U.S. Foreign Policy:
War in Iraq

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1 The Problem of Iraq

Recall that when the Persian Gulf War ended, the Kurds in the north of Iraq, and the Shi’ites in the south rose in rebellion against Saddam Hussein, but were crushed by the regime. The U.S. administration was divided over how to handle the Iraqi dictator. Nobody had any illusions that he remained a dangerous opponent, and now that the hopes of the regime being toppled from within had been dashed, the question had become what the U.S. should do next. A small, but, vocal group wanted to proceed with regime change. They believed that if Saddam were left to his own devices, he would consolidate his rule and pursue the WMD programs, which would eventually make him an exceedingly unpleasant problem to deal with. Some of their predictions had already been borne out by the suppression of the revolts, which, rooted as they had been in Kurdish and Shia areas, had frightened the Sunni into rallying to Saddam’s side despite having no love for him. Saddam had used this opportunity to eliminate many rivals and had lavished resources on the military forces loyal to him. While many agreed with the conclusion that eventually Saddam would have to go, an even larger group of analysts believed that an all-out push by the U.S. to effect regime change was a bad idea. They preferred to engage in long-term containment coupled with clandestine assistance to coup-plotters or popular revolt leaders within Iraq.

The more mainstream position that emerged within the Bush (and even more strongly in the Clinton) administration preferred to take a less confrontational tack. They conceded that Saddam was a concern, but they did not believe he was that important of a threat to worry about, especially after the Gulf War, which had seriously hampered his ability to wage war and destabilize the region. Saddam could be easily contained as long as the U.S. was committed to working with its allies, and the U.S. had much higher priorities to worry about: Eastern Europe, Russia, NATO, China, and so forth. Under these circumstances, and with the focus of the U.S. firmly in Europe and Asia, the Middle East was bound to go on the back burner, Saddam or no Saddam.
With the crushing of the uprising in 1991, Saddam had showed the resiliency of his regime. The U.S. responded by making it clear that Iraq would not be welcomed back to the family of nations until that regime was no longer in power. The international community imposed sanctions on Iraq and on May 7, the U.S. made it clear that the burden of removing him from power was on the Iraqis themselves:

Saddam is discredited and cannot be redeemed. His leadership will never be accepted by the world community and, therefore, Iraqis will pay the price while he remains in power. [...] All possible sanctions will be maintained until he is gone. Any easing of sanctions will be considered only when there is a new government.¹

In addition to the sanctions, the Bush administration also authorized a covert program to topple Saddam.

There was some hope that the regime could be subverted from within. Iraq was reeling in the aftermath of the war. Although the uprisings were suppressed, many Shia fled to the marshes in Southern Iraq from where they continued their attempts to destabilize the regime. Saddam responded with a campaign to drain the marshes and deprive them of sanctuary. The counterinsurgency became so nasty that the U.S., Britain, and France established a second no-fly zone in August 1992 (south of the 32nd parallel) to give the Shia there some respite from the aerial assaults by the Iraqi military.

There were also numerous coup plots, assassination attempts, and revolts from supposedly loyalist Sunni tribes: from a former general in the Republican Guard (May, 1992), from the son of the former Prime Minister and the original commander of the Republican Guard (June, 1992 — this one resulted in the arrest of about 300 officers and the execution of many), from the al-'Ubayd Sunni tribe (1993), from unknown assassins who detonated a bomb while Saddam was driving by (December, 1993), from a Republican Guard officer who shot him up but missed (January, 1994), from the head of his Intelligence Service, who fled to Kurdistan and told the U.S. about Iraq’s secret WMD programs (December, 1994), from another prominent general (May, 1995; and, when that general remains were returned to his tribe, the Sunni ad-Dulaymi, the revolt by members of that tribe), from his sons-in-law who fled to Jordan and spilled the beans about Saddam’s coverup of WMD programs (August, 1995), from a wide network of high-ranking officers in the security services, air force, and the Republican Guard (June 1996 — this one resulted in the arrests of hundreds of conspirators and alerted the regime to CIA’s ability to penetrate its highest reaches). Unfortunately, the Iraqi security services proved more than a match for the plotters, and the Iraqi army remained overwhelmingly loyal.

to Saddam and had no compunction putting down all resistance. Saddam seemed unbeatable in the internal struggle for survival.

