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OPINION**Why We Went to War in Iraq**

By **DOUGLAS J. FEITH**
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A lot of poor commentary has framed the Iraq war as a conflict of "choice" rather than of "necessity." In fact, President George W. Bush *chose* to remove Saddam Hussein from power because he concluded that doing so was *necessary*.

President Bush inherited a worrisome Iraq problem from Bill Clinton and from his own father. Saddam had systematically undermined the measures the U.N. Security Council put in place after the Gulf War to contain his regime. In the first months of the Bush presidency, officials debated what to do next.



Getty Images
 Saddam's Shiite victims: Over 2,000 bodies were found at this mass grave in Hillah.


As a participant in the confidential, top-level administration meetings about Iraq, it was clear to me at the time that, had there been a realistic alternative to war to counter the threat from Saddam, Mr. Bush would have chosen it.

In the months before the 9/11 attack, Secretary of State Colin Powell advocated diluting the multinational economic sanctions, in the hope that a weaker set of sanctions could win stronger and more sustained international support. Central Intelligence Agency officials

floated the possibility of a coup, though the 1990s showed that Saddam was far better at undoing coup plots than the CIA was at engineering them. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz asked if the U.S. might create an autonomous area in southern Iraq similar to the autonomous Kurdish region in the north, with the goal of making Saddam little more than the "mayor of Baghdad." U.S. officials also discussed whether a popular uprising in Iraq should be encouraged, and how we could best work with free Iraqi groups that opposed the Saddam regime.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld worried particularly about the U.S. and British pilots enforcing the no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq. Iraqi forces were shooting at the U.S. and British aircraft virtually every day; if a plane went down, the pilot would likely be killed or captured. What then? Mr. Rumsfeld asked. Were the missions worth the risk? How might U.S. and British responses be intensified to deter Saddam from shooting at our planes? Would the

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intensification trigger a war? What would be the consequences of cutting back on the missions, or ending them?

On July 27, 2001, Mr. Rumsfeld sent a memo to Mr. Powell, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Vice President Dick Cheney that reviewed U.S. options:

"The U.S. can roll up its tents and end the no-fly zones before someone is killed or captured. . . . We can publicly acknowledge that sanctions don't work over extended periods and stop the pretense of having a policy that is keeping Saddam 'in the box,' when we know he has crawled a good distance out of the box and is currently doing the things that will ultimately be harmful to his neighbors in the region and to U.S. interests – namely developing WMD and the means to deliver them and increasing his strength at home and in the region month-by-month. Within a few years the U.S. will undoubtedly have to confront a Saddam armed with nuclear weapons.

"A second option would be to go to our moderate Arab friends, have a reappraisal, and see whether they are willing to engage in a more robust policy. . . .

"A third possibility perhaps is to take a crack at initiating contact with Saddam Hussein. He has his own interests. It may be that, for whatever reason, at his stage in life he might prefer to not have the hostility of the United States and the West and might be willing to make some accommodation."

The Iraq policy debate remained unresolved when the September 11 attacks occurred. Like all major national security issues, Iraq policy was re-examined in light of our post-9/11 sense of vulnerability and the heightened worries about terrorism and, especially, about the danger that terrorists might obtain WMD from a nation state.

When the president ultimately decided that the Iraqi regime must be ousted by force, he was influenced by five key factors:

1) Saddam was a threat to U.S. interests before 9/11. The Iraqi dictator had started wars against Iran and Kuwait, and had fired missiles at Saudi Arabia and Israel. Unrepentant about the rape of Kuwait, he remained intensely hostile to the U.S. He provided training, funds, safe haven and political support to various types of terrorists. He had developed WMD and used chemical weapons fatally against Iran and Iraqi Kurds. Iraq's official press issued statements praising the 9/11 attacks on the U.S.

2) The threat of renewed aggression by Saddam was more troubling and urgent after 9/11. Though Saddam's regime was not implicated in the 9/11 operation, it was an important state supporter of terrorism. And President Bush's strategy was not simply retaliation against the group responsible for 9/11. Rather it was to prevent the next major attack. This focused U.S. officials not just on al Qaeda, but on all the terrorist groups and state supporters of terrorism who might be inspired by 9/11 – especially on those with the potential to use weapons of mass destruction.

3) To contain the threat from Saddam, all reasonable means short of war had been tried unsuccessfully for a dozen years. The U.S. did not rush to war. Working mainly through the U.N.,

we tried a series of measures to contain the Iraqi threat: formal diplomatic censure, weapons inspections, economic sanctions, no-fly zones, no-drive zones and limited military strikes. A defiant Saddam, however, dismantled the containment strategy and the U.N. Security Council had no stomach to sustain its own resolutions, let alone compel Saddam's compliance.

4) While there were large risks involved in a war, the risks of leaving Saddam in power were even larger. The U.S. and British pilots patrolling the no-fly zones were routinely under enemy fire, and a larger confrontation – over Kuwait again or some other issue – appeared virtually certain to arise once Saddam succeeded in getting out from under the U.N.'s crumbling economic sanctions.

Mr. Bush decided it was unacceptable to wait while Saddam advanced his biological weapons program or possibly developed a nuclear weapon. The CIA was mistaken, we all now know, in its assessment that we would find chemical and biological weapons stockpiles in Iraq. But after the fall of the regime, intelligence officials did find chemical and biological weapons programs structured so that Iraq could produce stockpiles in three to five weeks. They also found that Saddam was intent on having a nuclear weapon. The CIA was wrong in saying just before the war that his nuclear program was active; but Iraq appears to have been in a position to make a nuclear weapon in less than a year if it purchased fissile material from a supplier such as North Korea.

5) America after 9/11 had a lower tolerance for such dangers. It was reasonable – one might say obligatory – for the president to worry about a renewed confrontation with Saddam. Like many others, he feared Saddam might then use weapons of mass destruction again, perhaps deployed against us through a proxy such as one of the many terrorist groups Iraq supported.

Thoughtful, patriotic Americans differed then and now on whether the risk of leaving Saddam in power outweighed the risk of war. But Mr. Bush concluded that it did, and that war therefore was necessary. In Congress, many Democrats as well as Republicans supported that conclusion. Debates will continue over whether the president should have balanced the risks differently. But characterizing the Iraq war as "a war of choice" sheds no light on the issue.

Mr. Feith, under secretary of defense for policy from 2001 to 2005, is author of "War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism" (HarperCollins, 2008), the author's proceeds of which are being donated to charities for veterans and their families.

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