

Deterring Saddam Hussein: A Dangerous Fantasy

by

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The case that American policy toward Saddam Hussein can rely upon deterrence must pass three tests: Will deterrence work in a range of plausible scenarios? Will it produce stability or instability in the Middle East? Do the assumptions of rational deterrence match Saddam Hussein's personality? Deterrence fails to pass the basic tests for national policy.

1.) Plausible scenarios. We do not know how men like Bismarck, Napoleon or Hitler would have used nuclear weapons to frighten and bully their neighbors. But Saddam Hussein could be tempted to exploit such capabilities. Replay the invasion of Kuwait: Iraq has nuclear weapons and missiles that can reach every country in the Middle East and US naval forces in the Persian Gulf. Iraq invades Kuwait with conventional forces and threatens to defend itself with nuclear weapons if attacked. What happens?

With nuclear weapons, Iraq may get to keep Kuwait. When the cities and palaces of billionaire Saudi rulers can be vaporized without warning, would they support a fight? Would Europe support a war for Kuwait if the Saudi oil fields could be irradiated with devastating consequences to their economies? Would Congress vote to send American troops when a single missile directed at the American fleet or base in Saudi Arabia would kill them by the tens of thousands? When an escalating war could cause Haifa or Tel Aviv to be destroyed with millions of deaths and without warning?

True, this is an aggressive scenario. But would Saddam be tempted and think that he could win? How much would America threaten him? UN inspectors have gone to more than 300 sites nominated by US intelligence without finding any weapons, and we could not be assured of destroying Saddam Hussein or his nuclear weapons. Would America be the first to use nuclear weapons, unleash nuclear contamination into the global environment, and kill millions of Iraqi civilians, while potentially leaving Saddam Hussein enough weapons to crosswalk the Saudi oil fields, or Israel, until the West surrendered?

What about another scenario? After Kuwait, imagine that Saddam Hussein secretly gives biological weapons to Islamic fundamentalists to threaten Saudi Arabia unless it shares oil revenues fairly with all Arab peoples, increases financial support to Islamic fundamentalism, and dissociates itself from America. A dozen anthrax-contaminated letters are sent to Saudi government offices and palaces. Does the Saudi royal family risk death, agree, or decamp to the Riviera to earn interest on its billions of dollars of investments?

Biological weapons against America probably cannot be deterred. There are networks throughout the Arab world that hate the United States, and passing the initial samples and instructions would be easy. The destinations of the new envelopes can be a wide range of institutions - our research universities, subway systems, shopping malls. The strategy of terrorism

would be to frighten and demoralize Americans so we withdraw from distant Arab politics - and we might suddenly discover that we prefer energy conservation and to accelerate research on renewable energy.

Such strategies can underestimate America and fail, but Saddam Hussein may not anticipate failure.

2.) Regional stability. The second test for deterrence is whether it produces stability. Instead, greater fear and nuclear proliferation are likely. If Iraq goes nuclear, Saudi Arabia and Iran would move swiftly to acquire their own fissionable material and missile delivery systems. Israel would increase its own arsenal. What Arab countries would trust an American nuclear shield? The logic of deterrence is a more fearful Cold War politics with vastly increased quantities of fissionable material and new delivery systems that will not be under American control.

3.) Saddam s personality. The final test is whether Saddam Hussein s personality is consistent with the assumption of rationality and prudence that deterrence requires? To the contrary, relying upon deterrence is asking for trouble. A decade ago, the CIA s psychiatrists diagnosed Saddam Hussein as a borderline personality - meaning that while he can be coldly rational, he lives inside a highly dramatized and oddly wired global and historical drama with himself as the ultimate hero. Such leaders have messianic motivations and take risks that surprise armchair analysts. And they have an absolute mystical conviction in their ultimate triumph. (Contrary to what a rational analyst might predict, a highly dramatized, public, and dangerous confrontation with America can attract such personalities and become the focus of their lives.) Ultimately, such messianic and narcissistic leaders can miscalculate and overreach. However, like Napoleon or Hitler, they are dangerous and can be brutally destructive. Saddam Hussein was not effectively deterred from invading Kuwait. He did not back down when faced by Desert Storm. In both cases, a deterrence theorist would say that Saddam miscalculated - but that is the warning. And Saddam Hussein has gone from obscurity to become one of the most talked-about leaders in the world. The dangerous public confrontations with America before a global audience are, themselves, a payoff.

If deterrence can work, we should use it. However with Saddam Hussein it is a dangerous fantasy. It will produce danger, instability, and soon - by design or miscalculation - the use of nuclear or biological weapons.

1/2/2003

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