While Saddam was busy surviving, the rest of Iraq was dying. Initially, the massive loot from Kuwait had allowed the regime to mask the severity of the defeat. But these could only last for a few months and by March 1991 the country was already struggling to keep afloat. In recognition of the extent of Iraq’s humanitarian troubles, UNSC Resolution 687 of April 3 — which demanded the destruction of WMD and missiles, and set up the rules for compensation of the victims of Iraqi aggression, among other things — specifically excluded foodstuffs and medical supplies from the sanctions. Following a report that estimated that the restoration of Iraq’s infrastructure to provide for public health, electricity, water, and sanitation to prewar levels would require about $22 billion, UNSC Resolution 706 of August 15 permitted Iraq to sell oil for up to $1.6 billion in return for humanitarian aid (with part of the proceeds from the sale to go toward compensating Kuwait). Saddam rejected this: he was not about to give the U.N. control over Iraq’s greatest source of revenue, and would certainly not permit the emergence of an alternative source of food supply. Instead, the regime resorted to printing money, and as a result inflation skyrocketed to 2,000%.

What was Saddam aiming at? He had no choice but to comply with the terms of the ceasefire that had ended the Gulf War. Since he had consented literally at gunpoint, he did not accept the legitimacy of the terms and was therefore going to abide by them only insofar as he could be forced to do so. He banked on the sanctions regime falling apart soon after the Coalition allies lost their unifying sense of purpose and he hoped that the U.N. inspectors could be fooled, bribed, or intimidated into clearing Iraq without sacrificing the WMD programs. On June 30, 1991, Saddam formed a special committee tasked with concealing the WMD programs so that work could continue while U.N. Special Commission for the Disarmament of Iraq’s (UNSCOM) and International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) inspectors were being deceived.

The inspectors proved far more diligent than expected and uncovered Iraq’s undeclared program to enrich uranium. The concealment committee bit the bullet and fessed up to the program and shifted its focus on preserving only the elements that would be difficult to replicate. It dispersed the scientists to locations they hoped the inspectors would not bother looking at. To no avail, by the spring of 1992, the Iraqis had to admit the existence of a biological weapons program as well. Saddam then shifted to more overt obstructionism while simultaneously probing the resolve of the containment coalition. In December 1992, his troops began harassing the planes enforcing the no-fly zones. The tactic did not work: one of his fighters was shot down, and the U.S., U.K., France, and Russia all produced dire warnings about the consequences of continuing it. In January 1993, he sent troops into Kuwait to bring back equipment abandoned during the war. This did not work either: the UNSC declared Iraq to be in material breach of the ceasefire, and authorized air strikes
which hit military targets in southern Iraq and around Baghdad, forcing Saddam to beat back a hasty retreat in a week. This was the last action against Iraq of the outgoing Bush administration; it was now up to Clinton to deal with Saddam.

2 The Clinton Years

The first serious challenge for the new President was, ironically, Saddam’s attempt on the life of the previous one. In the spring of 1993, Kuwait arrested several conspirators who were planning to assassinate President Bush when he arrived in the country for a ceremony commemorating the Gulf War victory. By the summer, CIA and FBI investigations had revealed the preponderance of evidence that Iraq had been behind the plot. On June 26, 1993, American warships destroyed the headquarters of the Iraqi Intelligence Service in Baghdad in retaliation. The fact that Saddam had targeted a former U.S. President hardened the attitudes of the Clinton administration, which now settled on what they called “aggressive containment,” and scotched any talk of opening a dialogue with Saddam.

The U.S. position crystallized in February 24, 1994, when the senior director for Middle East Affairs of the NSC announced the policy of dual containment. Under this policy, the U.S. abandoned the previous administrations’ policies of balancing Iran and Iraq against each other, and instead attempted to contain both simultaneously. With Saddam’s Iraq now considered beyond the pale, and Iran still seen as an implacable enemy of the U.S. (or at least American policies in the Middle East), both had to be coerced into some sort of rapprochement with the West. The chosen tools for that were sanctions against both, and military strikes plus subversion attempts for Iraq (Iran was too difficult to penetrate and the regime too secure to give any serious hope to a U.S.-sponsored overthrow). Immediately, the policy came under fire: it pushed two traditional enemies closer together in their mutual hatred of the U.S.; it required the continued presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia (which enraged many Islamic extremists); it saddled the U.S. with the costs of dealing with both rogue regimes; and it put U.S. troops in harm’s way, which could result in a repeat of the 1983 Beirut disaster; it also relied very much on sanctions, which were becoming unpopular due to the humanitarian toll in Iraq.

