

## **PUNISH SADDAM'S TERRORISM WITH MILITARY ACTION**

**Evidence is mounting that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein launched a failed attempt to assassinate former President George Bush during Bush's April 14-16 visit to Kuwait. Such brazen terrorism calls for a strong American military reprisal. Yet the Clinton Administration appears to be equivocating, with some officials advocating that this terrorist outrage be handled as a criminal offense that requires mere legal prosecution, rather than as a national security threat that demands military action.**

**If the U.S. fails to retaliate with a punitive military attack for Saddam's latest affront, Saddam will be emboldened to launch further terrorist attacks and aggression. Continued U.S. passivity would undermine the international coalition confronting Iraq, possibly leading Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey to reassess the risks, costs, and benefits of maintaining their opposition to Saddam's ruthless regime. A soft U.S. response to Saddam's terrorism also would be a dangerous signal to Iran and other states that support terrorism. President Bill Clinton needs to craft a firm and consistent policy toward Iraq. He needs to retaliate militarily against Saddam for this attempt at terrorism, while increasing American economic and military support for the Iraqi opposition.**

**Clinton's Equivocation.** The Clinton Administration has adopted a low-key, noncommittal approach to dealing with the Bush assassination attempt. The White House initially withheld comment while it awaited the official report of a counter-terrorism investigation team dispatched to Kuwait in May to evaluate the evidence of the Iraqi plot. Such caution was understandable given the grave nature of the charges. Once the preliminary conclusions of the investigators became known, however, the Clinton Administration appeared to want to avoid a direct confrontation with Saddam. Despite the fact that counter-terrorism experts from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Central Intelligence Agency reportedly have concluded that Iraq orchestrated the assassination plot, the White House seems to be in no rush to obtain the final report of the investigative team.

**The Administration is divided on the question of whether to handle the affair as a national security matter demanding a military reprisal against the Iraqi government, or as a criminal offense requiring legal prosecution. Some unnamed officials at the Justice Department advocate the extradition and trial in the U.S. of the sixteen terrorist suspects arrested in Kuwait in lieu of military retaliation against Baghdad. But Kuwait ruled out extradition on May 10 and began its own legal proceedings against the conspirators on June 5. The Clinton Administration then announced on June 7 that it will defer any decision on the U.S. response to the plot until after Kuwait completes its trial. This could take months; the trial already has been adjourned until June 26.**

**Clinton Administration officials justify the postponement of a decision as necessary to build public support for military retaliation against Iraq. They maintain that a case for retaliation could only be made by disclosing evidence that could taint the trial of the sixteen suspects. They also claim that the Administration's options ultimately could be constrained by how the trial is portrayed in the American press.**

**These rationales for delay mask a timid reluctance to take action. The Administration has lost touch with the American people if it truly believes that they will not support military reprisals against Saddam for his treacherous attempt on the life of an ex-President. Moreover, if the White House bases its response to Saddam on the outcome of the Kuwaiti judicial process or American press coverage of the trial, it will allow American**

national security interests to be undermined by peripheral political considerations. President Bill Clinton needs to respond to Saddam, not to public perceptions of the Kuwaiti trial.

The Administration has failed to implement a firm and consistent policy toward Iraq. Although American warplanes patrolling the No Fly Zone in northern Iraq retaliated for hostile Iraqi actions on two occasions in April, in mid-May the U.S. turned a blind eye to three attacks by Iraqi ground-based anti-aircraft guns on American warplanes patrolling southern Iraq. Preoccupied with the Bosnia crisis, Washington failed to respond to these attacks, which an anonymous senior U.S. official dismissed as "nothing more than business as usual."

The U.S. cannot afford to accept Saddam's terrorism as business as usual. In formulating the U.S. response to mounting evidence that Iraq was behind the assassination attempt on Bush, President Clinton should:

✓ **Consider the attack as a national security threat, not merely as a criminal matter.** The status of an ex-President as a national symbol makes a state-sponsored assassination attempt a grave matter of national security. A narrow legal approach focused on extraditing and prosecuting the terrorist suspects does not punish or deter Saddam Hussein, who long has violated international laws with impunity. Treating state-supported terrorism as a criminal matter in which evidence must meet strict legal standards also raises the threshold for action so high that a military response could be rendered moot. This undermines U.S. security by eroding deterrence against state-sponsored terrorism.

The Administration should focus on Iraq's actions, not on the legal details surrounding the case. Washington need not be concerned about developing an air-tight legal case against Saddam. Even if former President Bush was not targeted by the conspirators, the resumption of Iraqi terrorism against Kuwait would itself be grounds for a U.S. military reprisal. Any Iraqi terrorist attack, regardless of its target, is a violation of the cease-fire terms set forth by United Nations Security Council Resolution 687 at the end of the Gulf War.

✓ **Be prepared to use military force against Iraq in a decisive manner.** Clinton must drive home to Saddam that he will pay a heavy price for his terrorism. Given Saddam's stubborn resistance to almost three years of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, Clinton must resort to military force to punish Saddam and deter future terrorist attacks. Rather than undertake incremental pinprick attacks on symbolic targets, the U.S. should systematically launch air strikes and cruise missile strikes at the assets that Saddam values most—his security forces, the Republican Guard, and Iraq's military industries. The U.S. goal should be to punish Saddam and his closest supporters while undermining his ability to maintain himself in power, repress the opposition, and threaten Iraq's neighbors.

✓ **Increase support for the Iraqi opposition.** To its credit, the Clinton Administration has improved relations with the Iraqi National Congress (INC), the opposition umbrella group. A delegation of INC leaders met with Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Vice President Al Gore in late April. The Administration now should follow up its increased diplomatic support for the opposition with economic and military aid, including anti-tank weapons for the Kurdish resistance forces currently under the threat of an Iraqi military attack. In recent weeks Saddam has moved long-range artillery and tanks to reinforce the 100,000 troops that ring the Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq. If Saddam does invade the Kurdish enclave, the U.S. and its allies should launch air attacks against the invading forces and redouble economic and military support for the embattled Kurds.

The U.S. must maintain relentless pressure on Saddam Hussein to curb his aggression against his own people, neighboring states, and American citizens and military personnel. Saddam's attempt on former President Bush's life is a heinous act that threatens to undermine U.S. efforts to contain Iraq. It should not be relegated to the status of a criminal matter to be adjudicated by Kuwaiti or American courts. The U.S. must respond with a strong military retaliation, which is the most effective way of punishing and deterring Saddam.

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