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The Right Way

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There are two ways of opposing a war with Iraq. The first way is simple and wrong; the second way is right but difficult.

The first way is to deny that the Iraqi regime is particularly ugly, that it lies somewhere outside the range of ordinary states, or to argue that, however ugly it is, it doesn't pose any significant threat to its neighbors or to world peace. Perhaps, despite Saddam's denials, his government is in fact seeking to acquire nuclear weapons. But other governments are doing the same thing, and if or when Iraq succeeds in developing such weapons—so the argument continues—we can deal with that through conventional deterrence, in exactly the same way that the US and the Soviet Union dealt with each other in the cold war years.

Obviously, if this argument is right, there is no reason to attack Iraq. Nor is there any reason for a strong inspection system, or for the current embargo, or for the northern and southern "no-fly" zones. Some of the most vocal organizers of the antiwar movement, here and in Europe, seem to have adopted exactly this position. It has been overrepresented among speakers at the big demonstrations against the war. Most of the demonstrators, I believe, don't hold this first view; nor is it held by the wider constituency of actual and potential opponents of Bush's foreign policy. But we have to recognize a constant temptation of antiwar politics: to pretend that there really isn't a serious enemy out there.

This pretense certainly keeps things simple, but it is wrong in every possible way. The tyranny and brutality of the Iraqi regime are widely known and cannot be covered up. Its use of chemical weapons in the recent past; the recklessness of its invasions of Iran and Kuwait; the rhetoric of threat and violence that is now standard in Baghdad; the record of the 1990s, when UN

inspectors were systematically obstructed; the cruel repression of the uprisings that followed the Gulf War of 1991; the torture and murder of political opponents—how can all this be ignored by a serious political movement?

Nor should anyone be comfortable with the idea of an Iraq armed with nuclear weapons and then deterred from using them. Not only is it unclear that deterrence will work with a regime like Saddam's, but the emerging system of deterrence will be highly unstable. For it won't only involve the US and Iraq; it will also involve Israel and Iraq. If Iraq is permitted to build nuclear weapons, Israel will have to acquire what it doesn't have at the present time: second-strike capacity. And then there will be Israeli ships in the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean equipped with nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert. This may be "conventional" deterrence, but it is insane to look forward to it.

The right way to oppose the war is to argue that the present system of containment and control is working and can be made to work better. This means that we should acknowledge the awfulness of the Iraqi regime and the dangers it poses, and then aim to deal with those dangers through coercive measures short of war. But this isn't a policy easy to defend, for we know exactly what coercive measures are necessary, and we also know how costly they are.

First, the existing embargo: this can and should be adjusted so as to allow a wider range of products necessary to the civilian population into the country, while still excluding military supplies and the technologies necessary to the development of weapons of mass destruction. But however "smart" the sanctions are, they will still constitute a partial blockade and a forceful restraint of trade, and, given the way Saddam spends his available funds, they will impose severe hardships on ordinary Iraqis. It is fair to say that their own government is responsible for these hardships, since it could spend its money differently, but that does not make them easier to bear. Malnourished children, hospitals without medical supplies, declining longevity rates: all this is the (indirect) consequence of the embargo.

Second, the "no-fly" zones: preventing Iraqi planes from flying over an area that amounts to about half of the country requires constant American

overflights, and this requires in turn what has averaged out as twice-weekly bombings of radar and antiaircraft facilities. So far, no planes or pilots have been lost, and I believe that few civilians have been killed or injured in the bombing raids. Still, this is a risky and costly business, and if it is "short" of war, it isn't far short. On the other hand, if Saddam were allowed free rein in the north and south, against the Kurds and the Shias, the result would probably be a repression so brutal that it would justify, perhaps even require, a military intervention on humanitarian grounds. And that would be a full-scale war.