By late 1993, the economic situation in Iraq had become so dire that even a Sunni tribe on whom the dictator relied revolted against him. Several assassination attempts followed in quick succession, forcing Saddam to rethink his wait-and-see strategy. Iraq’s deception against UNSCOM worked, and the inspectors began saying that Iraq has been effectively disarmed. In July, 1994, Russia proposed a deadline for the lifting of sanctions, but the U.S. opposed it, arguing that there was no reason to put artificial pressure on the inspections and that it suspected Iraq had not come clean still. This convinced Saddam that he had to find a way to break the sanctions regime although the way he attempted to do that was puzzling.
After threatening unspecified consequences if the U.N. did not lift the sanctions at its review on October 10, Saddam mobilized the Republican Guard and sent them to the border with Kuwait. Over the first week of the month, the U.S. estimated that the Iraqi buildup in the area had reached 80,000 troops. Saddam’s goal was to create an international crisis, which he could then use to wrest some concessions on sanctions in return for defuzing it. Saddam’s reasoning was, however, flawed. Just when Russia, China, and France were all pressing the UNSC to give Iraq some credit for what appeared to be compliance with the disarmament, and just when the U.S. and U.K. were becoming isolated in their steadfast opposition to any easing of the sanctions until Iraq’s full compliance could be verified, Saddam’s actions restored the unity of the opposition. On October 8, the UNSC expressed “grave concern” over these actions and declared Iraq’s threat to stop cooperating with the U.N. “completely unacceptable.” On the same day, the U.S. launched Operation Vigilant Warrior, which reinforced the 13,000 American troops in the Persian Gulf to a force of about 60,000, complete with a carrier battle group, 350 additional aircraft, and that was without counting the British and French contributions (the latter was symbolic). On October 15, the UNSC Resolution 949 demanded the withdrawal of all Iraqi troops from the area and threatened further measures. The U.S. signaled that these measures would come in the form of air strikes on the Iraqi forces south of the 32nd parallel. Saddam had miscalculated very badly, and now had to beat a hasty retreat. His troops began withdrawing on the following day.

The October gambit not only failed to give Iraq immediate relief from the sanctions but had caused the UNSC to close ranks just when fissures had appeared among its members. No strategy that directly defied the U.N. would work, and in December Saddam’s precarious position got even worse: the head of the Iraqi Intelligence Service, Wafiq al-Samarra’i, defected and revealed to UNSCOM that Iraq had developed chemical weapons that were ready for use, that its biological weapons program was more extensive and still operational, and that it had managed to hide more than forty ballistic missiles which could be used to deliver these weapons. These revelations led to reassessment of the disarmament programs, and the panel of experts reported in May, 1995 that Iraq had not, in fact, complied with the U.N. resolutions regarding the WMDs, just as the Americans and the British had been saying all along. Clinton clarified his administration’s policies in the Persian Gulf:

[Iran, Iraq, and Lybia] aim to destabilize the region. They harbor terrorists within their borders. They establish and support terrorist base camps in other lands. They hunger for nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. Every day, they put innocent civilians in danger and stir up discord among nations. Our policy

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toward these rogue states is simple: They must be contained.\(^3\)

As Clausewitz said, in strategy everything is simple, but that does not mean it is easy. The U.S. administration consulted with its allies, and all endorsed a hard-line policy in light of the latest revelations. However, the diplomatic exchanges also revealed a serious concern with the humanitarian costs of the sanctions regime. The Iraq economy was in a free fall. The value of the dinar was $3 before the Gulf War, it dropped to 140 dinars to the dollar by the end of 1993, and plummeted to 700 dinars to the dollar by the end of 1994 (it would collapse to 3,000 dinars to the dollar by the end of 1995). Saddam had cut food rations, there was starvation, inadequate health care, lack of electricity, and basic services. Iraqi government propaganda blamed everything on the sanctions and was, in fact, exaggerating the numbers to make them look worse. Since Saddam was simultaneously building new palaces and military facilities, the money to alleviate the humanitarian disaster was evidently not lacking; it was not available because Saddam had decided to use the plight of his own people to break the international consensus about the sanctions.

Since it was no use explaining that Saddam could feed his people if he would just redirect the military spending (which, of course, would have severely weakened his hold on power), the U.S. got the UNSC to pass Resolution 986 on April 14, 1995, authorizing the Oil-for-Food Program, which allowed Iraq to use oil exports (valued up to $1 billion every 3 months) to finance humanitarian aid. This was the implementation of Resolution 706, which had originally proposed this exchange, and provided for a comprehensive system to ensure that the money is spent appropriately. It provided for compensation of Kuwait (30%) and for reimbursement of costs to the U.N. (4%). It reserved funds for the Kurds (13%) to be administered directly by the U.N., leaving 53% for the rest of the Iraqi people.

