U.S. Foreign Policy: Band-Aid Diplomacy

Branislav L. Slantchev
Department of Political Science, University of California, San Diego

Last updated: February 26, 2016

The successful de-nuclearization of former Soviet republics, the implementation of the START I and II treaties with the attendant massive reduction in nuclear arsenals in the U.S. and Russia, and the effective assistance in the Russian efforts to secure the warheads and fissile material were among the most important achievements of Clinton’s foreign policy, and marked milestones in the security relations among the countries involved. Clinton would oversee another important triumph in the Balkans (to which we shall dedicate a separate lecture). His other security-related policies, however, exposed some of the problems in the doctrine of enlargement, especially when it came to places where the humanitarian impetus collided with the absence of genuine American interests.

1 Withdrawal from Somalia

Somalia is a country in East Africa that both the U.S. and the USSR had competed over because of its strategic location. With that rivalry ending, the Somalian President Barre was overthrown in January 1991, and the country sank into a civil war between various warlords, all amply armed with the weapons the two superpowers had left behind. The war ravaged the country that was quite poor anyway. The fighting caused over 20,000 casualties by the end of the year. It also ravaged Somalia’s agriculture causing famine that killed over 300,000 people within a year and threatened another 2 million with imminent starvation. The U.N. took the lead in organizing humanitarian aid and securing the food supply and in August 1992, President Bush authorized Operation Provide Relief that deployed about 400 people to Kenya to assist with that. These efforts were unsuccessful because the warlords confiscated much of the food, and obstructed its distribution. By now the death toll had climbed to 500,000 and 1.5 million Somalis had become refugees. In America, CNN broadcast shocking images of starvation producing a groundswell of public pressure on the administration to do something about it.

In December 1992, Bush initiated Operation Restore Hope, which deployed American troops as part of a multinational force under U.N. authorization. The 25,000-strong force quickly managed to stabilize the country and wrest control of
the distribution of food and medicine from the warlords. The number of deaths from starvation and disease had dropped dramatically. On March 15, 1993, the fifteen warring factions agreed to terms to restore peace, enter a process of national reconciliation, and establish a democratic state. The U.N. took over the mission, which now included the disarmament of the Somalis and expanded enforcement capabilities that were to assist in nation building. By the end of the month, 28 countries sent peacekeepers to Somalia, and the U.S. formally handed command to the U.N. on May 4. By June, only 1,200 U.S. combat troops remained the country to support about 3,000 American peacekeepers. The rapid scaling down of American forces, however, encouraged a revival of the conflict. It soon became clear that one of the most important warlords, General Mohammed Farrah Aidid, would not cooperate with the implementation of the March agreement and would do everything possible to thwart it.

On June 5, Aidid ordered an attack on U.N. peacekeepers, which caused the deaths of 24 Pakistanis, and the wounding of 60 men (3 of them American). After the UNSC passed Resolution 837 authorizing the arrest of the people responsible for this attack, U.S. troops began hunting for Aidid. Since the General controlled the capital Mogadishu, it was highly unlikely that the nation-building project could get underway in Somalia while he was still around and opposing it. During the summer, the fighting between Aidid and the Americans escalated with repeated attacks on Mogadishu that killed scores of Aidid supporters but failed to get either him or any of his trusted lieutenants. When Aidid’s militia blew up several U.S. soldiers, Clinton ordered the U.S. Army Rangers to Somalia. The new task force registered some success by capturing Aidid’s main financier but then the militia shot down an American helicopter. While the U.S. military was hunting the elusive General, the Clinton administration secretly dispatched Jimmy Carter to open negotiations with Aidid. It did not inform the U.S. commander in Somalia about this initiative, but when he requested armored reinforcements in September, the Secretary of Defense Les Aspin denied it. This decision would come back to haunt Aspin in just a few days.