Third, the UN inspections: these will have to go on indefinitely, as a regular feature of the Iraqi landscape. For whether or not the inspectors find and destroy weapons of mass destruction (some of these are very easy to hide), they themselves are a barrier to any deployment of such weapons. So long as they are moving freely and aggressively around the country, on their own time schedule, Iraq will be under increasing restraint. But the inspection regime will collapse, as it collapsed in the Nineties, unless there is a visible readiness to use force to sustain it. And this means that there have to be troops in the vicinity, like the troops the US government is currently moving into position. It would be better, obviously, if these troops were not only American. But, again, maintaining a readiness of this sort, whoever maintains it, is costly and risky.

Defending the embargo, the American overflights, and the UN inspections: this is the right way to oppose, and to avoid, a war. But it invites the counter-argument that a short war, which made it possible to end the embargo, and the weekly bombings, and the inspection regime, would be morally and politically preferable to this "avoidance." A short war, a new regime, a demilitarized Iraq, food and medicine pouring into Iraqi ports: wouldn't that be better than a permanent system of coercion and control? Well, maybe. But who can guarantee that the war would be short and that the consequences in the region and elsewhere will be limited?

We say of war that it is the "last resort" because of the unpredictable, unexpected, unintended, and unavoidable horrors that it regularly brings. In fact, war isn't the last resort, for "lastness" is a metaphysical condition, which is never actually reached in real life: it is always possible to do something

else, or to do it again, before doing whatever it is that comes last. The notion of lastness is cautionary—but this is a necessary caution: look hard for alternatives before you "let loose the dogs of war."

Right now, even at this last minute, there still are alternatives, and that is the best argument against going to war. I think that it is a widely accepted argument, even though it isn't easy to march with. What do you write on the placards? What slogans do you shout? We need a complicated campaign against the war, whose participants are ready to acknowledge the difficulties and the costs of their politics.

Or, better, we need a campaign that isn't focused only on the war (and that might survive the war)—a campaign for a strong international system, organized and designed to defeat aggression, to stop massacres and ethnic cleansing, to control weapons of mass destruction, and to guarantee the physical security of all the world's peoples. The threefold constraints on Saddam's regime are only one example, but a very important one, of how such an international system should function.

But an international system has to be the work of many different states, not of one state. There have to be many agents ready to take responsibility for the success of the system, not just one. Today, the UN inspection regime is in place in Iraq only because of what many American liberals and leftists, and many Europeans too, called a reckless US threat to go to war. Without that threat, however, UN negotiators would still be dithering with Iraqi negotiators, working on, but never finally agreeing on, the details of an inspection system; the inspectors would not even have packed their bags (and most of the leaders of Europe would be pretending that this was a good thing). Some of us are embarrassed to realize that the threat we opposed is the chief reason for the existence of a strong inspection system, and the existence of a strong inspection system is today the best argument against going to war.

It would have been much better if the US threat had not been necessary—if the threat had come, say, from France and Russia, Iraq's chief trading partners, whose unwillingness to confront Saddam and give some muscle to the UN project was an important cause of the collapse of inspections in the 1990s. This is what internationalism requires: that other states, besides the US,

take responsibility for the global rule of law and that they be prepared to act, politically and militarily, with that end in view. American internationalists —there are a good number of us though not enough—need to criticize the Bush administration's unilateralist impulses and its refusal to cooperate with other states on a whole range of issues from global warming to the International Criminal Court.

But multilateralism requires help from outside the US. It would be easier to make our case if it were clear that there were other agents in international society capable of acting independently and, if necessary, forcefully, and ready to answer for what they do, in places like Bosnia, or Rwanda, or Iraq. When we campaign against a second Gulf War, we should also be campaigning for that kind of multilateral responsibility. And this means that we have demands to make not only on Bush and Co. but also on the leaders of France and Germany, Russia and China, who, although they have recently been supporting continued and expanded inspections, have also been ready, at different times in the past, to appease Saddam. If this preventable war is fought, all of them will share responsibility with the US. When the war is over, they should all be held to account.

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