Saddam did not like UNSCR 986 any better than its weaker predecessor, UNSCR 706, and rejected it outright as violating Iraq’s sovereignty. There was another coup attempt in May, followed by a revolt by yet another Sunni tribe, this time in ar-Ramadi. On July 17, Saddam threatened to cease all cooperation with UNSCOM unless the sanctions were lifted by the end of August. It was unlikely that the threat would have worked but in any case the strategy was thrown in disarray by the defection of Hussein Kamel and his brother, both high-ranking military officers, and both Saddam’s sons-in-law. Kamel, in particular, was deeply involved in the smuggling operations that kept Saddam’s income coming so that he could distribute it to loyal supporters. When Kamel called for Saddam’s overthrow from the safety of Jordan, whose king also backed the call for the first time (he was wary of antagonizing the large population of Palestinians who were pro Saddam), Saddam mobilized

the Republican Guard and deployed the army throughout the country to ward off any trouble. Not knowing what his intention was, the U.S. responded by launching Operation Vigilant Sentinel, which sent massive reinforcements to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Jordan.

As it turned out, Kamel’s call for the overthrow of the dictator came to naught. However, the revelations he brought about Iraq’s continuing deception of the UNSCOM inspectors were shocking. They were so bad, in fact, that Saddam tried to blame Kamel for concealing WMD programs without his knowledge! In a clumsy attempt to prove that, the regime suddenly discovered over half a million pages of documents at Kamel’s farm. It was these documents that provided incontrovertible proof that the inspectors had been duped, and on a massive scale. Iraq had weaponized biological agents, and nearly 200 bombs and missiles on the ready for defense had the Coalition invaded Iraq during the Gulf War. The documents also revealed the program for enriched uranium to be used for a nuclear weapon that Saddam was planning to use against Israel in case of an invasion targeting regime change. The regime’s perfidy was on full display for everyone to see. It was obvious that the sanctions regime would not waver in light of the new evidence, and as the economy hit rock bottom the only way out was to bow to the inevitable and accept UNSCR 986. On January 20, 1996 Saddam declared himself ready to discuss its implementation.

Soon, Baghdad reverted to its old stalling tactics. The problem was that the concealment program was run by the Republican Guard, which was also responsible for Saddam’s security. The dictator feared that when the UNSCOM inspectors renewed their efforts to crack open the concealment, they would also penetrate Iraq’s security apparatus. Probing into sites connected to Saddam himself and interacting with members of his inner circle could be dangerous because American inspectors could feed intelligence to the CIA, which it could then use for its covert activities that had already resulted in so much headache for the regime. Saddam was right to suspect this for, unbeknownst to UNSCOM, the American inspectors were, in fact, reporting to the CIA information about Iraqi security. Correspondingly, less than a month after signing up for the Oil-for-Food Program under UNSCR 986 (May 20), Saddam refused the inspectors entry to several sensitive areas.

This was the first overt challenge to inspections in four years, and the U.S. administration immediately demanded that the UNSC find Iraq in “material breach” of the ceasefire resolutions, which would have authorized a military response in case he failed to comply. Before the Americans could get a decision on this, UNSCOM worked out a deal with Saddam under whose terms they would be given access to 60 sensitive sites but only if their team, which could not exceed four people, was escorted by a senior Iraqi official. Washington was furious: these terms were a violation of the UNSC resolutions, which had demanded immediate and unconditional access to any site in Iraq, and had given Saddam a way to defy inspections.

With the inspections regime now in jeopardy, the U.S. pinned its hopes on the
most wide-ranging conspiracy the CIA had coordinated in Iraq. Hundreds of senior Iraqi officers were plotting to overthrow the regime but it turned out that the Intelligence Service had penetrated the conspiracy and had simply waited in order to identify as many of its members as possible. In June, Saddam had the suspects arrested, putting an end to the scheme. Since the CIA operatives fled the area, the probability of any further covert action in the near future became nil.

