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JAMES A. BAKER III WASHINGTON TIMES--September 11, 1996

Why U.S. did not march on to Baghdad

In the aftermath of the U.S. strikes against Iraqi military targets, some armchair generals and talking-head diplomats argue that, in 1991, the Gulf war coalition should have toppled Saddam Hussein's regime even if it meant marching to Baghdad or beyond in order to apprehend him. Let there be no doubt: toppling the regime *would* have required going at least as far as Baghdad. While acknowledging that the United States and its coalition allies, including the Arab state members, uniformly believed Saddam would not survive a military defeat of the magnitude that the coalition inflicted upon him, continuing the offensive to Baghdad would have been a dangerous mistake. President George Bush's judgment to end the war when he did was the absolutely correct one — even with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight.

For a host of reasons — strategic, political, military and diplomatic — the marching-to-Baghdad canard is as nonsensical now as it was then. All our political and war aims, as enunciated by the Bush administration throughout the crisis, had been achieved. Our strategic objective was accomplished: Kuwait was liberated, and Saddam's ability to threaten his neighbors in the future was substantially diminished. The vast bulk of Iraq's military machine, including most of its nuclear, chemical and biological-weapons programs, was destroyed. The president's decision to order a cease-fire after 100 hours of ground fighting was enthusiastically recommended by his military and political advisers and endorsed by Congress, and American public opinion, not to mention our coalition partners.

There are at least five more compelling reasons why marching on to Baghdad would have been dangerous:

• Loss of life. Even with our massive military superiority, the odds of finding Saddam were extremely long. In Panama, a small nation compared with Iraq, it took American troops 15 days to find and capture Manuel Noriega, in 1989. Iraqi soldiers and civilians could be expected to resist an enemy seizure of their *own* country with a ferocity not previously demonstrated on the battlefield in Kuwait. The ensuing warfare would certainly have resulted in substantially greater casualties to American forces than the war itself. For this reason, our military and the president's senior advisors were properly dead-set against it.

• Military occupation. Even if Saddam were captured and his regime toppled, U.S. forces would still have been confronted with the specter of a military occupation of indefinite duration to pacify the country and sustain a new government in power. Unlike Panama, however, where a democratically elected government was available to assume power, there was no organized opposition to Saddam. Removing him from power might well have plunged Iraq into civil war, sucking U.S. forces in to preserve order. Had we elected to march on Baghdad, our forces might still be there.

• Bolstering Iran. As much as Saddam's neighbors wanted to see him gone, they feared that Iraq might fragment in unpredictable ways, which would play into the hands of the mullahs in Iran. The mullahs could export their brand of Islamic fundamentalism with the help of Iraq's Shi'ites and quickly transform themselves into the dominant regional power. This was also a concern of the Bush administration and many of our allies. As if to prove the point, Iran quickly moved to support the dissidents within Iraq. Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani called on the Iraqi citizenry to rise against its discredited leaders. The Lebanonization of Iraq was ultimately in nobody's interests.

• Fracturing the coalition. Diplomatically, pressing on to Baghdad would have caused not just a rift but an earthquake within the coalition. Going beyond our mandate from the U.N. Security Council could have made an Arab nationalist hero out of Saddam. Suddenly, an international coalition's war to liberate Kuwait from a universally condemned invasion would have been transformed into a war of U.S. imperialism in the view of the "Arab Street" throughout the region.

It was important that the coalition survive the war intact, for at least two reasons. One was the possibility of reviving the long-moribund Middle East peace process. The other was that, during the war, we had learned that Saddam's program to develop weapons of mass destruction was both more substantial and better concealed than we had believed at the outset. We were determined to use our victory in Desert Storm to put the Iraqi regime under the intense glare of the most intrusive international weapons-inspection regime ever developed.

We were also determined to maintain substantial economic and political sanctions against Iraq to restrict its aggressive tendencies — sanctions that remain in effect today. To put Saddam in that cage, so to speak, we needed implementation of existing U.N. resolutions and an additional U.N. resolution enacted. The international coalition had to remain intact to achieve this.

• Destroying the foundations for postwar peace. For all the devastation on the ground, it was clear that the invasion of Kuwait and its liberation by a U.S.-led coalition established a dramatic new reality in the Middle East. Arab radicalism was defeated, creating a unique opportunity to pursue a lasting peace in the Middle East among Arabs and Israelis.

In liberating Kuwait, and promptly withdrawing from Iraq as we had promised, the United States had earned the respect and gratitude of all the Gulf Arab states. At the same time, we had taken care of the gravest threat to Israel's security — Iraq. U.S. credibility in the region was at an all-time high. Moreover, the Soviet Union, long a force for trouble in the Middle East, was now a partner of U.S. diplomacy.

This allowed us to organize the Madrid Conference, in which Israel and all her Arab neighbors sat down, face to face, for the first time in peace talks. Had we gone to Baghdad, the Madrid Conference would never have happened. There might very well be no ongoing Middle East peace process to speak of today.

So, of all the criticism of Bush administration decision-making during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, it is this marching-to-Baghdad canard that has the least merit. As a diplomatic, political or even military matter, marching to Baghdad would have been a disaster in the making.

James A. Baker III was U.S. secretary of state from 1989-92. *© 1996, James A. Baker III. This article was distributed by the Los Angeles Times Syndicate.*

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