



Iraq attack: Can we talk?

Just for the record, the administration's stated policy on Iraq is that it would like to facilitate what Secretary of State Colin Powell first called a "regime change." Aside from the fact that the promise of regime change sounds vaguely like a 10-step guide to softer skin, the euphemism speaks for itself: We want to get rid of Saddam Hussein, an evil man who would no doubt like to destroy us. Fair enough.

It's no surprise that more than 70 percent of Americans would like to see an attack on Iraq. They believe, post-Afghanistan, that America would win, with or without any allies. Most of all, they

think the world would be better off without Saddam. Who can disagree with that?

But wait. Isn't there a conversation we're missing here before declaring war or announcing our intention to overthrow a leader? Sure, the public is all for it in the abstract, but doesn't the president need to make his case for action to both Congress and Americans? If we overtly claim the right to change the regime of another country by force of arms, don't we need to explain why, particularly to potential allies? Is our action pre-emptive? Is there an imminent threat? "The forces that are going to be needed will represent one of the most significant and controversial deployments of American power since Vietnam," says William Galston, a former Clinton domestic-policy adviser. "Yet we've barely begun to engage publicly on the complex issues it raises."

No consensus. Instead, the questions and disagreements have largely been about tactics and strategy—about the best way to "take out" Saddam, as Vice President Dick Cheney delicately puts it. Such as: The Joint Chiefs of Staff want to delay any invasion of Iraq, fretting that a military operation would involve 200,000 troops. Other administration officials say that's not true and push for a war similar to the Afghan model. Still others call for a covert operation to overthrow Saddam. Which might be fine, if the CIA and the State Department could just agree on which Iraqi insurgents to back.

And as Bush waits, conservatives accuse him of going "wobbly" on his war on terrorism. Meantime, the president tells Europeans last week that "I have no war plans on my desk." Which, Arizona Sen. John McCain tells me, "is disingenuous. That's sophistry. How about long-range war plans? Or what about the guy down the hall?" As for McCain, he's not shy about his own plans for Saddam: "Why not try to overthrow this guy? What do you have to lose if you fail?"



Iraqi President Saddam Hussein on his 65th birthday in April

"How about long-range war plans?"

Let's stipulate that both McCain and Bush are right: Saddam needs to go. That means the president needs to tell Americans that it's not going to be a cakewalk—that the Republican Guard in Iraq is no Taliban, that we'll very likely have to go it largely alone, and that we have no idea what will happen once we win. And how about explaining why? The initial justification for an attack on Iraq—linking it to September 11—has proved flimsy, so the White House's new line is that Saddam is capable of doing something even worse. If it's the threat of weapons of mass destruction, tell us why a good inspections regime would not be enough to forestall war. Tell us why we are right and many of our European allies are wrong.

Even some Democrats—who privately express reservations about action in Iraq—have taken to muting themselves. "Democrats don't want to be on the record opposing [deposing Saddam], but they don't really want to support it, either," says Michael O'Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. "Still, no one wants to defend Saddam's right to stay in power." So the conversation among potential dissenters is instead largely peripheral: Let's not talk about regime change until the war in Afghanistan is over, they say. Or, let's establish a coalition to prepare for a post-Saddam Iraq. Better yet, let's talk to our allies. Way to go out on a limb, folks.

It's not good enough—even with a clear enemy in sight—to have a trickle-down theory of public engagement on Iraq. It's a good idea for a democracy that is contemplating a dangerous step to conduct a robust conversation about it before the fact. President Bush led that conversation when he spoke to Congress about the war on terrorism last September 20. If there is to be another war, he needs to do it again. ●

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