On October 3, 1993, the Rangers attempted to capture two of Aidid’s top lieutenants in Mogadishu, but the operation ran into difficulties leading to the downing of two Black Hawk helicopters and an urban firefight between Somali militiamen and the Americans. The Somalis repeatedly attempted to overrun the American positions, sometimes using civilians to shield the militiamen. In the ensuing melee, 18 US soldiers were killed, and the same TV sets now showed grisly images of one of their naked bodies dragged through the streets to the jeers of onlookers. It is unclear how many Somalis died in the battle, but estimates range from about 300 to over 1,000. Many of these deaths were of civilian shields that the American soldiers had to fire upon in order to get through to the militiamen. The U.S. forces, however, succeeded in their mission and captured three of Aidid’s top lieutenants among over 20 other supporters.
The responsibility for the tactical disaster lay squarely with the Department of Defense, which had inadequate intelligence, had sent unprotected helicopters into a war zone, had no ground troops nearby that could intervene if the operation went south, and had denied the request for reinforcements. Clinton immediately ordered a stop to all military action against Aidid and even though he beefed up the military presence in Somalia, it was only a short-term measure designed to enhance their defensive capabilities. On October 7, the President announced that American troops would be fully withdrawn from Somalia by the end of March 1994. The administration sent representatives to open negotiations with Aidid, and in December Les Aspin took all the blame for refusing to authorize armored vehicles and gunships in support of the original mission, and resigned.

Aidid’s defiance of both the U.N. and the U.S., whose repeated failures to capture him had only resulted in hostility to their presence, was amply rewarded. The General’s prestige soared when Clinton assented to his demand for a “Somali-based political settlement,” meaning the complete withdrawal of foreign forces. The U.S. completed its pullout before the self-imposed deadline in 1994, and within a year all remaining 20,000 U.N. troops left Somalia as well. The General did not live long enough to enjoy the fruits of his victory: on August 1 1995, he died from wounds sustained in a fight in Mogadishu.

The termination of the mission in Somalia, however, had wider and long-lasting repercussions for the U.S. because Clinton’s behavior was interpreted as a headlong retreat in the face of essentially negligible losses. The Somali fiasco would be used as an example of how easy it was to push the U.S. around despite its apparent military might. The public pressure—which had initially prompted the humanitarian intervention—had too readily swung to the other extreme after the Battle of Mogadishu, clamoring for immediate withdrawal.1 Clinton himself soured on nation-building, at least in places as remote as Somalia. Both the public and the administration became aware of how easy it was in these strife-torn places for factions to bite the hand that fed them without much concern about the humanitarian consequences of doing so.

The political fallout from this failure also haunted the administration’s foreign policy, which now became excessively concerned with avoiding U.S. casualties. All of this could not but reward extremist opponents, especially the members of rising terrorist organizations. From their position of distinct military inferiority it would have been exceptionally difficult to attract followers for a hopeless fight against America. But what if America had no stomach for a fight? What if killing a handful of American soldiers panicked the nation and compelled its administration to abandon the policies that caused them? The future looked much brighter then.

Moreover, in the wake of the chaotic U.S. (and U.N.) withdrawal, the lawless

---

1Some of this was no doubt resentment at the sight of women and children dancing on top of the burned out hulk of an American helicopter. After all, it was these innocent civilians that the U.S. troops had been trying to help.
region fell easy prey to Islamic extremists who proved to be the only ones capable of suppressing some of the violence and providing some services. The example of Somalia would wind up in the mythology constructed by the likes of Osama bin Laden, where it joined the other fairy tale, in which a handful of intrepid Arab fighters helped the Afghan guerrillas defeat the Soviet superpower in Afghanistan. Now, a handful of militiamen armed with AK-47s had defeated the American superpower in Somalia. Bin Laden, in fact, claimed some credit for Mogadishu although the evidence clearly shows he had nothing to do with it. (More on that later.)