This left the Kurds as a possible ally to topple Saddam, but the Kurds had discredited themselves by attempting a free-lance operation (assisted by some rogue CIA agents) back in March 1995, when they attacked Iraqi troops but were forced to retreat. The U.S. administration, which had been unaware of the planned operation, had refused to support it and had advised the Kurds to dig in under the protection of the no-fly zone. What followed next could not be made up. The Kurds cooperated with Baghdad in avoiding the U.N. sanctions by smuggling oil (out) and goods (in). The scale of the operation was stunning: in the summer of 1996, there were 600 tanker trucks crossing every day, bringing in revenue of half a million dollars to the faction of the Kurds (KDP) in control of the border point with Turkey. The other faction (PUK), with whom KDP had an agreement to share power, now demanded its share of the windfall and appealed to the Americans to mediate. Washington, however, refused to get involved because it judged that the Kurds were unreliable (as their unsanctioned March 1995 operation had shown) and because it had no wish to get involved in intra-Kurdish quarrels.

When the U.S. refused to mediate, PUK turned to the traditional ally of the Iraqi Kurds, Iran. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard supplied weapons and advisers, enabling PUK to launch an attack on KDP on August 17. The KDP now turned to the U.S. to intervene, but this was also refused. With the Americans out and the Iranians supporting the other side, the KDP had one choice left — Saddam — and it was to him that they turned for help! Saddam could not wait to get involved: he could regain control over northern Iraq and restore some of the prestige of his regime. The added bonus was that all of PUK-controlled territory lay south of the 36th parallel, which was the limit of the no-fly zone. There was a chance that the U.S. would not respond, although this was by no means certain since UNSC Resolution 688 prohibited Saddam from repressing Iraqi citizens and could be used to justify strikes against him.

On August 31, 1996, Saddam rolled the dice: in cooperation with the KDP, his forces attacked and took Irbil, the seat of the regional Kurdish government under PUK. The Iraqis executed several hundred Kurds before withdrawing and leaving the city in the hands of the KDP. They then regrouped to positions that would enable them to overrun the remaining PUK territory but halted to see what the U.S. would do in response to this blatant aggression. And this is where trouble began. Although this was clearly a violation of UNSCR 688, the U.S. could not get support for strikes from Turkey (which did not want to help Kurds under any circumstances), Saudi Arabia (which worried that Kurdish separatism would cause Iraq to
disintegrate, exposing it to Iranian influence), and Jordan (whose Palestinians were becoming increasingly restive because of the suffering of the Iraqi people under the sanctions). Without regional allies to offer bases for strikes in the north of Iraq where events were unfolding, the U.S. had to be content with striking places it could reach. Consequently, the U.S. and the U.K. expanded the southern no-fly zone north to the 33rd parallel (south of Baghdad), and then launched cruise missiles at Iraqi military targets in the new NFZ in early September (Operation Desert Strike).

If Saddam had planned to drive PUK completely out of Kurdistan, then the action had the desired effect for he now pulled back his forces. The entire episode, however, was a victory for him: he had scored a much-needed military victory, he had humiliated the U.S. and exposed cracks in the coalition against him, and he had eliminated much of Kurdish opposition, and he had cleared the north of CIA personnel. In the wake of these gains, Saddam strengthened his position by announcing an increase in the food rations by 35% and declaring his readiness to implement the Oil-for-Food Program. In response, the value of the dinar rose from 3,000 to the dollar to 1,000 to the dollar. Saddam’s regime was on the path to recovery.

The credibility of the containment policies suffered as three of the five permanent members of U.N. Security Council began to work against it because of commercial links with Iraq and because they were seeking to curb American influence. The U.S. became more and more isolated, finding staunch support only in the British government. Domestically, the Republican-dominated Congress grew ever more belligerent, undermining the administration’s ability to pursue coherent long-term action in the region and splitting its attention when it had to deal with sex scandals and impeachment articles. Disagreements within the administration also threatened to paralyze foreign policy. For his part, Saddam had learned that he could succeed by challenging the U.N. as long as he could do so in ways that would make it difficult for the U.S. to find support for use of force.

As the Oil-for-Food program went into effect, the plight of the Iraqis should have decreased considerably. While this was true for segments of the population Saddam considered important for his regime, the situation of the Shia in the south was miserable. The U.N. published statistics demonstrating that sanctions could not have been the cause of this since Iraq’s income under the program was more than sufficient to purchase the necessary quantities of food and medicines. Iraq was choosing not buy the goods it claimed to need and there was also extensive smuggling of the goods it purchased for resale on black markets abroad. Baghdad also kept up a steady diet of propaganda in the media, flooding foreign journalists with pictures of starving children and dying infants. In fact, journalists were not allowed to interview Iraqi officials until they had filed at least one story about the humanitarian effect of sanctions. In the media war of statistics versus pictures of miserable children, the photos were bound to prevail. The U.S. administration was at a loss about a strategy that could effectively counter that.

