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Keeping Saddam Hussein in a Box

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The United States faces a clear choice on Iraq: containment or preventive war. President Bush insists that containment has failed and we must prepare for war. In fact, war is not necessary. Containment has worked in the past and can work in the future, even when dealing with Saddam Hussein.

The case for preventive war rests on the claim that Mr. Hussein is a reckless expansionist bent on dominating the Middle East. Indeed, he is often compared to Adolf Hitler, modern history's exemplar of serial aggression. The facts, however, tell a different story.

During the 30 years that Mr. Hussein has dominated Iraq, he has initiated two wars. Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, but only after Iran's revolutionary government tried to assassinate Iraqi officials, conducted repeated border raids and tried to topple Mr. Hussein by fomenting unrest within Iraq. His decision to attack was not reckless, because Iran was isolated and widely seen as militarily weak. The war proved costly, but it ended Iran's regional ambitions and kept Mr. Hussein in power.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 arose from a serious dispute over oil prices and war debts and occurred only after efforts to court Mr. Hussein led the first Bush administration unwittingly to signal that Washington would not oppose an attack. Containment did not fail the first time around -- it was never tried.

Thus, Mr. Hussein has gone to war when he was threatened and when he thought he had a window of opportunity. These considerations do not justify Iraq's actions, but they show that Mr. Hussein is hardly a reckless aggressor who cannot be contained. In fact, Iraq has never gone to war in the face of a clear deterrent threat.

But what about the Iraqi regime's weapons of mass destruction? Those who reject containment point to Iraq's past use of chemical weapons against the Kurds and Iran. They also warn that he will eventually get nuclear weapons. According to President Bush, a nuclear arsenal would enable Mr. Hussein to "blackmail the world." And the real nightmare is that he will give chemical, biological or nuclear weapons to Al Qaeda.

These possibilities sound alarming, but the dangers they pose do not justify war.

Mr. Hussein's use of poison gas was despicable, but it tells us nothing about what he might do against the United States or its allies. He could use chemical weapons against the Kurds and Iranians because they could not retaliate in kind. The United States, by contrast, can retaliate with overwhelming force, including weapons of mass destruction. This is why Mr. Hussein did not use chemical or biological weapons against American forces or Israel during the 1991 Persian Gulf war. Nor has he used such weapons since, even though the United States has bombed Iraq repeatedly over

the past decade.

The same logic explains why Mr. Hussein cannot blackmail us. Nuclear blackmail works only if the blackmailer's threat might actually be carried out. But if the intended target can retaliate in kind, carrying out the threat causes the blackmailer's own destruction. This is why the Soviet Union, which was far stronger than Iraq and led by men of equal ruthlessness, never tried blackmailing the United States.

Oddly enough, the Bush administration seems to understand that America is not vulnerable to nuclear blackmail. For example, Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, has written that Iraqi weapons of mass destruction "will be unusable because any attempt to use them will bring national obliteration." Similarly, President Bush declared last week in his State of the Union address that the United States "would not be blackmailed" by North Korea, which administration officials believe has nuclear weapons. If Iraq's chemical, biological and nuclear arsenal is "unusable" and North Korea's weapons cannot be used for blackmail, why do the president and Ms. Rice favor war?

But isn't the possibility that the Iraqi regime would give weapons of mass destruction to Al Qaeda reason enough to topple it? No -- unless the administration isn't telling us something. Advocates of preventive war have made Herculean efforts to uncover evidence of active cooperation between Iraq and Al Qaeda, and senior administration officials have put great pressure on American intelligence agencies to find convincing evidence. But these efforts have borne little fruit, and we should view the latest reports of alleged links with skepticism. No country should weave a case for war with such slender threads.

Given the deep antipathy between fundamentalists like Osama bin Laden and secular rulers like Saddam Hussein, the lack of evidence linking them is not surprising. But even if American pressure brings these unlikely bedfellows together, Mr. Hussein is not going to give Al Qaeda weapons of mass destruction. He would have little to gain and everything to lose since he could never be sure that American surveillance would not detect the handoff. If it did, the United States response would be swift and devastating.

The Iraqi dictator might believe he could slip Al Qaeda dangerous weapons covertly, but he would still have to worry that we would destroy him if we merely suspected that he had aided an attack on the United States. He need not be certain we would retaliate, he merely has to think that we might.

Thus, logic and evidence suggest that Iraq can be contained, even if it possesses weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, Mr. Hussein's nuclear ambitions -- the ones that concern us most -- are unlikely to be realized in his lifetime, especially with inspections under way. Iraq has pursued nuclear weapons since the 1970's, but it has never produced a bomb. United Nations inspectors destroyed Iraq's nuclear program between 1991 and 1998, and Iraq has not rebuilt it. With an embargo in place and inspectors at work, Iraq is further from a nuclear capacity than at any time in recent memory. Again, why the rush to war?

War may not be necessary to deny Iraq nuclear weapons, but it is likely to spur proliferation elsewhere. The Bush administration's contrasting approaches to Iraq and North Korea send a clear signal: we negotiate with states that have nuclear weapons, but we threaten states that don't. Iran and North Korea will be even more committed

to having a nuclear deterrent after watching the American military conquer Iraq. Countries like Japan, South Korea and Saudi Arabia will then think about following suit. Stopping the spread of nuclear weapons will be difficult in any case, but overthrowing Mr. Hussein would make it harder.

Preventive war entails other costs as well. In addition to the lives lost, toppling Saddam Hussein would cost at least \$50 billion to \$100 billion, at a time when our economy is sluggish and huge budget deficits are predicted for years. Because the United States would have to occupy Iraq for years, the actual cost of this war would most likely be much larger. And because most of the world thinks war is a mistake, we would get little help from other countries.

Finally, attacking Iraq would undermine the war on terrorism, diverting manpower, money and attention from the fight against Al Qaeda. Every dollar spent occupying Iraq is a dollar not spent dismantling terrorist networks abroad or improving security at home. Invasion and occupation would increase anti-Americanism in the Islamic world and help Osama bin Laden win more followers. Preventive war would also reinforce the growing perception that the United States is a bully, thereby jeopardizing the international unity necessary to defeat global terrorism.

Although the Bush administration maintains that war is necessary, there is a better option. Today, Iraq is weakened, its pursuit of nuclear weapons has been frustrated, and any regional ambitions it may once have cherished have been thwarted. We should perpetuate this state of affairs by maintaining vigilant containment, a policy the rest of the world regards as preferable and effective. Saddam Hussein needs to remain in his box -- but we don't need a war to keep him there.

Drawing (Michael Bierut)