2 Inaction in Rwanda

Given the complete turn-about of American policy in Africa after Somalia, it is not difficult to see a connection between that and the tragic events that now unfolded in Rwanda. The genocide there began on April 7, 1994, less than two weeks after the last U.S. troops left Somalia. In Rwanda, members of the extremist informal Hutu organization, the akazu, held many of the important positions of authority in the government, and did not wish to share political power with the minority Tutsi, who had collaborated with the Belgian colonial administration. In the wake of decolonization, the Hutu and the Tutsi fought for dominance in Rwanda and Burundi, with over 200,000 Hutus perishing under extremist Tutsi rulers in Burundi. After Tutsi officers assassinated the democratically elected president of Burundi in 1993, violence broke out against, causing an estimated 25,000 deaths on each side. In Rwanda, the Hutu had taken power in 1962 but they had repressed the Tutsi, causing some to flee to neighboring countries, where they plotted to bring down the government. The Tutsi rebels launched an attack on Rwanda in 1990, and the fighting that followed led directly to the 1994 genocide.

In early 1993, the Hutu extremists compiled lists of moderate Hutus, whom they considered traitors, they planned to kill. They imported large numbers of machetes, saws, scissors, and razor blades, which they distributed around the countryside. When the Tutsi assassinated the Burundian president, a wave of anger and fear swept the Hutu population: it was all too easy now to paint all Tutsis as enemies of the Hutus. The akazu realized that they could use this temporary situation to their advantage and armed militia groups with automatic weapons. The commander of the U.N. mission in Rwanda got wind of akazu plans to kill Belgian members of the mission and register all Tutsi in the capital. Since the mission had been established in October 1993 with the consent of both warring parties, Kofi Annan decided that there was no authority to do anything that could be interpreted as playing favorites with one of them.

On April 6, 1994 the presidents of both Rwanda and Burundi were killed when their plane was shot down near the Rwandan capital. Although blamed on the Tutsi at the time, subsequent investigation suggests that it was the extremists Hutu
who were responsible for the murder. This set the akazu plans into motion. The Rwandan Prime Minister was killed along with his escort of 10 Belgian soldiers, and everyone on the list of “traitors” was assassinated over night. The akazu then implemented the rest of their “final solution,” which was to exterminate the entire Tutsi population of Rwanda. Using the rallying cry that blamed the Tutsi for the death of the president, military officers of the akazu ordered Hutu communities to kill every Tutsi they could lay their hands on, including babies.

Aside from the Tutsi rebels, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), there was no organized opposition to the slaughter, and in the first six weeks alone about 800,000 Rwandans, the vast majority Tutsi but also Hutu who “looked” like Tutsi or who were suspected of sympathizing with them, were exterminated. The killings spared no one, but Tutsi women had even more suffering in store for them as the Hutu turned to rape as a weapon. Rape was exceptionally brutal and extraordinarily widespread, and the perpetrators were both military and civilians, sometimes assisted by Hutu women. The Hutu extremists released hundreds of AIDS patients from hospitals and turned them into rape squads. Sexual mutilation after the rape also became common. By the end of April, the killings in the akazu heartlands stopped because all Tutsi there had been eliminated. The RPF, however, steadily advanced in the north and in the east, ending the genocide in the areas it captured. Half a million Hutu fled from the occupied areas in fear of retribution.

Although the RPF did conduct some reprisals, its main goal was to overthrow the genocidal regime and assume control of government. By late June, the RPF was close to total victory, having cornered the extremist Hutu in the south-west corner of the country. At this point (June 19), the French government announced its intention to intervene and organize a “safe zone” to protect...the extremist Hutu.

France had been providing military and diplomatic support to the Hutu government for a decade, and this included an intervention in 1990 that had saved it from the RPF. Although ostensibly meant to “maintain a presence pending the arrival of the expanded UNAMIR [U.N. mission in Rwanda]” for the security of refugees, the French-led U.N. force was quickly compromised when the perpetrators of the genocide welcomed it but then continued to kill all Tutsi who dared come out of hiding. The RPF had not forgotten the French role in 1990 and did not halt its advance until the safe-zone had shrunk enough. It took the capital on July 4, and completed its conquest of the country by the end of the month.

