

Saddam Hussein's Death Is a Goal, Says

Bush White House Advisers Hoped That 'Collateral Damage' Would

By Walter Pincus
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During the bombing of Baghdad in 1991, officials in the Bush White House "lit a candle every night hoping Saddam Hussein would be killed in a bunker," according to Robert M. Gates, then a National Security Council official and later director of the CIA.

A former top intelligence official in the Clinton administration said yesterday, "Those candles will be lit again if we have to bomb again. Command and control sites will be targeted and we hope that Saddam Hussein is in one of them."

Although supporters of tougher military action against Iraq than the bombing strikes proposed by the Clinton administration have publicly avoided calling for President Saddam Hussein's assassination, his death is an implicit aim behind many demands for stronger U.S. steps, including support of a coup, that would remove him from power.

Any plot designed to assassinate the Iraqi president would not only violate a long-standing executive order, but also be "very counterproductive," Gates said in an interview. And Gates's successor as CIA director, R. James Woolsey, told a House committee Thursday that calls for the Iraqi leader's assassination were "extremely irresponsible."

Gates said that U.S. involvement in an assassination attempt against Saddam Hussein "would put our own leaders at increased risk, not to mention U.S. diplomats and other American citizens traveling abroad."

Executive order 12333, signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1981, reads in section 2.11 that "no person, employed by or acting on behalf of the United States Government, shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, assassination." The original version was signed in 1976 by President Gerald R. Ford in the wake of public

disclosure in 1975 that the CIA, with White House support, had attempted assassinations in the 1950s and 1960s of Cuban President Fidel Castro and leaders in the Congo and the Dominican Republic.

Although the order has the force of law and applies to members of the executive branch of the government, no criminal penalties automatically attach to its violation, and any punishment would be at the prerogative of the president.

When it comes to bombing, the executive order is bypassed because military action is targeted on buildings; leaders of the targeted country are considered potential collateral damage.

"We did try to kill him," said one military officer involved in targeting during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. "I'm not going to be dishonest with you. But if he doesn't die, it doesn't mean it's a failure. You're bombing leadership targets as a process, not a person. You degrade his ability to make decisions."

Targeting by coalition aircraft during the gulf war, as compiled by the Pentagon, showed that 580 command and control targets were hit and another 260 were considered leadership targets, including Saddam Hussein's palaces and other building he had been known to frequent.

"People at the CIA and the White House understand the rules of this game," according to a former senior CIA official, "and they do not play fast and loose with it."

Obvious assassination plots would be rebuffed while coup attempts against a leader who is a danger to world order would not fall under the prohibition even if the dangerous leader died in the coup, the official said.

During the Bush administration,

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according to intelligence sources, questions arose when a group of Panamanian officers sought support and lethal weapons for their attempt to capture then-Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega and exile him from their country. The administration had to determine whether the group really had assassination in mind. When the proposed covert action was discussed in the White House and on Capitol Hill, questions were raised about the prohibition of the executive order, these sources said. The CIA withheld its support, and the coup failed.

One of the Clinton administration's covert actions against Saddam Hussein in the 1994-1995 period was the so-called "zipless coup" aimed at quickly removing the Iraqi leader. The plotting involved supporting exiled Iraqi military and political leaders who operated from Amman, Jordan. The goal was to find, encourage and assist some senior Iraqi officer to take his troops, kill or overpower Saddam's immediate guards and then take the leader himself.

Whoever this military leader was, the expectation was he would have to be a Sunni and Ba'ath Party member and seize power for himself. This is in the tradition of Iraq, where the last two leaders, including Saddam, gained power through killing predecessors.

When the House and Senate intelligence committees were briefed about the operation, this former intelligence official said, "there was no objection."

One weakness of this approach, one source said, was the lack of assurance as to the reliability of any new leader who would gain power in Iraq through assassination. The Clinton administration's CIA-developed plot collapsed because the Iraqi military exile group was infiltrated by Saddam Hussein's agents. The CIA's plotters inside the country were picked up and executed, and the project was ended.

Another exception to the general no-assassination policy was discussed in the late 1980s in the wake of the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon, according to another former senior CIA official. The topic: "What are the rules in plotting to kill terrorists?" this official said. The end result was an informal agreement with the congressional oversight committees that if a covert action targeted a terrorist in his apartment plotting to blow up a building, he had to be detained. But if that terrorist were found and known to be on his way to blow up a building in a truck with explosives, he could be killed if that were the only way to stop him.

One CIA official said yesterday it is much harder to find Saddam Hussein than it might appear. "We don't know where he is at any one time," this intelligence official said, "and he moves around each night, sometimes more than once." Gates said that even his infrequent daytime appearances are staged. His travels in Baghdad feature decoy motorcades, and his public appearances are staged, taped by television cameras and shown to the public only after Saddam Hussein has returned to one of his secure offices.

There has been mention of destroying Saddam Hussein's elite troops and the bulk of his Republican Guard as a way of destroying the forces that have kept him in power. "It's been talked about before," said one former top clandestine officer. "You bomb Saddam's elite guards

and the Republican Guards" since they provide his protection and keep him in power. "Of course, there will be a mammoth cost in lives since they all live with their wives and children. But that's the way you do it." Without those units, Saddam Hussein is vulnerable, he said.

The Bush administration, according to former officials, debated but never agreed to focus on doing away with Saddam Hussein specifically in Operation Desert Storm planning because "there was a hope or belief that Saddam would be swept away ... that he could not survive the

wrath of his own military in wake of his defeat in Kuwait," according to Richard N. Haass, who was on the National Security Council staff at that time.

Saddam Hussein's efficient handling of the post-Desert Storm rebellions in both the northern and southern parts of Iraq "changed the dynamic," Haass said, and the remaining Republican Guard forces stood by him in order to keep themselves in power.

*Staffwriter Barton Gellman
contributed to this report.*