

The Case for Hitting Hard at Saddam

by [Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](#)

Feb 8, 1998

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](#)

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow for national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress.



Articles & Testimony

Now that a broad consensus has emerged in government circles on the need to use force against Saddam Hussein, Washington should stay the course. It should not be deterred by last-minute Russian or French diplomacy, by inconclusive United Nations debates or—perhaps the biggest obstacle of all—by its own self-doubts. Iraq must be punished, militarily, for its dangerous failure to comply with UN resolutions.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright largely managed to shore up support for the U.S. view of the Iraqi crisis during her travels to the Middle East and Europe. The British, French, and pro-US regimes throughout the Middle East may have shown only varying degrees of enthusiasm for impending military action, but they all agreed that Saddam must allow UN inspectors free and unfettered access to all potential weapons sites in Iraq—and that he, not the United States, will bear responsibility for the consequences of his failure to comply. Only the Russians equivocated on those basic points.

This international support sets the stage for military action to follow later this month—presumably the purpose of Secretary of Defense William Cohen's current visit to the Middle East. As that day draws near, however, the United States should keep three simple guidelines in view:

Don't be lulled. Seeking to embellish their commercial appeal to a future post-sanctions Iraq, the Russians and French will probably continue to pursue a drawn-out and ever-elusive diplomatic solution until the United States says "enough." Washington should give little time or credence to these efforts. Specifically, it should not defer to the UN to "authorize" military action; to prevent use of force, Russia will likely block a Security Council effort this week to declare Iraq in "material breach" of its obligations under UN resolutions. The US nevertheless must act.

The choice for Saddam is as clear now as it was before the Gulf War. Then it was withdraw or not; now it is free access or not. Partial measures are meaningless, so there is little to negotiate.

Consider the path to the current crisis. It began in October, and was extended when Washington acceded to a phony Russian-brokered solution the following month. Just weeks afterward, Saddam was up to his old tricks: accusing UN inspectors of spying, complaining about the composition of the inspection teams, criticizing inspection chief Richard Butler, threatening to cease all cooperation with the inspections, and calling for a jihad to have sanctions lifted. Thanks to Saddam's stalling, Iraqi scientists have gained time to increase their stockpiles of weapons of mass

destruction and throw UN inspectors further off the trail. Although inspectors have cut deeply into Iraq's mass-destruction arsenal, Saddam has succeeded in keeping us in the dark about his overall holdings. The head of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Phyllis Oakley, recently confessed to Congress that-thanks to Iraq's refusal to "come clean" (as UN resolutions require) about its mass-destruction programs-"there are a lot of things we don't know."

In this environment, "diplomatic solution" has little meaning. Saddam might agree to back down and then, when the crisis atmosphere has ebbed, renew his recalcitrance. Since the United States continues to say it would welcome a diplomatic solution, it may warily have to sign onto one, should Saddam profess to back down. But this time it should be prepared for immediate strikes if Saddam once again breaks his end of the deal.

Keep goals achievable and expectations low. Why bomb Iraq? Newsweek wrongly called it "the question that doesn't have a good answer." There are four potential objectives in pursuing military action. These are, in descending order of ambition: to overthrow Saddam Hussein, to obliterate his weapons-of-mass-destruction capability, to coerce his acceptance of the UN inspection regime, and merely to punish him for bad behavior.

Though all of these are worthy goals, only the last is the "good answer." Air strikes cannot force Saddam from power; we know too little about the location of his operations to cripple his mass-destruction capacity with certainty; and we can hope-but can't be sure-that force will achieve compliance with UN inspection requirements.

Unfortunately, a cacophony of voices is now coming from Washington endorsing one or another of the first three objectives. Albright has said the aim would be destruction of his mass-destruction capability. The president's comments suggested the goal would be coercion. Sen. Majority leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) enthusiastically declared, "Let's go all the way!" suggesting that he favors overthrow. Meanwhile, only Secretary Cohen has tried to downplay expectations.

This focus on inflated goals, as well as the lack of harmony and clarity in government statements, creates two dangers. One is that we will not follow through on our military plans because the goal-whether overthrow, coercion, or the obliteration of mass-destruction weapons-appears unattainable. That would hand Saddam a real and uncontested victory. The other is that the U.S. operation, once carried out, will be seen to fall short of stated expectations, giving Saddam a perceived victory he can use to project permanence and prestige and further to weaken the sanctions regime.

Oddly, nobody has spoken up for the best bombing rationale of all: punishment. The most important lesson Saddam should learn from this episode is that there is a heavy price to pay-however belatedly-for flouting international authority. It has been almost five years since the UN Security Council last declared Iraq in "material breach" of Security Council resolution 687, the post-war "surrender resolution" that requires Iraq to comply with UNSCOM inspections. During that time, the Iraqi leader has consistently tested the limits of international patience- repeatedly thwarting international will by denying inspectors access to suspected weapons sites-with results that he could only see as encouraging.

Hit hard. Former CIA chief John Deutsch famously acknowledged that the light US response to the Iraqi attack on the Kurdish-controlled city of Irbil in August, 1996 actually strengthened Saddam internally. A CIA report leaked last month says that the minimal international response to his actions over the years has produced the same result.

Punishing Saddam means just that-hitting hard at key security assets, something more than the much derided "pinpricks" of some previous US attacks. Encouragingly, Cohen has said the upcoming operation will last days and will be the strongest anti-Iraqi action since the end of the war. Punishing Saddam will mean attacking known weapons sites, including his infamous "palaces," as well as the security forces most crucial to his regime's survival.

In the course of punishing, other goals could also be served. Several days of sustained bombing will persuade

Saddam to comply with UN demands, at least for awhile. Contrary to conventional wisdom, punishment often works; combined air and cruise missile strikes caused Iraq to cease its challenges to the northern and southern no-fly zones and resume cooperation with UN inspectors in January 1993, for example. Effective targeting might also destroy much of his mass-destruction capacity and further limit his ability to threaten his neighbors. Weakening of his most loyal security forces may even lead to the longed-for coup that would end his regime.

Failure to hit Saddam where it hurts will only encourage him further to test the limits of international patience until Kurds, Shiites, or a neighboring state are again his victims. That is why it is crucial to reestablish the principle of punishing Saddam's violations for its own sake-punishment that then should become routine if Saddam continues to flout the rules. ❖

Newsday

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Facing Syria's Food Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ishtar Al Shami

(/policy-analysis/facing-syrias-food-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](#)