

# The 'least bad' option?

reviewed by [David Heim](#) in the [December 18, 2002](#) issue

*The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq.* By Kenneth M. Pollack. Random House, 494 pp., \$29.95.

Saddam Hussein is a murderous tyrant who has used chemical weapons and is trying to develop biological and nuclear weapons. He is a menace to his own people and a threat to stability in the Middle East. On these points, few people disagree. The question is: What should be done about him?

Assuming that he cannot be ignored, three options present themselves to the U.S. and the rest of the world: contain him, deter him or remove him. Kenneth M. Pollack thinks that the containment option has been tried and failed. The deterrence strategy is too risky and unpredictable with an unstable character like Saddam. That leaves removing Saddam as "unfortunately . . . the best option--or at least our 'least bad' option."

Pollack lays out this case with care, calm and abundant technical knowledge. A Persian Gulf specialist for the National Security Council during the Clinton administration and before that an analyst for the CIA, he devotes much of his book to recounting how for over a decade three different presidents--Bush, Clinton and Bush the second--were frustrated in their efforts to enforce a policy of containment. When the first President Bush put an end to the gulf war in 1991, his assumption was that Saddam, having been defeated on the battlefield, was about to fall from power. In the interim, U.S. officials concluded, Saddam could be contained through economic sanctions, an imposed disarmament verified by United Nations inspectors, and a U.S. military presence in the region.

Though the UN inspectors had some success in eliminating weapons materials in the early '90s, Pollack says, Iraqi defectors reported that Saddam had played games with inspectors and was proceeding with his weapons program. Saddam became increasingly uncooperative with the inspectors and in 1998 he expelled them.

As for sanctions, they were undermined from the start by smugglers and were never popular with key UN members such as France and Russia, which were eager to trade with Iraq. The sanctions also hurt ordinary Iraqis much more than they hurt Saddam. In recent years, Pollack claims, Saddam's regime took in between \$2 billion and \$3 billion a year via smuggling--money Saddam used to bolster his power and pursue his weapons program. Under the UN sanctions, Iraq was allowed to sell oil for food and humanitarian supplies, but it often didn't sell as much oil as allowed--proof, Pollack notes, that Saddam was not much concerned with the plight of the Iraqi people.

A containment policy could work, according to Pollack, but it would require not only effective weapons inspectors--backed by the threat of force--but stronger trade sanctions, including punishment of countries such as Syria and Jordan that trade with Iraq. Organizing such a strategy would demand enormous diplomatic energy and political will on the part on the U.S., and even then--judging from the results of the past decade--such international pressure could be mobilized only episodically. (Pollack presumably views the current work by weapons inspectors as simply one more such episode, bound eventually to disintegrate as Saddam plays for time.)

Compared to the messy business of containment, deterrence is an appealing alternative. Under this approach, the U.S. and its allies rely on their superior might to deter Saddam from any military adventures. He knows that were he to move on Kuwait, or on the Saudi oilfields, or on the Kurds, he would be met with enormous force. And surely he knows that were he to launch a nuclear weapon or chemical agent against the U.S. or its allies, he would be immediately destroyed. His instinct for survival should keep him in check.

There are two problems with deterrence, however. First, deterrence is designed to work in a situation like the U.S.-Soviet standoff in which each side knows well the other's capability and assesses risk in the same way. Deterrence assumes that "What would I do in the other guy's shoes?" is a reasonable basis for prediction. But Saddam has shown he is unpredictable, and probably not a rational calculator of risk. His conduct during the Iraq-Iran war and the invasion of Kuwait indicated that he operates in his own world, motivated by illusions of grandeur. He is indifferent to the advice of his generals when it contradicts his wishes, and they often fear to tell to tell him the truth about Iraq's military limitations.

The second problem with deterrence is that it works in both directions: if Saddam becomes armed with weapons of mass destruction, other countries, including the U.S., would hesitate to challenge him--the cost may be higher than they want to pay. Besides, the option of incinerating Baghdad in response to Saddam's aggression is not a happy one.

This leads us to the advantages of an invasion. It offers the chance to get rid of Saddam before he obtains weapons of mass destruction and the ability either to leverage more power or spread destruction in a futile, delusional grasp for power or posthumous esteem. (On the latter possibility, Pollack cites this report by the former head of Iraq's nuclear weapons program, Khadir Hamza: During the gulf war Saddam called for a crash program to produce one nuclear missile. If the allied forces marched on Baghdad, he planned to hurl it at Tel Aviv.)

Pollack is not a drummer for war but a professional manager of risk who says he comes to his conclusion "grudgingly." In any case, his account makes it clear that the policy of "regime change" did not arise suddenly with George W. Bush. It has been contemplated for a decade and was formally endorsed by Clinton.

An invasion is not without dangers of its own, of course, but Pollack has no doubt the U.S. can remove Saddam, and probably quickly if it commits enough resources and troops. Every country will be happy to see Saddam go, including the Arab states, however much they may publicly protest a U.S.-led invasion. For Pollack, the policy choice boils down to this: either deal with Saddam now or face the likelihood of having to deal with him later when the costs will be much higher.

It is disconcerting to be led, step by step, to this reasonable case for war. Surely, one thinks, if we are going to be reasonable about it, some other option can be found. At the same time, Pollack's book is a sharp reminder of how difficult it is to shape international affairs at all, much less in optimal ways. One is reminded of the remark by Lord Halifax, Britain's foreign secretary in the 1930s: "Perhaps the greatest difficulty in the conduct of foreign affairs, and the one least appreciated by those not engaged in it, is the fact that ideal policy is scarcely ever practical."

Pollack's account is made entirely from within the framework of power politics. He does not consider, for example, whether the invasion option is morally suspect in ways that the other options are not. Still, a moral analysis cannot dispense with Pollack's practical wisdom. And those who want to make the case for containment or deterrence, or offer some other option, will first have to confront Pollack's

impressive, sober analysis.