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Mr. Bush's War (Cont'd)

NO, SAYS the president's national security adviser, on the opposite page, the Bush administration did not coddle Saddam Hussein before the Iraq war or provide him the weapons, technology or loans to feed his aggressive appetites. Gen. Brent Scowcroft dismisses charges to the contrary as coming from those who lagged in supporting the war.

But this is not quite right. The critics include plenty—New York Times columnist William Safire, Sen. Al Gore, this newspaper—who supported the war. The administration contends its policy was prudent and points out that Congress was aboard. In fact, a growing record suggests that the administration was careless after the Iran-Iraq war ended in expecting good behavior from Saddam Hussein and in providing him licenses and loan guarantees. Much of this record is in documents and admissions brought out only later by congressional probe or judicial process—materials Congress and the public did not have at the time. Some specific points:

- It may not be "established" that Iraq misused American credit guarantees to purchase weapons or diverted U.S. commodities to a third country. But the full uses of the grain in these deals remain to be explored. In any event, the real

question is not whether American money guaranteed the illegal loans from the Italian bank BNL's Atlanta office with which Iraq added to its might. It is why Washington pressed ahead with further credits after the FBI raid on BNL in Atlanta in the face of warnings of diversion and corruption from the bureaucracy.

- If American high-tech licensing was as tough as now is maintained, then how to account for the reports from American intelligence and other bodies warning of Iraq's special-weapons plans and progress, some of it attributed to American technology? For instance, the State Department memo of March 24, 1989, warning Secretary James Baker that Baghdad was "working hard" on weapons of mass destruction? Is it really enough to say that other nations were more negligent?

- "We have not denied Congress access to a single document." Let's start with the full text of NSD 26 of Oct. 2, 1989, the basic policy statement written after the Iran-Iraq war.

It would indeed help to open constructive bipartisan debate, as Gen. Scowcroft suggests, on how best to deal with rogue regimes. Establishing the record of how one administration dealt with one rogue is the essential threshold.