

How Best to Oust Hussein?

By John Deutch
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Many people are calling for the United States to overthrow Saddam Hussein. But how would we actually do it?

The most obvious way would be to attack Iraq with a combination of air and ground forces. But almost no one wants to risk young American lives in Iraq, and everyone agrees that air strikes alone cannot do the job.

Instead, some suggest, the United States should mastermind a quiet assassination of the Iraqi leader.

For the moment, disregard that it is illegal under current law to sponsor assassination for political reasons. Also disregard past history -- for example, abortive American efforts to kill Fidel Castro in the 1960's.

But ask yourself two questions. Is it likely that we could carry out such an assassination successfully? (Perhaps, though it stretches credulity.) And could we do so quietly? (Impossible.)

There certainly are circumstances where assassination might be justified -- for example, an attempt on Hitler's life. But the conditions for reversing our policy against assassination should be pretty stringent: unanimous support from allies; a preponderance of world opinion, especially in the region, about the desirability of getting rid of the despot, and some confidence that the successor would be less evil than the target.

There would also need to be a judgment that American influence and interests in the Middle East would not be impaired for long if we were revealed to have been even partly responsible for the assassination. No, assassination is not a viable way to handle Mr. Hussein.

What about the idea of overthrowing the Iraqi Government through "covert action"? Covert action has long been an important instrument of the United States Government. It lies between open warfare and diplomacy -- the United States tries to influence political events in another country, but anonymously.

In my judgment, covert action has growing importance today, primarily in the war against drugs, terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. But could the much reviled Central Intelligence Agency organize an overthrow of Saddam Hussein with the hand of the United States concealed?

Of course, this is not the first time that some political leaders and the public have longed for a simple way to get rid of a troublesome foreign leader. Dwight Eisenhower took the covert-action approach with Sukarno in Indonesia in the late 1950's, and John Kennedy tried it with the Bay of Pigs. In 1954, Jacobo Arbenz was overthrown in Guatemala, and Col. Edward G. Lansdale, in a legendary C.I.A. operation, showed that covert action could successfully defend a legitimate regime from Communist insurgency in the Philippines.

But the record of covert action is, at best, mixed, as our experience in Iraq shows. Since 1991, the C.I.A. has supported several dissident groups -- the Kurds in the north, dissidents in London, and most recently an opposition in the Iraqi military. But, of course, Saddam Hussein is still there.

The problem is that policy makers frequently adopt covert action to avoid harder choices -- either direct military action or the difficult aboveboard diplomatic work necessary to replace a foreign leader.

Since the end of the Persian Gulf war, there has been a reluctance to undertake the policy of working publicly to replace Mr. Hussein. There is no obvious leader to back, Mr. Hussein is popular with the Arab public, and there is a risk of provoking terrorist acts against the United States.

In the presence of ambiguity like this -- remember Nicaragua? -- covert action becomes almost impossible. Consider the difficulty a C.I.A. case officer would face in talking to a prospective leader of a coup attempt against Mr. Hussein. This coup leader would be unlikely to resemble Thomas Jefferson. He or she would ask: Will the United States provide military assistance in the first few hours of an attempted takeover? Whom will the United States support after the fall of Mr. Hussein? Is there any evidence of regional support (neighbors are important) for a regime after Mr. Hussein? How much money will the United States commit if the coup is successful, and how much is available in advance (in small bills)? How will the Sunni, Shia and Kurds share power in post-Hussein Iraq?

Even if the case officer could answer those questions, that would be only the first hurdle. Once such a movement is begun, the C.I.A. would like to be able to control the insurgency, and the agency knows that is not possible. Because of their fervor, dissident groups are notoriously optimistic about what they can accomplish. They often want to blow up the radio station in town rather than the radio tower, or the railroad station rather than the railroad tracks. These actions can be bloody and are hard to control.

Covert action can be helpful if it is not considered a "hail Mary" pass at the end of a football game, but is instead part of the blocking and tackling of a concerted team effort.

If we are prepared to make a public commitment to overthrow Mr. Hussein, then we should announce our intention to form and financially support a new Iraqi dissident group. We should work with other governments in the region to describe the political and economic benefits that

would come to Iraq and the Iraqi people with a new regime, one that does not seek weapons of mass destruction or threaten the security of the region. And we should authorize covert action that would be appropriate to support those public efforts.

Such an approach is more likely to catalyze change than an assassin's bullet. Covert action is not an alternative to air strikes -- those strikes, despite their limits in directly bringing about Mr. Hussein's fall, are necessary to tell the world that the United States continues to oppose Mr. Hussein's reckless conduct. But independent of any military action, we should also be working strenuously, both publicly and covertly, to nudge Iraq toward a stable life after Saddam Hussein.

John Deutch, a professor of chemistry at M.I.T., was Director of Central Intelligence and Deputy Secretary of Defense in the first Clinton Administration.

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