Given the wobbly American response, Saddam Hussein became further embold-
ened, and in early 1997 he initiated a series of challenges to the other post-war provisions, including the sanctions and inspections regimes: Iraq submitted required reports late, the reports were incomplete, and many facilities were mysteriously evacuated before inspectors could visit them. It was all done to frustrate UNSCOM and widen the rift between the UNSC members, but without giving the U.S. the excuse to launch strikes. The strategy delivered in the fall, when a divided UNSC adopted Resolution 1134 (October 23, 1997), which threatened to impose travel bans on Iraqi officials if Iraq continued to obstruct weapons inspectors. The abstentions of Russia, China, and France emboldened Saddam, and on November 13, he expelled the remaining American members of the U.N. weapons inspections team accusing them (accurately) of spying and plotting to overthrow him. The U.N. recalled the remaining members in protest and UNSC passed another resolution imposing the bans and demanding that Iraq resume cooperating. Saddam then threatened to discontinue the Oil-for-Food Program unless the U.N. set a firm deadline for the ending of sanctions.

Exasperated, the U.S. and U.K. commenced yet another military buildup in the region but the opposition from Arab and European governments became more vocal. The Russians offered to mediate and worked out a deal whereby Saddam would allow all inspectors back in return for a promise that Russia would try to convince the U.N. to set a deadline for the lifting of sanctions. Satisfied that the inspections could continue, the Americans backed down only to face a repeat of the drama two months later. The Iraqis again prevented the UNSCOM teams from doing their work and on January 17, 1998 Saddam demanded that the sanctions be lifted by May 20 or else Iraq would cease cooperating with the inspectors.

The U.S. began yet another buildup and this time its isolation deepened as both Russia and China condemned the threat to use force. Of all regional allies only Kuwait offered bases for strikes, and in the U.S. the public had grown tired of containment, did not want to see a military response, and was in any case distracted by the Lewinsky sex scandal, which had just broken out. There was little the U.S. could do when U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan flew to Baghdad and worked out yet another deal according to which Iraq would give inspectors unrestricted access in return for UNSCOM respecting “the legitimate concerns of Iraq relating to national security, sovereignty, and dignity”; respect that apparently included agreeing to highly restrictive procedures for visits to 8 “presidential” complexes where inspectors suspected Iraq was storing materials for its WMD programs. The February 23 agreement was another victory for Saddam for he now managed to secure restrictions to the “unrestricted” access of inspectors.

The UNSCOM teams worked diligently under the new rules in soon found evidence of nerve gas having been loaded onto a missile. Iraq had initially denied making the nerve agent, it had then denied making it in sufficient quantities for military use, and now it was revealed that it had not only done so but also readied it for that use. Saddam then suspended cooperation with the inspectors on August 4, and
demanded a reduction of the Anglo-American presence in the teams. Washington had its hands full: Monica Lewinsky began her grand jury testimony on the 6th, and al-Qaeda struck the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania on the 7th. The U.S. tried to get UNSC to condemn Iraq’s newest actions, and UNSC adopted Resolution 1194 on September 9 doing just that. However, the resolution stopped short of declaring Iraq in “material breach” of the ceasefire resolution and as a result precluded the use of force.

On September 29, 1998, Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act, stating that “it should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime.”\(^4\) When Clinton signed it on October 31, Saddam expelled the inspectors yet again and announced the Iraq would no longer cooperate with UNSCOM. He demanded that a comprehensive review of their compliance be conducted and a timetable for ending the sanctions be adopted. On November 5, UNSC adopted Resolution 1205 condemning that action as well and demanded that Iraq withdraw that decision. Again it failed to find Iraq in “material breach” of the ceasefire. The U.S. administration approached the allies again and reminded them that Saddam had now gotten away two times with blatant violations of UNSC resolutions without receiving a forceful response. The argument worked, and the Saudis offered the bases in support for a military mission. The Anglo-American buildup resumed and on the 11th, the U.N. recalled its personnel, clearing the way for air strikes. On November 14, with American and British planes en route to Iraq, Saddam reversed course and had Tariq Aziz announce on CNN that Iraq would allow the inspectors back in. The U.N. immediately accepted, and this yanked the support of the British government for air strikes. Completely isolated, the Americans aborted the mission. The administration came under severe attack at home when the Republicans charged it with incompetence and lack of will for handing American foreign policy to the U.N. Saddam had averted the attack and had scored another victory by showing just how isolated the U.S. had become.