Confirmed news of the genocide came out as early as April 9, when Polish U.N. observers witnessed the slaughter of over 100 Tutsi in a church in the capital. They contacted the commander of the UNAMIR forces with a request to send some nearby troops but the request was denied with the explanation that such incidents were occurring all over the city and it was not possible to react to all of them. It was, however, quite possible for over 1,000 heavily armed European troops to show up on the same day and escort all European civilians out of the country. They did not stay to help UNAMIR, not that the U.N. forces were going to do anything.
In fact, on April 11, the Belgian soldiers abandoned thousands of civilians at the Official Technical School where the Belgian UNAMIR had been stationed. Following their withdrawal, the Hutu militia stormed the school and killed everyone. The only actions UNAMIR took involved numerous attempts to establish a cease-fire, all of which were rejected by the RPF, which refused to end the fighting while the killings continued. It was this persistence by the RPF that enabled at least some Tutsi to survive.

Fresh from its debacle in Somalia, the U.S. stood by and supported the UNSC Resolution that authorized the French-led intervention in the summer. Even though he vigorously defended his decision to withdraw from Somalia at the time, Clinton would later say that the failure to intervene in Rwanda was the greatest policy blunder of his presidency.²

The final toll is horrifying. On the eve of the genocide, Rwanda had 7.3 million people, of whom about 1.1 million were Tutsi. The slaughter took the lives of nearly 1.2 million people, of whom over 800,000 were Tutsi, in just 100 days.

It is important to realize that even though the genocide that is often portrayed as if it was perpetrated along ethnic lines with neighbor suddenly turning on neighbor in an orgy of violence, the reality was quite different. The genocide was not spontaneous — it had been organized by the akazu over more than a year — and was planned (as the kill lists of prominent Tutsi and moderate Hutu showed). The violence was not perpetrated by Hutus in general but by the police, the Presidential Guard, the Hutu army, and the Interahamwe militias that had been created, armed, and trained by the akazu. The militias, which fielded about 50,000 men, had criminals, football hooligans, and assorted thugs at their core, and once the killings began they were joined by large numbers of the extremely poor seeking loot and revenge on the more prosperous. Loot, in fact, was a great motivator for many to join. While it is not easy to establish just how many people took part in the massacres, the victorious Tutsi immediately imprisoned about 33,000 on related charges, and that number was later expanded to 125,000. The upper bound on the total has been estimated at about 200,000.³

This is an extraordinarily high number but one must bear in mind two things. The army, the Presidential Guard, the police, and the extremist militia gangs would account for about 120,000 (under the leadership of about 700 elite Hutu). These were the hardcore killers who perpetrated most of the violence. (If each of them murdered 1 person every 10 days, then they could account for 1.2 million victims

---


over the 100 days period.) Perhaps more relevant is the fact that even at the upper bound, the genocidal group would constitute about 8% of the adult Hutu population. In other words, 92% of Hutus did not take part in the killings, which implies that the ethnic-based explanation for the genocide is just a myth. Unfortunately, it was a myth that was at the root of the failure to intervene here, and it would be a myth that would keep Europe and the U.S. on the sidelines when violence escalated in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

3 Intervention in Haiti

American coercive involvement in Haiti can be traced back to September 1991, when a military coup ousted the democratically elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Following U.N. sanctions on oil sales to Haiti and mounting diplomatic pressure from the Orbanization of American States (OAS), the leader of the military junta, General Raoul Cedras, struck a deal with Aristide in July. The former president would be allowed to return by the end of October 1993, the junta would be pardoned, the Haitian army modernized, and a new police force formed. Violence in Haiti continued unabated and soon the U.S. began to suspect that the junta was not going to uphold its end of the bargain. Clinton, however, decided to go ahead as if Aristide was going to return as per agreement. In October, he dispatched a military ship with 200 U.S. and Canadian army engineers and military police on a joint peace-keeping mission whose purpose was to ensure the safe arrival of Aristide. On the 11th, barely a week following the well-publicized Mogadishu debacle, the ship arrived in Port-au-Prince, where it was met by an angry mob that yelled how it was going to make this another Somalia. Unwilling to take any risks, the ship turned back the following day, cementing the perception of Clinton’s foreign policy as falling in tatters.

