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## THE QUESTIONS TO ASK

# No reason now to take on Saddam

Too many factors argue against American action.

By TOM ALLEN

For months, the Bush administration has suggested that the U.S. will topple Iraq's ruthless leader, Saddam Hussein. The only questions have been when and how.

Those are not the only relevant questions.

Before we start a war, we must first ask: What price will we pay? Will it be worth it? The answers are not yet clear, to me or to others. But failure to debate these questions increases the chances of fatal mistakes. We are, moreover, a democracy, and the consent of the governed to go to war, obtained through their elected representatives and senators, is not only constitutionally required, but essential for success.

**I DO NOT DOUBT** that Saddam is a menace to the United States, to the world and to his own people. But we face many foes, some far better equipped to use weapons of mass destruction against us or our allies. So we must also ask, why focus on Iraq now?

A realistic consideration of these factors is sobering. Most troubling is the risk of making matters worse. The current justification for this war (initial claims of Saddam's ties to the events of Sept. 11 have not been substantiated) is to prevent Iraq's development of nuclear weapons.

That is a real concern. Yet, as Brent Scowcroft, the first President Bush's security advisor, and retired Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of the allied forces in Operation Desert Storm, have warned, by attacking Iraq we give Saddam both the excuse and the incentive to use the biological and chemical weapons

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Rep. Tom Allen, a Democrat, represents Maine's 1st District in the U.S. Congress.

that he already has.

Second, the human and financial cost may be extremely high. While our military forces are vastly superior, Saddam has presumably learned from the last war; this one will probably not be fought in the desert, but in city streets filled with civilians, making precision bombs useless and casualties high. It will cost billions to wage the war and billions more to rebuild.

Unlike other recent U.S. military campaigns, this time our allies appear to have no stomach for an invasion. We may foot the whole bill. More significantly, the absence of an international coalition backing us up could greatly hinder the war's effectiveness, and make it more likely that the conflict would fuel greater hostility to the United States and instability in moderate Muslim nations. That is why coordination with our allies is essential.

**IF WE SUCCEED** in toppling Saddam, what next? Can we replace the current regime with a viable alternative that will bring stability and peace to the region? Do we have the resolve, as well as the vision and capacity, to bring this about? And, as Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel has noted, there is no credible opposition to Saddam in Iraq.

Finally, what will a preemptive strike in Iraq, unprecedented in American history, do to our standing in the world and to our self-image? If we flaunt the international rule of

law, how can we expect others to follow it? Americans, moreover, don't think of themselves as aggressors. As Republican House Majority Leader Dick Arney said, "It would not be consistent with what we have been as a nation or what we should be as a nation."

War should always be the option of last resort. As Vietnam veteran Hagel said, "Many of those who want to rush this country into war and think it would be so quick and easy don't know anything about war. They come at it from an intellectual perspective versus having sat in jungles or foxholes and watched their friends get their heads blown off."

**APPARENTLY**, the administration has given up on alternatives to war. There may be other ways to ensure Iraq does not become a nuclear menace. At the least, a new robust weapons inspection regime should be tried through the United Nations. Although its promises must be viewed with suspicion, the Iraqi government, faced with this threat to its survival, recently indicated a readiness to cooperate.

The administration's position that "the risk of inaction is greater than the risk of action" omits the option of containment. While it may not be the bold step the administration is looking for, containment has a successful track record, most notably as the policy that led to the nonviolent conclusion to the Cold War.

If credible evidence indicates that Saddam is on the verge of using weapons of mass destruction, military action would be justified. Before we start down the road to Baghdad, however, we must insist on asking whether this is one of those few times when war is appropriate.

— Special to the Press Herald