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The Right War for the Right Reasons

By JOHN MCCAIN

WASHINGTON — American and British armed forces will likely soon begin to disarm Iraq by destroying the regime of Saddam Hussein. We do not know whether they will have the explicit authorization of veto-wielding members of the United Nations Security Council. But either way, the men and women ordered to undertake this mission can take pride in the justice of their cause.

Critics argue that the military destruction of Saddam Hussein's regime would be, in a word, unjust. This opposition has coalesced around a set of principles of "just war" — principles that they feel would be violated if the United States used force against Iraq.

The main contention is that we have not exhausted all nonviolent means to encourage Iraq's disarmament. They have a point, if to not exhaust means that America will not tolerate the failure of nonviolent means indefinitely. After 12 years of economic sanctions, two different arms-inspection forces, several Security Council resolutions and, now, with more than 200,000 American and British troops at his doorstep, Saddam Hussein still refuses to give up his weapons of mass destruction. Only an obdurate refusal to face unpleasant facts — in this case, that a tyrant who survives only by the constant use of violence is not going to be coerced into good behavior by nonviolent means — could allow one to believe that we have rushed to war.

These critics also object because our weapons do not discriminate between combatants and noncombatants. Did the much less discriminating bombs dropped on Berlin and Tokyo in World War II make that conflict unjust? Despite advances in our weaponry intended to minimize the loss of innocent life, some civilian casualties are inevitable. But far fewer will perish than in past wars. Far fewer will perish than are killed every year by an Iraqi regime that keeps power through the constant use of lethal violence. Far fewer will perish than might otherwise because American combatants will accept greater risk to their own lives to prevent civilian deaths.

The critics also have it wrong when they say that the strategy by the United States for the opening hours of the conflict — likely to involve more than 3,000 precision-guided bombs and missiles in the first 48 hours — is intended to damage and demoralize the Iraqi people. It is intended to damage and demoralize the Iraqi military and to dissuade Iraqi leaders from using weapons of mass destruction against our forces or against neighboring countries, and from committing further atrocities against the Iraqi people.

The force our military uses will be less than proportional to the threat of injury we can expect to face should Saddam Hussein continue to build an arsenal of the world's most destructive weapons.

Many also mistake where our government's primary allegiance lies, and should lie. The American people, not the United Nations, is the only body that President Bush has sworn to represent. Clearly, the administration cares more about the credibility of the Security Council than do other council members who demand the complete disarmament of the Iraqi regime yet shrink from the measures needed to enforce that demand. But their lack of resolve does not free an American president from his responsibility to protect the security of this country. Both houses of Congress, by substantial margins, granted the president authority to use force to disarm Saddam Hussein. That is all the authority he requires.

Many critics suggest that disarming Iraq through regime change would not result in an improved peace. There are risks in this endeavor, to be sure. But no one can plausibly argue that ridding the world of Saddam Hussein will not significantly improve the stability of the region and the security of American interests and values. Saddam Hussein is a risk-taking aggressor who has attacked four countries, used chemical weapons against his own people, professed a desire to harm the United States and its allies and, even faced with the prospect of his regime's imminent destruction, has still refused to abide by the Security Council demands that he disarm.

Isn't it more likely that antipathy toward the United States in the Islamic world might diminish amid the demonstrations of jubilant Iraqis celebrating the end of a regime that has few equals in its ruthlessness? Wouldn't people subjected to brutal governments be encouraged to see the human rights of Muslims valiantly secured by Americans — rights that are assigned

rather cheap value by the critics' definition of justice?

Our armed forces will fight for peace in Iraq — a peace built on more secure foundations than are found today in the Middle East. Even more important, they will fight for the two human conditions of even greater value than peace: liberty and justice. Some of them will perish in this just cause. May God bless them and may humanity honor their sacrifice.

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