Department, there were several reasons why a post-9/11 strategy had to focus on Saddam Hussein. First among them was Saddam's ties to terrorist groups, of which the Clinton administration had been well aware and had repeatedly cited. Although no evidence existed that Saddam had been involved in al Qaeda's attack on New York and Washington—and no Bush official ever asserted otherwise—the White House learned after the liberation of Afghanistan that Abu Musab Zarqawi, one of al Qaeda's key operatives, had found safe haven in Iraq. There was also some evidence (cited

by General Tommy Franks in his own memoir, *American Soldier*), that Zarqawi "had been joined there by other al-Qaeda leaders."

In March 2002, a *New Yorker* article described the presence in Afghanistan of a radical Islamic group, Ansar al-Islam, whose members were being trained in al-Qaeda camps but being paid through Saddam Hussein's intelligence service—suggesting a connection "far closer than previously thought." From other intelligence sources it appeared that Zarqawi was in fact heading Ansar al-Islam, and that its members were training for WMD use against Western countries. Finally, in September 2002, the CIA released a report, *Iraqi Support for Terrorism*, asserting that "Iraq continues to be a safe haven, transit point, or operational node for groups and individuals who direct violence against the United States."*

We now know, thanks to captured Iraqi documents, that American intelligence seriously underestimated the extent of Saddam's ties with terrorist groups of all sorts. Throughout the 1990's, it emerged, the Iraqi intelligence service had worked with Hamas, the Palestine Liberation Front, and Yasir Arafat's private army (Force 17), and had given training to members of Islamic Jihad, the terrorist group that assassinated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat. Saddam also collaborated with jihadists fighting the American presence in Somalia, including some who were members of al Qaeda. It may be that al Qaeda had no formal presence in Iraq itself, but the captured documents show that it did not need such a presence. Saddam was willing to work with any terrorists who targeted the United States and its allies, and he reached out to al-Qaeda-affiliated groups (and vice-versa) whenever the occasion warranted.

SECOND, AS Feith relates, Saddam had the WMD know-how, as well as probable stockpiles, that terrorist groups like al Qaeda might want for future operations. Just weeks before 9/11, a privately sponsored exercise had simulated a smallpox attack on the United States. The results were chilling: more than three million people infected within two months, and one million dead. "Today," declared the official report, "we are ill-equipped to prevent the dire consequences of a biological-weapon at-

* This document would become central to later claims that the administration "manipulated intelligence" for political purposes. But neither the bipartisan Silberman-Robb Commission nor the Senate Intelligence Committee found a single case of such manipulation or, for that matter, of political pressure being put on intelligence analysts. What the analysts reported was sometimes wrong, but not because policymakers made it so.

tack”—a conclusion that would cast a shadow of apprehension over the post-9/11 Defense Department, as dark as the shadow cast by the anthrax scare that gripped the country after five people received fatal doses in the mail and by the discovery during the invasion of Afghanistan that the Taliban had been experimenting with chemical weapons.

Where would terrorists look to acquire such inefficient but murderous weapons? As far as anyone knew, the place to start would be Saddam's Iraq. UNSCOM had uncovered Saddam's extensive biological-weapons (BW) program, dating back to before Desert Storm, only in 1995. Since then, Iraq claimed to have destroyed its BW stockpile—but there was no proof of this. Similar doubts surrounded Saddam's chemical-weapons (CW) program, of which even bigger stockpiles remained unaccounted for. (In UNSCOM's estimate, there were 1.5 undocumented tons of VX gas alone.) In addition, UNSCOM believed Saddam still possessed clandestine Scud missiles, useful as a delivery system for a chemical attack.

Third was Saddam's declared antipathy toward the United States. In 1993 he had hatched a plot to assassinate his then-nemesis, former President Bush, during a visit by the latter to Kuwait. A "general suspicion" among Clinton-administration officials, in Pollack's words, was that Saddam was also "working on a variety of terrorist contingencies" in the event that the United States ever tried to topple his regime. He was the only world leader who actually applauded the attacks of 9/11.

Finally and most ominously, Saddam was emerging, like a great malignant moth, from the containment regime in place since the end of the first Gulf war. By the end of the 1990's, sanctions had become a joke, proving less a liability to Saddam than an asset in rebuilding his power. In October 2000 a supposedly "contained" Iraq had boldly renewed its military cooperation with Syria, moving divisions to the Syrian border and even deploying troops into Syria itself to put pressure on Israel. Since then, Saddam's attacks on American and British air patrols over Iraq had grown more intense. When General Tommy Franks met with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld after the liberation of Afghanistan, these attacks headed his daily list of challenges. "It would only be a matter of time," Feith writes, "before Iraq was once again engaged in a violent clash with the United States."

