

## What a Little War in Iraq Could Do

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The United States is marching to war as if there were no alternative. Judging from President Bush's press conference last night, the administration seems to have no exit strategy, no contingency plans to stop the march. Our leaders have created a situation where any failure to fight would count as a victory for Saddam Hussein and Jacques Chirac.

Would that victory be worse than the war itself? It could be, if it served only to postpone the war. The French would claim to have saved the peace; Saddam Hussein would claim to have defeated the American effort to overthrow him. But then, down the road, the United States would almost certainly have to fight under harder conditions against a stronger Iraq.

The American march is depressing, but the failure of opponents of the war to offer a plausible alternative is equally depressing. France and Russia undoubtedly raised the diplomatic stakes on Wednesday by threatening to veto a new Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force in Iraq. But they once again failed to follow up the rhetoric with anything meaningful.

What would a plausible alternative look like? The way to avoid a big war is to intensify the little war that the United States is already fighting. It is using force against Iraq every day -- to protect the no-flight zones and to stop and search ships heading for Iraqi ports. Only the American threat to use force makes the inspections possible -- and possibly effective.

When the French claim that force is a "last resort," they are denying that the little war is going on. And, indeed, France is not participating in it in any significant way. The little war is almost entirely the work of American and British forces; the opponents of the big war have not been prepared to join or support or even acknowledge the work that the little war requires.

But Mr. Bush could stop the American march toward the big war if he challenged the French (and the Germans and the Russians) to join the little war. The result would not be a victory for Mr. Hussein or Mr. Chirac, and it would ensure that the Iraqi regime would get weaker over time.

So here is an exit strategy for the Bush administration. They haven't asked for it, but they need it. First, extend the northern and southern no-flight zones to include the whole country. America has already drastically restricted Iraqi sovereignty, so this would not be anything new. There are military reasons for the extension -- the range of missiles, the speed of planes, the reach of radar all make it difficult for the United States and Britain to defend the northern and the southern regions of Iraq without control of central airspace. But the main reason would be punitive: Iraq has never accepted the containment regime put in place after the Gulf War, and its refusal to do that should lead to tighter and tighter containment.

Second, impose the "smart sanctions" that the Bush administration talked about before 9/11 and insist that Iraq's trading partners commit themselves to enforcing them. Washington should announce sanctions of its own against countries that don't cooperate, and it should also punish any companies that try to sell military equipment to Iraq. Third, the United States should expand the United Nations' monitoring system in all the ways that have recently been proposed: adding inspectors, bringing in United Nations soldiers (to guard military installations after they have been inspected), sending surveillance planes without providing 48 hours' notice, and so on.

Finally, the United States should challenge the French to make good on their claim that force is indeed a last resort by mobilizing troops of their own and sending them to the Gulf. Otherwise, what they are saying is that if things get very bad, they will unleash the American army. And Saddam Hussein knows that the French will never admit that things have gotten that bad. So, if they are serious, the French have to mount a credible threat of their own. Or better, they have to join the United States in every aspect of the little war.

If an American proposal along these lines received strong international support, if there was a real commitment to sustain the little war for as long as necessary, there would be no good reason for the big war. The march could safely be stopped.

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