



Tuesday, October 30, 2001

What If Saddam Did It?

Michael Elliott on Iraq's possible involvement and how the Bush Administration might respond

Monday, Oct. 29, 2001

It is the suspicion that dare not speak its name. We know that Saddam Hussein, President of Iraq, has reason to harbor a burning hatred for the U.S. and anyone whose second name is Bush. We know that Iraq has the will and the technical capacity to "weaponize" anthrax. We know that in 1988 Saddam used chemical weapons against his own people. We know that for seven years his officials lied to, cheated and frustrated the United Nations-imposed regime designed to eliminate his capacity to manufacture weapons of mass destruction. We know there has been no inspection of Iraq's weapons facilities for almost three years. We know that Mohamed Atta, thought to be the ringleader of the Sept. 11 terrorists, met in Prague with an Iraqi spy. With all that data, it's hardly surprising that some have made the obvious connection and wondered, ever since the first plane crashed into the World Trade Center. Suppose it is Saddam. What then?

For now, nobody paid to do so has to answer that question. After an internal debate immediately following the atrocities, all members of the Administration have lined up behind a strategy of "Afghanistan first." A second wave, if it comes, may not involve Iraq. Last week law-enforcement sources tended to think the anthrax attacks were the work of a homegrown maniac, not a foreign terrorist. So far, little evidence suggests that the Sept. 11 atrocities were hatched in Baghdad. Sources say the British have insisted loudly that they see no intelligence to link the hijackings to Iraq. That is significant. The British (unlike, say, the French) are not squeamish about Iraq; they have been helping the U.S. bomb it for a decade. Tony Blair's government has nothing to gain from sucking up to Saddam; he's always going to hate the British.

But the old suspicion is still there, like a jagged tooth you can't stop playing with. Some seasoned observers, like R. James Woolsey, former head of the CIA, have been convinced from the start that the case for Iraqi involvement had to be taken seriously. Imagine that incontrovertible evidence connected

the anthrax attacks, or Sept. 11, to the murderous panoply of Saddam's state. What would happen?

The easy answer is: another Gulf War. But like most easy answers, that one just begs more questions. Most military analysts assume that to be sure of success, a second Gulf War would have to be fought like the first. That is, the U.S. (and any allies it might rope in) would spend months assembling, say, 500,000 troops on the ground, launch massive air strikes, and then march on Baghdad. But that strategy — so successful in 1991--would be more tricky a second time. For one thing, Iraq would not give the U.S. the luxury of a leisurely build up. But much more important, Saddam knows that the objective of any new war would not be the removal of his forces from Kuwait, as in 1991, but the removal of him from this mortal coil. He would thus have no incentive to do anything other than to fight with every weapon at his disposal, however villainous — and would have the time to do so. The U.S. would have to reply with some massive display of force. So a second Gulf War fought like the first could escalate to the use of weapons of mass destruction.

Is there another, quicker way of defeating Saddam? In 1998 a committee of conservative foreign-policy analysts — many of them now in the Bush Administration — wrote to President Clinton proposing the recognition of an alternative government of Iraq and the establishment of safe havens from which local forces could attack Saddam. Richard Perle, the sharpest-taloned hawk in Washington, who co-authored the 1998 letter, insists that Saddam's power is overrated: "He is in my view highly vulnerable." Perle might be right; histories of the Gulf War conclude that the Iraqis were not much of a fighting force. But few if any allies would rally to the American side in such a proxy war. A senior European official, well disposed to the Bush Administration, calls the plan "incoherent." That means the U.S. would have no cover from a coalition if the operation went wrong.

That risk may not be determinative. If Washington really wants to go to war alone, it can. The real worry is this: even a "quick" proxy war against Saddam would take weeks to plan and win — more than enough time for him to use the weapons he has assuredly been preparing since the U.N. inspectors were kicked out. So the choice between a slow or fast war against Iraq is one of equal evils. Either could end with horrors of a sort the world has not witnessed since Nagasaki.

With Reporting by Massimo Calabresi/Washington