In part because of this public image disaster and in part because impotence in the Caribbean would be intolerable, Clinton’s administration increased pressure on Cedras but the general would not budge. UNSC imposed a naval blockade on Haiti while the U.S. threatened intervention in an attempt to coerce the junta to give up power. After trying economic sanctions with no effect, Clinton finally resolved to remove Cedras by force. On July 31, 1994, the UNSC passed Resolution 940, the first ever authorizing the use of force to restore democracy in a member state. It provided for a 6-months U.N. mandate to maintain order, followed by the reinstatement of the Aristide government. The 25,000-strong invasion force, backed by two aircraft carriers and extensive air support, assembled in early September for Operation Uphold Democracy. On the 17th, Jimmy Carter and Colin Powell launched a last-ditch diplomatic effort to keep the peace. As the negotiations dragged on, the operation was launched on schedule on September 19, fully prepared to execute a frontal assault on Haiti. With military invasion imminent, Cedras capitulated
to avoid the bloodshed. When he agreed to relinquish power, the invasion force was converted en route into a peacekeeping mission, and the commanding general became a diplomat. Aristide returned to Haiti on October 15.

The invasion-cum-peacekeeping force restored Aristide to power, disarmed the army that had supported the coup and the paramilitary groups that had terrorized Haiti, stabilized the country, and trained the new police force to maintain security. The operation was transferred to UNMIH (United Nations Mission in Haiti) command on March 31, 1995, which deployed 6,000 peacekeepers. In December of the same year a new president, René Préval, was elected in free and fair elections, and a peaceful transfer of power occurred on February 7, 1996. Democracy had been returned to Haiti, and Clinton referred to this mission as “remarkable success.”

Unfortunately, this proved to be only a passing optimistic interlude as the country descended into poverty and chaos. With unemployment reaching the unbelievable 60%, most foreign investment collapsed, and the barely functioning government could not even pass legislation to absorb the aid that was trying to make it into the country. The U.S. soon lost its appetite for nation-building, and by 2000 the island was abandoned to its fate and at the mercy of the warring factions.

In November of that year, Aristide won the presidential elections, in which the opposition had refused to participate. He failed to stabilize the country and violence escalated as his supporters attempted to suppress the opposition. This triggered a rebellion in 2004, Aristide was forced into exile, and the U.N. again stationed peacekeepers in Haiti. The 2006 elections brought Préval back to power, and the U.S. engaged in a sustained effort to prevent Aristide from going back to Haiti.

The country has been buffeted by several tropical storms resulting in loss of life and burgeoning humanitarian problem. In 2010, the problem turned into disaster when Haiti was struck by a magnitude-7.0 earthquake — which killed an estimated 85,000 and displaced over 1.5 million — and the government’s inept relief policies.

4 Terrorism and al Qaeda

We shall explore this topic in quite a bit of detail when we study the emergence of the Islamic jihadist movement. For now, a brief summary will suffice. Clinton’s tenure saw an escalation of Islamic attacks, most somehow connected to al Qaeda, on U.S. interests both here and abroad. There were bombings of the World Trade Center in New York (February 26, 1993, Islamic terrorists, possibly linked to al Qaeda), the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia (June 25, 1996, Hezbollah, possibly assisted by Iran and al Qaeda), the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya (August 7, 1998, al Qaeda), and the USS Cole in Yemen (October 12, 2000, al Qaeda). On August 20, 1998, the administration responded to the embassy bombings by launching missile strikes against al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and a suspected chemical plant in Sudan (which turned out to have no links to terrorists). This, the
freeze on bin Laden’s assets in the U.S., and a $5 million bounty on his head, was as far as this administration would go. The President, mired in domestic scandals about his sexual escapades and possibly illegal deals with Chinese interests that had contributed to his election campaign, was too distracted to do anything.