With the fall of Afghanistan, moreover, Bush's military planners had become more rather than less nervous about the Iraqi threat. Osama bin Laden's escape from his Tora Bora hideout raised the possi-

bility that he might find safe haven in Baghdad. (Saddam had offered the terrorist leader sanctuary at least once before, after his 1997 expulsion from Sudan.) And as for weapons of mass destruction, on this issue the CIA and its director, George Tenet, still had no doubts, and Tenet's dogmatic certainty on the point was backed up by the UN inspectors themselves.

Since 1998, no inspector had visited Iraq. Huge quantities of chemical WMD's were known to have existed before Desert Storm. Quantities had been destroyed since. How much more was left? Saddam had never made the accounting demanded by the UN. In its absence, the UN's chief weapons inspector, Hans Blix, reasonably inferred that considerable quantities must still have existed.

TODAY WE know that this conviction—which had underlain Clinton's air strikes in 1998 and the UN's desperate efforts to reinsert its inspectors into Iraq, and which was shared by virtually every foreign intelligence service, from the French and Germans to the British and Japanese—was the weakest link in the case for going to war with Iraq. But who was responsible for the misimpression? Some have blamed it on the assurances of former Iraqi exiles, especially Ahmed Chalabi of the Iranian National Congress; their motive was presumably to convince the Bush administration to depose the dictator and put them in charge. A more likely culprit seems to have been another Iraqi exile, Rafid Ahmed Alwan, code-named "Curveball," who arrived in Germany in 1999 telling horrific tales of Saddam's BW arsenal.

Exiles and/or charlatans may indeed have played a part in misleading the CIA and other Western intelligence services. But by far the most important deceiver was Saddam himself. For more than a decade, he had consistently acted like a guilty man, evading inspections and moving trucks from palace to palace in the dead of night. Even his own army officers, Feith writes, believed he was hiding biological and chemical weapons. And as became clear from his post-capture interrogations, this was precisely the impression he intended to convey, assuming that it would be enough in itself to deter not only an American invasion but an insurrection by Iraqi Kurds or Shiites, or even—his most consistent worry—an attack by Iran.

It never seems to have occurred to Saddam that an American President would take him seriously enough to decide that his supposed WMD stockpiles and programs had to be destroyed by any means necessary. But there was nothing unreason-

able about the President's inference—which was the inference of most American politicians as well. No one knew for sure, just as no one knew what links Saddam might have with al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. If WMD's existed once, they might well still exist; nothing, and certainly not Saddam's behavior, suggested otherwise.

Nor was there any way to know, at least until troops were on the ground. Thus, dealing forthrightly with the issue entailed, first, threatening Iraq with a full-scale land invasion and then, if Saddam refused to back down, launching an actual attack.

Convincing Congress that the United States enjoyed a right of "anticipatory self-defense" against Saddam was hardly a difficult task. On the contrary, in September 2002 the Senate virtually arm-twisted Bush into giving it time to pass a new and more specific resolution than the Clinton-era one authorizing regime change in Iraq. In ringing the tocsin, moreover, leading Democrats spoke at least as assertively as leading Republicans. One of them was Charles Schumer:

Hussein's vigorous pursuit of biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons, and his present and potential future support for terrorist acts and organizations . . . make him a terrible danger to the people of the United States.

Another was Hillary Clinton:

My position is very clear. The time has come for decisive action to eliminate the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's WMD's.

John Edwards was still another:

Every day [Saddam] gets closer to his long-term goal of nuclear capability.

Howard Dean, then the governor of Vermont, was of a similar mind:

There's no question that Saddam Hussein is a threat to the U.S. and our allies.

More than half of Senate Democrats, including John Kerry and Joseph Biden, joined with Republicans in authorizing the President "to defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq," and in so doing to enforce all the relevant but ineffectual resolutions passed by the UN Security Council. In the House, 81 Democrats (out of 209 in total) concurred. Later, many would claim that they had been tricked or misled or even lied to. In fact, the vote reflected nothing more than an affirmation of

the old Clinton-era position, now urgently reinforced by the experience of 9/11.*

It was, after all, California's Nancy Pelosi who had warned the nation on December 16, 1998, during Operation Desert Fox, that Saddam's "development of WMD technology . . . is a threat to countries in the region." During the House debate in October 2002, Pelosi sounded the same urgent theme, summing up a threat whose imminence the Democrats had been insisting upon for years. "Yes," reiterated the tireless Pelosi, "[Saddam] has chemical weapons. He has biological weapons. He is trying to get nuclear weapons."

