

Why the U.S. Did Not Overthrow Saddam Hussein

By Stephen Zunes

There has been a curious bout of revisionist history in recent weeks criticizing the U.S. decision not to “finish the job” during the 1991 Gulf War and overthrow the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein. With such a lopsided victory in the six-week military campaign, these right-wing critics argue the U.S. could have easily marched into the capital of Baghdad and ousted the dictator.

However, the decisive military victory—which came with relatively few American casualties—resulted in large part because Iraqi forces were concentrated in flat, open desert. This was conventional and open combat, where U.S. forces could excel and take full advantage of their firepower and technological superiority. Had U.S. forces moved north toward Baghdad, however, they would have had to march through more than 200 miles of heavily populated agricultural and urban lands. Baghdad itself is a city of more than five million.

Invading U.S. forces would have been faced with bitter, house-to-house fighting in a country larger than South Vietnam. Iraqis who may have had little stomach to fight to maintain their country’s conquest of Kuwait would have been far more willing to sacrifice themselves to resist a foreign Western invader.

The UN Security Council had authorized member states to use military power to enforce its resolutions demanding an Iraqi withdrawal from occupied Kuwait. There was no authorization to invade Iraq. The U.S., by basic tenets of international law and in the eyes of international community, would have become the aggressor.

The broad coalition of nations so assiduously put together by President George Bush would have fallen apart. Indeed, press reports and my own interviews with foreign ministers and other government officials of the Arab Gulf monar-

chies following the war indicated absolutely no support for carrying the war any further. Indeed, there was already a strong sense that the U.S. had inflicted unnecessary damage on Iraq’s civilian infrastructure with serious humanitarian consequences, going well beyond what was necessary to rid Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

Even Washington’s European, Canadian, and Australian allies were adamantly opposed to extending the war to Baghdad. The U.S. would have had to do it alone.

If an occupying U.S. army had succeeded in overthrowing Saddam Hussein, then what? Would a government installed by an invading Western power that had just ravaged the country with the heaviest bombing in world history have any credibility with the Iraqi people? American occupation troops would have been subjected to constant hit-and-run guerrilla attacks from Baghdad’s narrow alleyways, forcing the U.S. into a bloody counterinsurgency war. At best, the U.S. would have had to lead an extensive effort at the kind of “nation-building” that Bush’s son and other Republican leaders have repeatedly denounced in recent years.

Even putting the logistics aside, there is little evidence that the U.S. even wanted Saddam Hussein overthrown. When Kurds in the north and Shiites in the south of the Iraq rebelled in the aftermath of the Gulf War and threatened Saddam Hussein’s regime, the U.S. decided to ban only the use of fixed-wing aircraft by the Iraqi air force, which could have threatened U.S. troops. However, by allowing Saddam’s helicopter gunships to operate unimpeded, the rebels were crushed.

The Bush administration feared that a victory by Iraqi Kurds might encourage the ongoing Kurdish uprising in Turkey, a NATO ally. They also feared what a radical Shiite Arab entity

would mean to U.S. Gulf allies with restive Shiite populations.

Keeping Saddam Hussein in power while subjecting his country to debilitating sanctions and sending in international inspectors to destroy his offensive military capabilities seemed at the time like the preferred alternative.

There are many valid critiques of U.S. policy toward Iraq before, during, and after the Gulf War. Failing to invade and overthrow the Iraqi government, however, is not one of them.

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