As befits him, Saddam now overplayed his hand. He resumed his obstructionist policies and on December 8, UNSCOM informed the Security Council that the inspectors could not perform their duties. A week later, the teams withdrew and formally reported that Iraq was engaging in deception. This time, Clinton ordered immediate action — Operation Desert Fox, which started on December 16, 1998 — that consisted of three days of joint Anglo-American air strikes against military and command targets. Unlike the previous “pin-pricks” this was a major undertaking: the allies flew 650 sorties and lobbed 415 cruise missiles at Iraq. The dual goal was to reduce Iraq’s capability for aggression (by degrading its ability to pro-

\(^4\) The Act explicitly stated that “nothing in this Act shall be construed to authorize or otherwise speak to the use of United States Armed Forces (except as provided in section 4(a)(2)) in carrying out this Act.” The section in question refers to using the use up to $97 million for military education and training of opposition organizations.
duce WMDs), and to impress on Saddam the consequences of flouting international demands (by hitting military facilities to weaken his police state). The aftermath, however, was not impressive: Russia, France, and China all called for lifting the oil-embargo on Iraq but the U.S. threatened to veto any attempt to implement that. Clinton was losing the game with the dictator, and was even accused of trying to distract the public from the Lewinsky scandal by using force against Iraq.

On December 19, 1998 Clinton announced that it would be the policy of the U.S. government to topple Saddam’s regime. This was a momentous shift from containment and soon many foreign governments tried to assess just how serious the U.S. was about this. Some offered to help, others warned against the action, but many clearly believed that the U.S. was getting ready to rid the world of Saddam. For his part, the dictator was in trouble: Desert Fox had hit him hard and he was busy stabilizing his rule again. As the U.S. administration was developing plans for regime change in Iraq, the Yugoslav problem flared up again when Milošević undertook the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo. The Clinton administration was drawn in another war it did not want, and in March 1999 NATO began its bombing raids to force Serbia to reverse its policy. Although Milošević capitulated, it had been a close call and many in Washington had expected that it would be necessary to send ground troops to accomplish the task. Clinton became wary of walking into another war on his own, and resolved to work to restore the consensus in the U.N. All that achieved was more gains for Iraq.

After several months of intense diplomacy, UNSC extended the Oil-for-Food program and adopted Resolution 1284 on December 17, 1999. The resolution lifted the limits on how much oil Iraq could sell to pay for humanitarian aid, and greatly expanded the list of goods that constituted such aid. It kept the military embargo in place and retained U.N. control over the financing of the operation. In a major concession, the U.S. agreed to suspend the economic sanctions provided Iraq continued to cooperate with the United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC, which replaced UNSCOM). The price of that concession was French support for the resolution but when the French learned that the Russians were planning to abstain, they abstained as well. Saddam’s policy of awarding lucrative trade deals to the French and the Russians had paid off. China, ever leery of siding with the U.S., also joined the abstainers. Saddam had managed to split the UNSC yet again. Despite the resolution, the weapons inspectors did not return to Iraq. Even worse, when it became clear that the U.S. would not use force to overthrow Saddam, other countries rushed to make nice with him and the sanctions regime fell completely apart. Oil smuggling reached unprecedented levels, and the U.S. estimated that about 20% of the revenue ended up in Saddam’s hands.

By the middle of 2000, the U.S. administration was essentially just holding the line on Iraq. Clinton was deeply involved in a last-ditch effort to secure a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians, and when that fell through, the Palestinians launched the al-Aqsa intifada on September 28, 2000. Saddam now took the
opportunity to split the U.S., which was expected to support Israel, from its Arab allies, which were expected to side with the Palestinians. If he could widen the rift between them, perhaps the Arab states would expel the U.S. forces from their bases in the Middle East, and the containment regime would collapse altogether. For this, the confrontation had to escalate into a full-blown crisis, and the rock-throwing Palestinians were unlikely to achieve that on their own. Saddam made some arrangements with Syria and began deploying the Republic Guard forces west. If Iraqi forces were to enter Syria in some sort of joint operation, then Israel would regard this as an imminent threat and a cause for war. If Israel attacked Syria, the crisis would escalate into an all-out war that would drag the U.S. in and pit it against the Arabs. Washington coordinated with Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia and put tremendous pressure on Syria to abandon whatever scheme it had concocted with Iraq. As a result, in late October the Iraqi forces returned to their bases; there would be no wider Arab-Israeli War.