5 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.4

In addition to the sanctions, the Bush administration also authorized a covert pro-
gram 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
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 (Decem-
ber, 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 promi-
nent 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 pro-
grams (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 pen-
entrate 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 mas-
sive 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

4Speech by Robert Gates at the meeting for the American Newspaper Publishers Association,
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.

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 sum-
mer, 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 UNCOM 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 toward these rogue states is simple: They must be contained.⁶

As Clausewitz said, however, in strategy everything is simple, but because of that, not 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 (val-
ued 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 appro-
priately. 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, UN-
SCR 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 de-
flection 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 smug-
gling 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 antagoniz-
ing 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 UN-
SCOM 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 incontrovert-
ible 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 per-
sonnel. 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 the 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 to 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 emboldened, 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 reso-
olution 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.” 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 produce 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

---

7The 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.
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.

6 NATO and Russia

Although NATO never fired a shot in anger during the Cold War, it had been a great boon to Western Europe. Ostensibly created merely to enhance American commitment to the defense of Europe against the Soviet Union, the alliance had served two very useful purposes beyond deterrence: it had allowed the Europeans to free-ride on American military power, and it had spared them potentially divisive decisions about foreign policy. Thus, for decades European governments were able to redirect much of their spending to social programs instead of defense, which in turn had prevented either Germany or France to become too threatening militarily to its neighbor.

Under the American security umbrella and with American encouragement, European integration had proceeded apace, resulting in the formation of the European Union in 1993, and in the introduction of a common currency in 2002. As of 2014, the EU comprises 28 states, encompassing almost all of Europe. Its population of about 505 million exceeds that of the United States by nearly 60% (only China and India have larger populations). Its GDP of $16.26 trillion is very close to U.S.’s $16.80 trillion (although its larger population means that per capita the EU is far behind the US: $32,198 to $52,829). The EU’s military spending in 2013 was €192.5 billion (about $258 billion), which is exceeded only by the American defense budget of about $640 billion. Coordination among the members, however, has been especially troublesome in security matters. This is partly by design and has to do with the role NATO plays in Europe.

When the collapse of the Soviet Union deprived NATO of its principal opponent, some analysts wondered whether the alliance had to disband now that it had lost its
purpose. While Russia did not present a threat on the Soviet order and was in such deep economic distress that it looked (at least for a while) that had it not been for its possession of nuclear weapons, it might have slipped from the ranks of great powers altogether, NATO’s cohesive role in Europe was untouched by the end of the Cold War. Unified Germany soon emerged as the dominant economy in Europe and the economic engine of the EU. If Germany had to provide for its defense on its own, this potential could be converted into military power that would come to threaten its neighbors and perhaps even Russia. As Russia recovered, it could similarly become threatening to its neighbors, especially the former republics, particularly if democratic institutions failed to take hold and Moscow reverted to its authoritarian traditions. With Germany and Russia resurgent, the Central European states — especially Poland and Hungary — would have to build up their own independent militaries. With tensions simmering in various parts of Europe and violence having established a precarious balance in the Balkans, the continent could see arms races, instability, and a slide to yet another catastrophe. NATO could fill the power vacuum left by the disbanding of the Warsaw Pact and keep Europe far less militarized than it could be. Doing so, however, required extending its security guarantees to states formerly part of the Soviet Union or members of the Soviet bloc. Any penetration of NATO east of the Iron Curtain, however, was bound to elicit the vehement opposition of the Russians.

As of 2014, NATO has 28 members, of which 21 are also members of the European Union. Twelve of these were added after the 1990 German unification, all of them in Eastern Europe.