That said it all.

AS THE leaves turned in Washington in the fall of 2002, mainstream Democrats were on board with Bush, just as they had been on board with Clinton. The real reluctance for war came from Republican ranks—and from within the administration itself. The most serious dissenter was Secretary of State Colin Powell, together with his assistant Richard Armitage. Both men wanted to find a way to prop up the containment "box" around Saddam without having to resort to drastic military action.

Their hopes, however, were already more than three years out of date. The main feature of the containment regime had become the Oil-for-Food program, set up by the United Nations in 1996 with Clinton-administration approval. Within months, the program had become a spigot of cash for Saddam and his family and cronies. The full extent of the corruption, and the full roster of who paid in and who was paid out, may not be known for decades, if ever. But the overall picture is reasonably clear, thanks again in large part to documents seized in the 2003 invasion.

Saddam had shrewdly realized that vouchers for the sale of his oil might serve as a kind of international currency, distributed by him to favored customers who would be obliged to pay him kickbacks, all out of reach of the scrutiny of the UN. Eventually, UN administrators were brought into the conspiracy as well.[†] Within a year the program had miraculously restored Saddam's personal wealth and power, even as the Iraqi people continued to suffer. By the time of the U.S. invasion, he

* For a full refutation of the charge that we were "misled" into war, see Norman Podhoretz, "Who Is Lying About Iraq?," in the December 2005 COMMENTARY.

[†] See Claudia Rosett, "The Oil-for-Food Scam: What Did Kofi Annan Know, and When Did He Know It?," COMMENTARY, May 2004.

had skimmed at least \$21 billion from the program, in addition to the billions made through smuggled oil sales to other Middle East countries, including his old enemy Iran.

The list of recipients of Oil-for-Food vouchers grew to more than 270 names, constituting a Who's Who of slippery international politicians and diplomats—all of whom, needless to say, opposed any talk of military action against Iraq. On the Security Council, Russia, France, and China, key adversaries of U.S. policy toward Iraq going back to Clinton days, were among Saddam's key beneficiaries. Not only was Oil-for-Food the biggest scandal in UN history, it had turned the UN's mandate inside out. A program established to punish a rogue tyrant was systematically making him more powerful; nations that were supposed to be his custodians had become his accomplices; and the institution whose purpose was to protect international order was destroying it.

At the time, though, no one in the Bush administration knew this. That was why, in September 2002, President Bush was willing to yield to Colin Powell and British prime minister Tony Blair and ask the UN for one more resolution, this one explicitly threatening Saddam with military force if he did not finally comply with all the preceding resolutions against him.

What Powell found at the UN astonished even him. At a press conference, the French foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, shrieked that "nothing! nothing!" justified war—making Powell so angry that, as he would later tell the reporter Bob Woodward, he could barely contain himself. "Any leverage with Saddam was linked directly to the threat of war," Powell recalled, "and the French had just taken the threat off the table." He could not believe the Europeans' stupidity. Neither could the President. But it was not stupidity; it was self-interested duplicity.

THE UN's refusal to hold Saddam accountable had the unintended effect of bringing even Powell into line with the White House. In conversations with Bush, he began to use terms like "mosh pit" and "quagmire" to describe the world body. Still, the decision had been made to go back for another, tougher resolution—something that Bill Clinton in his time had conspicuously not secured—either for Desert Fox or for Kosovo.

In going to the UN, Bush willy-nilly allowed the focus to shift from the threat posed by Saddam to the United States, which would justify anticipatory action in self-defense, to Saddam's defiance of

existing UN resolutions, which conferred on the Security Council the right to approve or disapprove of action. Suddenly the salient point at issue was Saddam's actual stockpiles, determining the nature and extent of which had been the UN's focus for more than a decade. This led to a crucial delay of more than six months, from September 2002 until March 2003, a period Saddam duly exploited both to build an international coalition aimed at blocking Security Council action and to prepare his own defensive plans.

