

How to Kill Saddam

Stalking the Dictator: Scenarios From a Former Counter-Terrorist

By William Cowan

IF YOU KILL Saddam, all this would stop," a defecting Iraqi officer told his U.S. captors last week. No one knows how many of his former comrades share that view, but considering the extent to which Iraq is a one-man government, it's a reasonable supposition.

No issue, however, may be as difficult to discuss, even in the confines of the Oval Office. In today's world, assassination sanctioned or even condoned by any U.S. official at any level, for whatever reason, opens a Pandora's box of troubles that can dog a president long after his successors have taken their oaths.

Even for those of us who have worked on the fringes of such operations, the moral questions involved are haunting. During one of my tours in Vietnam, the Vietnamese unit I advised had a specific mission of dismantling the local communist infrastructure. While we focused on capture, we were sometimes driven to more drastic measures. Later, in Beirut in the mid-'80s, I was involved in sensitive retaliation operations against those who had bombed the U.S. Embassy and Marine compound. In both cases, the targets were individuals—real people with known names, not faceless soldiers on a scarred battlefield.

In the ongoing war, however, the decision to target Saddam is cast in a different moral

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perspective: taking the life of one man to save those of countless innocent soldiers and civilians on both sides.

For President Bush the real question may not be whether we should do it, but rather whether we can do it. I believe we can; we have the forces to plan for and conduct such an operation. We have the means to acquire, analyze and effectively use the necessary intelligence to conduct the operation. And, if necessary, we can acquire agents and operatives from within Saddam's own ranks to ensure that our operation has a high probability of success.

A direct attack on Saddam's bunker would probably not be viable, even if he were known to be in it. The bunker could reportedly withstand prolonged bombardment from conventional munitions. But two general scenarios do provide insight into how the United States could carry out an operation against Saddam:

■ *The Yamamoto scenario.* The least complex operation would use forces that allied commander Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf has available already. It would be similar to the World War II operation that killed Japan's Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, the architect of the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Two years later, Yamamoto was commanding the Japanese fleet when the U.S. Navy intercepted and decoded a radio transmission detailing plans of his visit to frontline forces. Quick approval by senior headquarters in Hawaii resulted in U.S. aircraft ambushing Yamamoto's airplane over the Solomon Islands. Many historians argue that Japan's ability to wage war in the Pacific was never the same.

In much the same manner, Saddam is known to venture out to meet with his own forces. As a besieged military commander, he must demonstrate concerned leadership

and show the civilian population and the world, via televised pictures, that he is still confidently in power. Given a timely piece of intelligence and the authority to act quickly upon it, Schwarzkopf could direct a specific attack on Saddam against which even his reported coterie of 600 or 700 guards could not protect him.

■ *The inside job.* At the other end of the operational spectrum is the development of a detailed plan that would only be executed on the president's order. Instead of seeking to seize upon an immediate opportunity, as in the Yamamoto option, it would be oriented towards identifying vulnerabilities inherent in Saddam's daily routine—the meetings he holds, the people he meets with, the members of his personal staff or security apparatus, the food he eats, the clothes he wears or anything else identifiable that can provide some direct or indirect access to him.

Such intelligence would have to be collected in excruciating detail. In addition to pushing our technical collection capabilities to their limits, intelligence gatherers would have to draw upon information from persons with previous access to Saddam, seek new contacts currently familiar with or with access into his daily regimen and enlist the help of other intelligence services that have worked Iraq and Saddam, such as the Soviets and the Israelis.

Assuming we can acquire the necessary intelligence, do we then have the forces? Yes, and although they don't plan, train or prepare for missions such as a directed assassination, they are fully capable of responding quickly to such an order. They can be drawn from the most elite counter-terrorist and contingency forces that the military has, such as the Army's Delta Force, the Navy's SEAL Team 6 and the Air Force's 1st Special Operation Wing. Depending on the scenario

chosen, equally important roles could be filled by other members of the special operations community, such as the Army's Rangers, the Green Berets or Marine Corps elements specially trained for unique missions.

Whatever forces were chosen for a single or alternative missions, they would probably develop their plans, train and rehearse under the command of Gen. Carl Stiner at U.S. Special Operations Command in Tampa, Fla. Stiner would prepare the force and, at presidential order, deploy them forward to Schwarzkopf to conduct their mission.

What kinds of operations could they consider? That would depend on vulnerabilities uncovered in the intelligence process. They could range from inserting a well-placed sniper team that might spend days waiting for its opportunity to shoot, using agents to smuggle a small detonating device into Saddam's office or quarters or placing a mine detonated on command along an avenue he is known to use, to virtually incapacitating him through the use of chemical agents placed in his food or on his clothes.

Can we do it alone? Perhaps. But most scenarios would require the quiet infiltration of an American team into Baghdad, and in those cases foreign operatives and agents are usually indispensable. When forces were on their way into Tehran in 1979 to rescue the American hostages, foreign operatives, together with U.S. counterparts who had infiltrated the city, were standing by to assist. In much the same manner, certain scenarios against Saddam would require the help of Iraqi agents.

Do we already have agents in place? It's hard to judge, especially since allied forces may, as they did in World War II, deliberately mask their penetration of enemy intelligence to protect their sources. But our inability to eliminate the Scud problem quickly could imply that we don't have well-placed, intelligence sources within Saddam's forces. If we don't already have good intelligence agents, we certainly don't already have good operative agents.

Can we find them? Yes. First, it's most

likely that some of our allies, including the Israelis, have extensive assets in Baghdad, some of whom they might activate for such an operation. If not, recruiting of reliable, well-placed assets is not impossible. Last August, at the request of U.S. firms who had employees being detained in Kuwait, I oversaw a series of hostage-related operations into Iraq and Kuwait. Although Iraq was difficult to penetrate and Kuwait was virtually closed to outsiders, by the end of September we had bribed Iraqi officials, including one senior-level intelligence officer, in order to acquire the documentation necessary for our operatives to gain access to Kuwait.

What, then, should be done? At a minimum, assuming it's not already happened, the president should direct that a small task force be mobilized to begin studying Saddam's environment, identifying vulnerabilities and developing options to take advantage of them. The task force would require not only intelligence specialists who know how to assess collected intelligence and direct further collection, but also special operations experts who could help identify the critical information needed to plan for and conduct alternative operations.

The president knows that establishing such a task force is done at the risk of public disclosure. But it's still the right thing to do. None of us knows for certain where Saddam will take the war. But we should know that if he decides that chemical, biological or nuclear weapons are acceptable means to achieve his ends, the imperative to end the war will quickly be upon us. Deciding then to begin planning to assassinate Saddam will be too late.

Finally, does public debate about whether it should be done, or how it could be done, compromise the probability of success? Not really. Saddam and those to whom he entrusts his personal security are fully aware of the capabilities of our forces and the intelligence apparatus that supports them. If the debate adds another element of concern to Saddam and those around him, then it's done so at the expense of his ability to directly oversee the war effort against us.