

Iraq: A New Leaf

William R. Polk

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A sober reassessment of the American capacity to deal with the Iraqi dilemma is years overdue. Many opportunities have been missed, but it is not too late to avoid the threat of large-scale warfare and the use of weapons of mass destruction that still may lie ahead. Even short of such dreadful events, there is a clear danger of major regional upheavals that could affect the world economy and undermine American leadership. Here I will lay out in summary what I believe our options are, the chances of success of each one, and the cost of trying to implement it.

I base my assessment on over half a century of work and study on the Middle East as a scholar, as a businessman, and as a United States government policy planner. I have lived in Iraq under previous regimes, have closely observed Iraqi society, have visited units of the Iraqi army, have talked with most of the current Iraqi leaders, and have shared observations and insights with British, French, Russian, and fellow American observers and officials.

We have, I believe, theoretically at least, seven options on what to do about Iraq. I begin with the first choice: supporting Saddam Hussein. Paradoxical as it now seems, that was the policy of the Reagan administration and the Bush administration until almost the eve of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. It was also the policy of the British, French, and Russian governments. All of us did it for similar reasons: we

opposed the fundamentalist Shi'ite revolutionary regime of Iran; we all sought markets for our arms; we wanted Iraqi oil; and we accepted the beguiling vision of Saddam's regime as both powerful and pliant (much as John Foster Dulles had done with an earlier Iraqi regime in the 1950s, when he negotiated the Baghdad Pact).

The United States implemented its pro-Saddam policy by providing Iraq with the most sophisticated intelligence then at its disposal in order to enable Iraq to defeat or contain the vastly more powerful Iranians. During the 1970s and 1980s, we competed vigorously both commercially and through government action with our allies over who would supply the Iraqis with weapons and technology beyond what the Russians could or would supply. And we either stood aside or encouraged efforts by the Iraqi regime to increase its domestic and regional power, as, for example, in the virtual coalition it formed with Turkey, our NATO ally, to try to crush the Kurdish revolt.

This policy came apart not because we disliked Saddam Hussein or abhorred his brutal police state. The nature of the man and his regime were clearly evident to any observer in the heyday of our pro-Iraqi policy. What destroyed this policy was a combination of Saddam's greed and an astonishing diplomatic blunder by the US.

Saddam overspent on arms, development, and grandiose monuments. He needed money. Neighboring Kuwait was a convenient bank. He drew on it and received many hundreds of millions of dollars, but he needed more. So...

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