This was the last confrontation between Clinton and Saddam. The outgoing administration bequeathed a festering problem to incoming President Bush.Containment had failed: the regional allies would not support military action, the UNSC had split and would not authorize the use of force, the sanctions regime was in ruins, smuggling had given Saddam a new lease on life, the inspectors had not returned, the internal opposition had collapsed, the Kurds were in disarray, the covert activities programs had been aborted, and the dictator was ensconced in Baghdad, seemingly able to survive any challenge. The new administration would somehow have to magically rebuild the consensus to contain Saddam — a tall order given a decade of failures in that regard — or face the unpleasant choice between leaving him to his own devices or undertaking the aggressive option of regime change.

2.1 Bush vs. Hussein – UNFINISHED, sorry

numerous reasons for war, many (most?) predating 9/11. regime change was already the state policy under clinton, and experience of last years showed that achieving it through sanctions or coup or revolution would be, well, impossible; some, like, rumsfeld, had called on clinton to consider military action against iraq, and several bush advisors began building a case for that immediately upon coming to office; bush had little interest in that, however, but 9/11 would change that too b/c of the conclusion that threats could not be allowed to fester while hoping for the best; the attacks had really solidified the notion that the president had a duty to prevent potential threats them from becoming physical attacks, especially if SH harbored WMDs and could conceivable conspire with terrorists; since SH had developed chem/bio weapons and did try to develop nukes, and could only be forced to dismantle the programs when defectors revealed their existence and was now again obstructing inspections, it was reasonable to conclude that he had the intent and, given the loosening of the inspections/sanctions regime, the opportunity too to
resume work on that; he also had tilted toward the religious spectrum, was paying $25K to families of suicide bombers, his intel services were in touch with islamic extremists, including, specifically al-Qaeda; under these circumstances, the logic of containment and deterrence no longer looked acceptable given the havoc of 9/11; in other words, the reasons for overthrowing S’s regime were largely unchanged; what did change was the strategy to accomplish that because time was not on the American side: it would have to be direct military action by the US; (at this point, the administration got carried away with the idea of democratizing iraq after SH’s ouster: domino theory plus morality play)

the fact that the reasons were the same made it difficult to sell a war on iraq to the public, which, after all, had heard it all before and had evinced no desire to do anything more than what clinton had already done; the admin chose to focus on the immediate danger posed by WMDs to the exclusion to the other reasons (e.g., ties to terrorists, the failure of containment/sanctions leaving him virtually unchecked in developing WMDs, the misery he had inflicted on iraq, the continuous threat he posed to neighbors, and fact that US would have to continue to maintain military presence in the region (which was upsetting already) and engage in periodic costly action to deal with iraq’s provocative mobilizations and violations of no-fly zones; all of this was going to get worse with iraq’s position now receiving direct/indirect backing from 3/5 of UNSC)

as deputy defsec Paul Wolfowitz stated in an interview,

The truth is that for reasons that have a lot to do with the U.S. government bureaucracy we settled on the one issue that everyone could agree on which was weapons of mass destruction as the core reason, but... there have always been three fundamental concerns. One is weapons of mass destruction, the second is support for terrorism, the third is the criminal treatment of the Iraqi people. Actually I guess you could say there’s a fourth overriding one which is the connection between the first two.


clear statement that the reduction of complexity that bush prompted so well in 2001 had now found its logical culmination in the iraq case: the administration now ran wild with the WMD on somewhat flimsy evidence and, unfortunately, created the perception that this was all there was to the problem sh posed; the danger with this, of course, was that when no WMDs were found, the admin was accused of going to war under false pretenses and lying to the public, neither of which was actually true; as far as generating support for invading iraq, however, the strategy worked: in early 2003, fully 87% of americans believed SH had ties to AQ, and majority accepted war with iraq as part of war on terror; this support extended to congress again, which duly passed resolution auth force
SH: talks with AQ, permits al-Zarqawi & extremist Kurds; turns to religion; govt sponsored grey market and smuggling to avoid sanctions; preparation for guerilla warfare (weapons caches, safe houses, etc) although not b/c expecting US invasion but b/c possible fight with shia; sunni tribes benefit from regime policies; containment has failed and sanctions about to end

“Major economic powers agreed Sunday to write off more than $31 billion in debt for Iraq in a deal that boosted U.S. efforts to help put the Iraqi economy back on its feet. Under the agreement, the Paris Club of 19 creditor nations will write off 80 percent of the $38.9 billion that Iraq owes them” http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A3109-2004Nov21.html, accessed March 13, 2016.