

Bush Raises the Stakes in Iraq

By Charles Knight

The Bush administration's enthusiasm for toppling Saddam Hussein is so single-minded that American officials are failing to recognize the effect of broadcasting publicly their intent to seek "regime change." The Pentagon's joint staff, which has the enormous task of planning any military campaign against Iraq, is forced to deal with the strategic blunder inherent in the administration's policy.

The U.S. military establishment is especially concerned about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and their potential threat to U.S. forces and allies in the region. We know that stockpiles of these weapons are far fewer than the number Iraq possessed in 1991, but residual stocks remain a real worry. Although the Pentagon believes the conventional superiority of U.S. arms can easily defeat Iraq's army, military planners know that the use of chemical or biological weapons by Iraq might result in the deaths of hundreds or even thousands of American soldiers. And then there is the possibility that the Iraqis will launch missiles with chemical warheads against Tel Aviv, provoking a nuclear response by Israel.

But with its declarations of regime change and now "first strike," the Bush administration is undermining the logic of deterrence—previously used to make weapons of mass destruction unthinkable in wartime due to certain retaliation—and making the use of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction all the more likely.

Charles A. Duelfer, former deputy executive chairman of the UN Special Commission on Iraq, testified before Congress earlier this year about his candid discussions with high-ranking military officers in Iraq. These officers confirmed that the threat of U.S. retaliation successfully deterred Iraq from using chemical weapons during the 1991 Gulf War. They also said they would have used their chemical weapons had American-led forces marched on

to Baghdad. In the war's aftermath, the Iraqi leadership concluded that possessing these weapons had deterred the United States and its allies from overthrowing Saddam Hussein.

But the logic behind the U.S. policy declarations of regime change and first strike could inadvertently lead to the use of weapons of mass destruction by Iraq well before American troops get near Baghdad. Knowing that the United States will make a preemptive strike to degrade its stores of chemical weapons, Iraq will face the classic "use them or lose them" dilemma. And if U.S. troops invade Baghdad, we can expect a desperate moment when Saddam Hussein himself will feel that he has very little left to lose. At that point, America will have lost its power to deter.

Combine the planning for a first strike against Iraq with the stated intention of overthrowing the Iraqi regime, and the Bush administration has basically discarded the stabilizing logic of deterrence. Current U.S. declarations against Iraq, combined with President Bush's West Point speech outlining his first-strike policy, will make the use of weapons of mass destruction very likely, and even necessary, from the Iraqi perspective.

Members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have argued strongly against a full-scale invasion of Iraq, and for now have successfully persuaded President Bush to at least postpone such action. Seasoned military leaders know that counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism strategies involving first strike military action and regime change in Iraq have a good chance of ending with a terrible, unintended irony—a war fought with weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East.

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