Comment: *Regime change*

Judging by television and newspaper interviews with senior advisers to the President of the United States these last few weeks, an American-led coalition will soon attempt 'regime change' in Iraq. This would start with a high-tech blizzard of 'precision-guided munitions', probably about Christmas, terrorising Saddam Hussein and his henchmen into fleeing the country and inciting his oppressed people to insurrection. That, anyway, is the optimistic scenario.

'Special forces' are on hand to assist. Five thousand dissident Iraqis are training, on a crash course, in a secret location, outside the United States. Thousands of American troops are being assembled in Kuwait for an invasion of Iraq early next year, in late January or early February, before the weather gets too hot for soldiers to be comfortable in their heavy protective clothing.

Some American troops in Kuwait are practising house-to-house combat. On the alternative scenario, the streets of Baghdad would become a battle field, a doomed regime in its desperation would use chemical and biological weapons, certainly against Israel; the Israeli government has already committed itself to responding, presumably with tactical nuclear devices, and no one knows what might happen next. Members of the US Congress who expressed anxieties about this scenario and its unpredictability as regards casualties and regional instability, were brusquely reminded that the same worries in 1990 turned out to be groundless.

On either scenario, American troops would occupy Iraq for as long as it takes to set up a stable democracy, as with Germany and Japan after 1945, precedents frequently cited by American officials.

The Gulf War never quite ended. The armistice at the end of February 1991 committed the Iraqis to allow random inspection of their military research sites so that they could no longer develop weapons of mass destruction, biological, chemical and (possibly) nuclear. (Iraq was supplied with anthrax by the United States back in the 1980s, to help Saddam Hussein during his invasion of Iran.) They have not complied with these requirements, at least to the satisfaction of the United States. Trade in the the Gulf is monitored, vessels turned back if they breach UN sanctions (by the Royal Navy as well as by the American and Australian navies). Iraqi war planes are kept out of 'no fly' zones patrolled by American and British aircraft. Missiles try to intercept these missions, never with any success. Over the years, dozens of military installations in Iraq have been bombed.

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On the credit side, the 'no fly' zones prevent the Iraqi regime from killing Kurds in the north and Shiite Muslim people in the south. These were the people expected to overthrow the Baath party machine that has controlled Iraq for many years, after Saddam Hussein's withdrawal from Kuwait. Their insurrections were ruthlessly crushed by his finest troops. They received none of the help that they anticipated. Too late, largely at British insistence, the 'no fly' zones were established to save the insurgents from further punishment.

No one knows how many Iraqis died during the land war. Hundreds of thousands have died since, children and elderly folk particularly, from lack of clean water and sewage disposal, the collapse of electrical services in hospitals, and such like — the long term effects of 'degrading' the primary facilities in a country as urbanized as Iraq. Indeed, according to UNICEF reports, 4,500 infants die every month, even now, as a result of the economic sanctions. (Of course, this is Saddam Hussein's fault.)

In a letter addressed to President Bush (29 May 2001), signed by nine Catholic bishops among many other religious leaders, co ordinated by the organisation Voices in the Wilderness, it is suggested that the best way to move a society towards more democratic government is 'to strengthen its education, communication and social service systems, and help to build a strong and well educated middle class'. A decade of punitive sanctions has only weakened any chance of a middle class in Iraq from which opposition to the Baath regime could emerge; and the betrayal by the West (as they see it) of the insurgents in 1991 makes them wary of trying again.

At least Osama bin Laden (wherever he is) will not be at home this time round. In 1990 he went to the Saudi royal family, offering his followers to defend the Saudi oil fields against Saddam Hussein if he moved beyond Kuwait, as seemed threatened at the time. On that scenario, paradoxically, the network so sinisterly known as Al Quaida (it means 'the (data) base') would have been defending Saudi Arabia against Iraq. The Saudi royals chose American troops instead, reportedly promising Osama bin Laden that the foreigners would leave the holy land of Mecca as soon as the Iraqi threat was over. In disgust he returned to his mujihadeen in Afghanistan. The rest, as they say, is history.

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