

WHAT GEORGE BUSH NOW MUST DO IN IRAQ

The White House ignited a firestorm of controversy on March 27 when it ruled out destroying Iraqi helicopter gunships used by Saddam Hussein's brutal regime against Iraqi rebels and unarmed civilians. This decision, justified as a reluctance to become involved in Iraq's internal power struggle, should be reversed. The United States already is involved in Iraq's internal power struggle, like it or not, by virtue of the fact that it occupies approximately one-fifth of Iraq's territory as a result of a war that weakened Saddam's regime and opened the door to the ongoing rebellion. And the U.S. is involved because George Bush openly called upon Iraqis to topple Saddam. If Bush does not move quickly to reverse his decision, he risks repeating the humiliating tragedy of 1956, when Washington seemed to encourage Hungarian Freedom Fighters to rise up against their communist rulers, but then did nothing to help these Freedom Fighters when they did rebel. Indeed, as the U.S. now is doing in Iraq, America in 1956 watched passively as Freedom Fighters were slaughtered. Bush should understand that what is at stake is not simply a matter of morality; it now is a matter of American credibility.

Permitting Saddam's lethal helicopters to continue to massacre Iraqis would be tantamount to giving tacit support to his regime. It would undermine the U.S. goal of ousting the Iraqi dictator to help assure the peace and security of the Persian Gulf region. Turning a blind eye to the Iraqi government's bloody repression would tarnish the moral prestige won by America in its liberation of Kuwait. Although Bush undoubtedly meant to encourage an army coup when he called upon Iraqis to oust Saddam, his words also encouraged Iraq's 4 million Kurds (almost one-quarter of Iraq's 18 million population) and Shiite majority (roughly 55 percent) to rebel against the Sunni Arab minority which dominates Saddam's Baathist regime in Baghdad.

Weak, Divided Opposition. The Bush Administration has ruled out support for the Iraqi rebels, and even shunned contact with them until this week, because it has concluded that the Iraqi opposition is too weak and divided to oust Saddam. When the spontaneous uprising against Saddam began shortly after the end of the war on February 28, the consensus within the U.S. government was that the rebellion would last only two months. Even if the uncoordinated Kurdish and Shiite uprisings succeeded in toppling Saddam, U.S. officials concluded that they would splinter Iraq into autonomous Kurdish, Shiite, and Sunni Arab enclaves that would tempt Iraq's neighbors — Iran, Syria, and Turkey — to intervene. This "Lebanonization" of Iraq, it has been argued, would create a long-term source of instability in the Persian Gulf which could allow Iran to absorb its Shiite co-religionists in Iraq, expand its influence, and threaten the interests of the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and the smaller Arab gulf states.

Bush, of course, is right not to commit American troops to overthrow Saddam in a risky attempt to impose a government on Iraq. Such an intervention would have unpredictable consequences, perhaps unleashing a protracted guerrilla war. It is doubtful that the resulting government could survive without being propped up indefinitely by the U.S. This American connection would undermine the new regime's political legitimacy and eventually would produce a backlash that would make it easier for Iran to gain the allegiance of Iraqi Shiites. As the Israelis learned in Lebanon after their victorious war against the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1982, it is difficult to translate military success into a lasting political triumph by installing a friendly government.

Dangerous Signals. But Bush is wrong in not grounding Saddam's helicopters and in other ways restricting the regime's ability to crush the rebels. There is an important distinction between taking sides among the various factions opposing Saddam (something America should not do) and taking action to prevent Saddam from surviving (something America should do). While the Administration prudently has refrained from overreaching by expanding the war to impose a government on Iraq, it seems to have lost sight of the goal of removing Saddam from power. By passively accepting Saddam's repression of Iraqi rebels, Washington signals dangerously that it has accommodated itself to Saddam's survival. This reduces the chances that the greatest potential threat to Saddam's power, the Iraqi army, will turn against him. And by allowing Saddam to score a morale-raising military victory over the rebels, the Bush Administration enables Saddam to gain glory and credibility that he surely will invoke to keep his military loyal to him. It is puzzling that Bush seems to think that the Iraqi military will be more inclined to topple Saddam after Saddam leads the military to victory over the rebels. Military leaders try to topple regimes following military humiliations — not after military victories.

Arming the Iraqi rebels may not be advisable due to the opposition of U.S. friends in the region. Saudi Arabia fears a successful Shiite rebellion more than it fears the weakened Saddam Hussein because a Shiite victory would enhance Iran's power in the Persian Gulf and possibly incite Saudi Shiites, which make up almost 10 percent of the Saudi population. Turkey objects to an independent Kurdish state because this could become a beacon that could aggravate unrest among Turkey's 10 million to 12 million Kurds. Turkish President Turgut Ozal since January has sought to accommodate Kurdish moderates by moving towards recognizing the existence of the Kurdish people, formerly referred to by the government as "Mountain Turks," in eastern Turkey. Ozal, who announced on March 11 that Turkey had opened high-level political discussions with Iraqi Kurds, may be seeking to cultivate the Iraqi Kurds as a means of discrediting the radical Kurdish Workers Party, which has waged guerrilla warfare against the Turkish government for the last seven years.

This tentative change in Turkish policy eventually may enable the U.S., in close cooperation with Turkey, to arm Iraqi Kurds committed to autonomy within a democratic Iraq. Until then Washington should provide the Kurds with humanitarian aid such as food and medicine. Moreover, now that Turkey has established direct contacts with the Iraqi Kurds, Washington should follow suit. The State Department formerly had shunned political discussions with the Kurds out of deference to Turkey.

No More Sucker. The U.S. also should enforce the strictest possible interpretation of the provisional ceasefire agreement with Baghdad. General Norman Schwarzkopf made an oral agreement on March 3 to permit the Iraqi government to use helicopters to transport government officials and supplies. Schwarzkopf now maintains that he was "suckered" by the Iraqi regime, which intended all along to use the helicopters to attack its rebellious population. This is an extraordinary admission by a victorious general. If he was suckered on March 3, there is no reason for the White House to insist that he remain suckered. The U.S., which never agreed to permit helicopter gunship attacks, now should warn Baghdad that any such future attacks will prompt U.S. air attacks not only against the attacking helicopters, but against all Iraqi helicopters throughout Iraq. Because the provisional ceasefire technically is a "unilateral suspension of hostilities," as Schwarzkopf made clear when he met the Iraqi representatives, the U.S. is within its rights to resume hostilities unilaterally if the Iraqis violate the U.S.-dictated terms.

Shooting down Iraqi helicopters signals that the U.S. has not reconciled itself to Saddam's continued rule and will continue to force Baghdad to pay a heavy price as long as Saddam is in power. It will signal that Iraq in 1991 will not become George Bush's Hungary of 1956.

By denying Saddam these tools of repression, the U.S. can reclaim some of the moral authority that it lost by failing to aid the faltering Kurdish and Shiite uprisings against Saddam. By underscoring Saddam's weakness, rather than hinting that it can accommodate itself to Saddam's survival, the Bush Administration can give the Iraqi army maximum incentives to overthrow Saddam.

James A. Phillips
Deputy Director of Foreign Policy Studies