The case against Saddam, even by the UN's own rules, was rock solid, and in November 2002 the Security Council did unanimously issue Resolution 1441, ordering him to disarm his WMD's or face "serious consequences." Everyone understood that "serious consequences" meant the use of force, including on Iraqi territory. But the Europeans, determined to thwart the U.S., declined to take it that way. No military action was envisaged, they insisted; the passage of Resolution 1441 was action enough. Large crowds mobilized across Western Europe to denounce the very thought of war.

On November 25, 2002, under the terms of 1441, UN inspectors re-entered Iraq. They came back empty-handed. On December 7, Iraq dumped thousands of pages of documents on UNMOVIC. Even Hans Blix recognized that this mountain of materials, some of them over a decade old, contained nothing to clear up the question of what had happened to Saddam's stockpiles. All the same, Blix asked for time to sift through the document dump, knowing the task would consume months.

As Bob Woodward notes in *Plan of Attack*, his account of the run-up to the war, Bush so far had been "a study in patience." (It is also true that General Franks was not yet ready for offensive operations, and needed time for the buildup of American forces in Kuwait that was the leverage behind the implicit threat of force.) The President held back until Blix's interim report on January 27, 2003, which even the *New York Times* labeled "grim." There was nothing in it to suggest that Iraq had accepted the principle of complying with UN resolutions or intended to take any of the steps that, in Blix's words, "it needs to carry out to win the confidence of the world and to live in peace."

B LIX HIMSELF still held out the hope that, somehow, at some future time, Saddam would yet decide to comply. But his mission was doomed from the start. "UNMOVIC had the impossible task," John Keegan notes, "of proving a negative, that Saddam no longer had forbidden weapons."

But the burden of proof belonged legally on Saddam himself, as stated in Resolution 1441, and it was his failure to comply with that demand, and not Bush's supposed doctrine of "preemptive war," that triggered the U.S. invasion. What finally forced the Americans' hand was the UN's failure or refusal to acknowledge the very existence of the demand that it itself had made.

The UN's moment of truth came on February 5, 2003, when Powell gave a final presentation of the case against Saddam to the Security Council, with CIA director George Tenet sitting behind him. Powell's 76-minute exercise in destructive analysis documented what everyone knew was the case: that Saddam was in "material breach" of the UN's own stated requirements. That being so, the UN had lost any empirical grounds for declining to take military action. The only question left was whether the Security Council had the moral courage to stand behind its own resolution.

Later, Powell's defenders would charge that he had been tricked or deceived into making the speech—and in retrospect he said he was humiliated by the thought that he had conveyed false or misleading information. In fact, as Feith shows, the speech came at Powell's own suggestion, and before giving it he had ruthlessly winnowed out any evidence he considered shoddy or dubious. Even so, he offered over 100 examples of Saddam's evasion and deceit, evidence based on eyewitness accounts, radio intercepts, and satellite photos. Nor did he hesitate to bring up the al-Qaeda connection as an indicator of possible future horrors along the lines of 9/11. "Ambition and hatred are enough to bring Iraq and al Qaeda together," Powell asserted, and only military action could ensure that they forever remained apart.

His words were wasted. Russia, France, and Germany stood fast against war "under any circumstances." Their intransigence, reinforced by their own secret links to Saddam, doomed any final Security Council vote for action. But Powell's speech did at least confirm the near-unanimity of the official U.S. position. As the late *Washington Post* columnist Mary McGrory wrote the next day, "I can only say he persuaded me, and I was as tough as France to convince." Indeed, even before Powell's speech, Joseph Biden, reacting to Blix's interim report, had summed up the feeling of many Democrats in these words:

Saddam is in material breach of the latest UN resolution. . . . The legitimacy of the Security Council is at stake, as well as the integrity of the UN. [If] Saddam does not give up those

WMD's and the Security Council does not call for the use of force, I think we have little option but to act with a larger group of willing nations, if possible, and alone if we must.

The die was cast.

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM got under way on March 21, 2003. In October of that year, the Iraqi Survey Group (ISG) reported it was unable to find any of the WMD stockpiles that everyone believed were in Iraq. Still, what the group did find, in the words of its director David Kay, was "dozens of WMD-related program activities and significant amounts of equipment" that Saddam had concealed from Blix's inspectors in 2002: proof, in other words, of Saddam's clear material breach of Resolution 1441.

Of course, this was not the element of the ISG report that attracted the attention of the war's critics. According to the *New York Times*, the ISG's findings supported the view that Bush had "used dubious intelligence to justify his decision to go to war." That was and is false.

