

Bush Has Not Made His Case

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The State of the Union address was President Bush's opportunity to make the case for a unilateral invasion of Iraq. He failed to do so in a convincing manner. How we get rid of Saddam Hussein is as important in the long run as just getting rid of him. If we do it the wrong way, our action could seriously damage larger national interests.

Among the speech's failings:

1. The president did not demonstrate that a unilateral U.S. invasion of Iraq will help in the fight against the ongoing, more serious, distributed threat of worldwide terrorism. To the contrary, it could well become a giant recruiting vehicle for al Qaeda and its imitators. Young Muslims around the world will see U.S. action without U.N. approval as neocolonialist, motivated more by a desire for Iraqi oil than Iraqi freedom. Many could become terrorists, striking at Americans anywhere in the world. If Americans are safe abroad only when the/re accompanied by bodyguards, it will be difficult, among other things, for the United States to succeed in the world economy.
2. Bush did not acknowledge that a unilateral invasion risks destabilizing Saudi Arabia, Pakistan or Egypt - any one of which would be a major strategic loss for the United States. In Saudi Arabia for example, the most benign potential change involves the overthrow of the current royal leadership by family factions that are much less pro-American. More serious would be a military coup led by an officer corps whose growing membership since 1991 has reflected the Muslim skew more than the royal house. The worst scenario would be a radical Islamic revolt that could gain momentum from unanticipated developments in a U.S. convict with Iraq. Likewise, any radical change in Pakistan could turn over nuclear weapons to Islamic terrorists - the very thing the administration says it's trying to prevent by invading Iraq. Finally, any radical change in Egypt, however unlikely, could pose a mortal threat to Israel.
3. The president minimized the importance of allies in a war against Iraq, as he has in many other areas. The major foreign policy job of the American president is to maintain healthy relations with the great powers -- Europe, Russia, China and Japan. If the United States conveys a vision in which each power can find the realization of its own interests, that job is easier. At the moment, China, Russia and the core states of Europe (Germany and France) oppose a unilateral U.S. invasion of Iraq, and, given U.S. positions on the Kyoto protocol, arms control treaties and the world court, they increasingly see America's world vision as diverging from their own. The administration ignores this opposition at America's peril. Those who preach American hegemony might well be tapped in the swamp of American hubris.
4. Bush's strong remarks ignored the fact that military actions often have unpredictable consequences. For example, the 1991 Persian Gulf War led to a continuing U.S. presence in the Islamic holy land - something the British and French always avoided - and radicalized a generation of Muslims, helping to create the atmosphere for the emergence of Osama bin Laden. This time, what will happen when the shooting stops is far from clear. If we are to be seen as more than transparent hypocrites, we will have to not only win a war and maintain a military presence in Iraq, but also to preside over the development of democracy in a country that makes the former Yugoslavia seem homogeneous. This is a multi-year commitment that could take thousands of U.S. lives and billions of dollars, yet there appears to be no plan for carrying it out. The president has not leveled with the American people about the cost of democratization, nor has he built popular support for occupation. By telling the American public only half the story now, he risks great national division later.

5. The president did not point out that the prospect of unilateral U.S. invasion has caused Iraq's neighbors to put away traditional animosities and begin to consult on what it could mean for them. When Shia Iran, Sunni Saudi Arabia, secular and authoritarian Syria, and secular and democratic Turkey all get together, we should pay attention. None of them has any love for Hussein, and they would welcome his demise, but at a minimum each could be overwhelmed by refugees in the event of war. They also have a common concern about a long, dominant U.S. presence in Iraq. To act without specific consultation with them on the structure of postwar Iraq invites their alienation and their adventurism among Iraq's ethnic groups, making it that much more difficult to establish a multiethnic, democratic Iraq.

No one should underestimate the power of the U.S. military. We have highly trained and patriotic soldiers and the very latest technology. Secretaries Donald Rumsfeld and Colin Powell are enormously talented leaders. There is no doubt the United States can win a war with Iraq. Hussein can be made to pay in overthrow, exile or defeat for what appears now to be his flagrant noncompliance with U.N. Resolution 1441. Still, the timing of military action and the international consensus supporting it are critical. Throughout the Cold War, we pent billions of dollars to contain the Soviet Union. Presidents rallied international support, bolstered our defenses and built consensus, but they never committed forces to a European war. Containment worked. For most of the 1990s, we contained Hussein. The unwillingness of the Clinton administration to do anything decisive when Hussein ejected U.N. inspectors was a serious error that Bush, with a more robust approach, has now corrected.

The president should recognize what he has already accomplished and keep the pressure on Hussein until he disarms or we achieve international consensus (as I believe we can) for military action. Consensus sometimes takes longer. It often doesn't fit a political calendar, but it is far preferable to unilateral action that jeopardizes our long-term leadership abroad and our unity at home.

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