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## **Bush's War Story Is All Wrong** **by Sheldon Richman**

President Bush likes to say that if his war critics had their way, Saddam Hussein would still be in power. But if we are to believe the president, the same thing can be said about him: if he had had his way, Saddam Hussein would still be in power.

A dominant theme of Bush's case for war against Iraq has been that it was forced on the United States. It was a war of necessity because Saddam refused to comply with UN resolutions calling for him to dismantle weapons of mass destruction. As Bush summarized his pre-war position on *Meet the Press* February 8, "We expect you, Mr. Saddam Hussein, to disarm, your choice to disarm, but if you don't, there will be serious consequences."

What if Saddam had complied with the resolutions? Bush's position implies that Saddam would have remained in power and no war would have occurred. After all, the resolutions did not demand "regime-change." But if Bush was prepared to leave him in power, why does he now list Saddam's brutality against the Iraqi people as grounds for war?

There's only one way to resolve this paradox: Bush is not telling the truth. Even if Saddam had fully documented his disarmament, Bush would have found a pretext for war. Regardless of what he says, the president never gave up his goal of regime-change to fulfill the Wilsonian vision of remaking the Middle East.

Bush had Saddam in his sights before the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Right after 9/11, although no evidence linked Saddam to the attacks, the Bush administration started openly talking about the need for regime-change in Iraq. "Regime-change" was the euphemism for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the installation of a new government more to the administration's liking. Everyone from the administration's national-security personnel, with one partial exception, indicated that immediate and, if necessary, unilateral war was the only option. The exception was Secretary of State Colin Powell, who believed that a unilateral war would be bad for U.S. relations with its allies. As a result of Powell's lobbying and mounting public and congressional concern about unilateralism, President Bush, clearly with reluctance, agreed to take the matter to the UN Security Council in 2002. The Council passed Resolution 1441 insisting that Saddam disarm or

face “serious consequences.” Saddam allowed a new UN team, headed by Hans Blix, to enter Iraq and search for WMDs.

Around this time something curious happened. Months of administration saber-rattling about regime-change suddenly ended, and the administration acted as if everything would be okay if Saddam just proved he had no weapons. (Perhaps this is because a preemptive attack for the purpose of regime change would be illegal under the UN charter.) However, it tempered this new line by suggesting that it did not expect Saddam to cooperate, leaving the door open for war.

Meanwhile, administration advisors passed up no opportunity to denigrate the inspectors publicly. Blix was called Mr. McGoo to indicate that he wouldn’t see a weapon if he fell over one. Further, the Bush administration withheld from the UN inspectors data it said it possessed regarding the location of weapons stockpiles. Every sign from the White House and Defense Department betrayed a hope that the UN mission would fail, clearing the way for war.

In recent weeks Bush has ignored these facts. He has said that Saddam wouldn’t “let [the UN] back in.” That is clearly false. The Blix team was there searching far and wide for weapons but found none. Bush also conveniently forgets that Saddam publicly invited the CIA to join the search. Maybe he was bluffing, but Bush never tested him.

Bush was just going through the diplomatic motions while hoping the approach would fail. It was a new low in presidential cynicism.

The failure of American forces to find a single unconventional weapon is a great embarrassment to President Bush. A burgeoning credibility crisis could jeopardize his reelection effort. So he has a large stake in portraying himself as a man who went the extra mile for peace but was forced to take the country to war by an intransigent “madman” who threatened the American people. Every part of Bush’s story contradicts the facts.

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