While Kay and his ISG inspectors found no WMD's, they did not say there had been none. To the contrary: "My view," Kay stated, is that "Iraq indeed had WMD's" and that smaller stocks still existed on Iraqi territory. Later he told Britain's *Daily Telegraph* that he had found evidence of some WMD's having been moved to Syria before the war. A question mark hangs over that possibility to this day.

In testifying to the Senate, moreover, Kay asserted unequivocally that "the world is far safer with the disappearance and removal of Saddam Hussein," adding that the upper echelons of the Iraqi regime had become divided into two factions: those willing to sell to the highest bidder whatever they knew about manufacturing WMD's and those, including Saddam himself, willing to buy someone else's know-how at equally high prices. Saddam's FBI interrogations would confirm Kay's analysis. There Saddam admitted that he intended to rebuild his WMD programs once he rid himself of the international sanctions imposed after 1991. He knew that WMD's were the key to his future power, just as they had been in the past. Had he been allowed to remain Iraq's dictator, he would have emerged as an even greater international menace than before the Gulf war.

Those who condemn Bush's decision to go to war, bemoan its cost in material and human terms, and deplore the damage it has allegedly done to the American image around the world should consider

what would have happened if there had been no war. It is not just that millions of Iraqis would still be in the iron grip of Saddam and his police state. The fact is that, by 2002, no inspection regime and no amount of international pressure, no matter how plumped up by yet another UN resolution, would have kept him contained any longer. The Oil-for-Food corruption would have continued to grow unrestrained, finding reliable co-conspirators in Europe and the Middle East. Rising oil prices over the next half-decade would have kept Saddam awash in cash, allowing him to rebuild his military and cement his connections with powers like Syria and Russia. He had called our bluff before; but this time it was no bluff.

Given the logic of the situation, at what point *could* Bush have avoided war? To have taken the military option off the table before going to the UN would have undercut everything his analysts and policy advisers, including at the CIA, had been saying since 9/11—and brought howls of protests from leading Democrats in Congress. Doing so after the passage of Resolution 1441 would have made a mockery of the rationale for going to the UN in the first place, and, as Powell explicitly recognized, undermined the resolution itself.

Should we have backed off after the Blix report on January 27, 2003, even as the American troop buildup in Kuwait was in full swing? That would have devastated Bush's reputation as a war leader after his resounding success in Afghanistan, and guaranteed that he would never be more than a one-term President (which may have been the real objective of his critics anyway).

Saddam Hussein had become a virus infecting the international body politic. The leading symptom of that infection was Oil-for-Food—emblematic of a moral anarchy let loose in the world that would prevail as long as Saddam remained in power. That anarchy had destroyed Iraq; eaten away the legitimacy of the United Nations; and almost wrecked NATO. Indeed, it is hard to see how NATO members already embittered by the diplomatic battle in the UN in 2002 could have continued to cooperate militarily in Kosovo or

Afghanistan. Nor is it clear that Eastern European nations would want to join a NATO led by a power, the United States, that had displayed such bare-faced unwillingness to stand up to a dangerous dictator.

“MY JOB is to secure America,” George Bush told Bob Woodward in 2004. “I also believe that freedom is something people long for.” Had he wished, he could also have referred back to the words uttered by President Clinton six years earlier, in February 1998:

Let's imagine the future. What if [Saddam] refuses to comply, and we fail to act, or take some ambiguous third route? . . . Well, he will conclude that the international community has lost its will. He will then conclude that he can go right on and do more to rebuild an arsenal of devastating destruction. And some day, I guarantee you, he'll use the arsenal.

Whatever one wants to say about the conduct of the Iraq war, *going* to war to remove Saddam Hussein in 2003 was a necessary act. It should and could have been done earlier, had not the Clinton White House, which understood the need, not wasted the opportunity through timidity and bluster. If, after 9/11, Bush had then blinked in his turn, he might indeed have found himself out of office by January 2005, and someone else would have had to tackle the job under much more disadvantageous conditions.

To judge by his unequivocal pronouncements pre-2003, and as improbable as it sounds now, that someone might well have been Al Gore, the erstwhile hawkish Vice President who had championed the Iraq Liberation Act, or indeed John Kerry, who back in 1998 told Scott Ritter that containment of Saddam was not working and that the time had come to use force. If Bush had failed to act, either one of these two men might have come to office in January 2005 publicly prepared to deal with the “gathering threat” that his predecessor had unaccountably allowed to grow larger and closer and ever more virulent.