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We Didn't 'Coddle' Saddam

Gov. Bill Clinton and Sen. Al Gore, aided and abetted by more than a few Democratic congressmen and the editorial pages of several of this country's leading newspapers, have worked hard to deceive the American people. In pursuit of the White House, they have energetically promoted a campaign to discredit U.S. policy toward Iraq prior to Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, to malign President Bush's proven foreign policy competence and to obscure their own inconsistency. Most of the president's critics today were conspicuously absent yesterday, when the president successfully resisted Saddam's violent ambitions in the gulf.

The facts—based on the entire record and not selective portions of it—are clear. During the worst days of the Iran-Iraq war in the mid 1980s, the United States was intent on preventing either Iraq or Iran from dominating a part of the world of undeniable strategic importance to the United States. No American president operating in the strategic and diplomatic climate of the 1980s could ignore the threat that either Iran or Iraq might dominate the Persian Gulf.

There was a broad bipartisan consensus behind the open U.S. policy of providing political and economic support to Iraq during the latter stages of its war with Iran. The U.S. Navy openly intervened in the gulf. Congress debated and approved Operation Earnest Will. Congressional intelligence committees reviewed and concurred with our activities in the region.

At the war's end, Congress did not challenge our policy of trying to moderate Iraqi behavior with a mix of limited incentives and strong disincentives. Our purpose, broadly understood and supported at the time, was to convince Iraq that moderate international and domestic behavior would be rewarded. We were right to attempt to convince Saddam that he had more to gain

from peaceful relations with the West and southern gulf states than from confrontation, radicalism and aggression. We were right to try to induce stability into the region without the force of American arms and the risk of American lives.

Our policy had universal support within the Arab world. Kuwait strongly supported it. So did moderate states like Egypt. So did every European

Taking Exception

power. So did virtually every American expert on the Middle East. So did most members of Congress. Our policy contributed substantially to our subsequent success in forging a victorious U.N. coalition to defeat Iraqi aggression in Kuwait.

We in no way "coddled" Saddam. Our public and our private statements critical of Iraqi policies, including its human rights abuses and its threats against Israel and gulf neighbors, were so sharp that our Arab allies—including Kuwait—cautioned us about our harshness.

To give Saddam incentives to moderate his behavior, the Bush administration, with considerable congressional support, authorized \$1 billion in credit guarantees—not loans or cash—to U.S. exporters selling grain to Iraq. Only half of those funds were ever released. The Banca Nazionale del Lavoro, which has been accused of illegal transactions with Iraq, was not involved in any of the credit guarantees approved by the Bush administration. Contrary to our critics' assertions, no investigation—by Congress, the U.S. attorney or a federal agency—has established that Iraq misused credit guarantees to purchase weapons or diverted commodities to a third country.

In fact, this extension of credit guarantees was

more than offset by Iraqi hard currency payments to the United States for earlier agricultural exports that reduced Iraq's debt to the United States by more than \$450 million. Most of the money still owed by Iraq to the United States is for credit guarantees extended during the Iran-Iraq war. The administration intends to recover this debt from Iraq's frozen assets.

Perhaps the most egregious falsehood that our political critics have forced on the public is that the Bush administration sold high technology to Saddam to enhance his nuclear, chemical and biological weapons program. The U.S. government's export controls toward Iraq were tougher than those of any other industrial country. We followed a strict policy of denying the export of weapons to Iraq. Whenever we learned of an attempt to evade U.S. law, we stepped in and clamped down and worked hard to get other countries to do the same. Between 1985 and 1990, about \$500 million of so-called dual-use exports, which under current legislation were not prohibited for military reasons, were shipped to Iraq, in part to allow U.S. companies a fair opportunity to compete with foreign companies selling to Iraq. Most of these were for such items as low-level computers and heavy-duty trucks.

Our export control policy succeeded. During Desert Storm, coalition forces did not encounter any U.S.-supplied weapons on the battlefield, and the more than 40 inspections conducted since the end of the war by the International Atomic Energy Agency and the U.N. Special Commission demonstrate conclusively that U.S. technology made no significant contribution to Iraq's military capability.

Saddam built the world's fourth largest army with more than \$100 billion of his own oil revenues and with loans from his neighbors. He fielded

troops with weapons mostly from the former Soviet Union, China and Western Europe. No one can fairly conclude that the United States created Iraq's military machine.

We have no reason to conceal any of this from Congress. The charge of a coverup is outrageous and irresponsible. The administration has provided literally thousands of documents to Congress at a cost of tens of thousands of man hours and hundreds of thousands of dollars. We have not denied Congress access to a single document.

Similarly, there is no justification for the charges of illegal conduct or wrongdoing by senior administration officials. Career prosecutors—not political appointees—in the Department of Justice have gone over every allegation in detail and found them baseless. The demand for an independent counsel when there is no basis for one is sheer McCarthyism—an attempt to transform a legitimate policy debate into a criminal conspiracy. The Justice Department's refusal to be stampeded into allowing the law to be used for partisan purposes was precisely the response that anyone who respects the law should have expected.

These are the facts about U.S. policy toward Iraq. It is too bad that our critics have chosen to distort them into unfounded accusations and lies. It would be better if their energies and ours were spent in constructive debate about how best to deal with the challenges posed by governments such as Iraq—bad, but important actors on the world scene. We would welcome such debate, but regrettably, it has not occurred. Mr. Clinton, Mr. Gore and their teammates are too busy rewriting history to learn from it.

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