

# Saddam's Hobbesian instinct for survival

By David Hendrickson

As the United States moves towards war with Iraq, it is often said that it inhabits a Hobbesian world of anarchy and power politics, one where the compulsions of security and survival demand the rejection of legal and moral restraints on the use of force.

In fact, nothing could be more contrary to the cool realism of Thomas Hobbes than the reckless course on which the Bush administration is set. Its case rests on premises entirely inconsistent with Hobbes' understanding of human nature; and its thirst for war is wholly incompatible with the English philosopher's love of peace -- a love so ardent that he accepted absolute monarchy as a relief from the spectre of civil war.

The case for war with Iraq rests on the proposition that Saddam Hussein cannot be deterred; that once he acquires weapons of mass destruction he will use them; and that he is fundamentally irrational. If this portrayal is right, Hobbes was wrong, for the philosopher believed that all men had reason and would employ it to assuage their fear of violent death.

Mr. Hussein's career is clearly explicable on a Hobbesian view. Rather than regarding tyrants as bereft of the psychological characteristics that Hobbes imputed to men, it makes more sense to see them as possessing the desire of self-preservation to an inordinate, even shocking, degree. Hence the pre-emptive use of violence and terror against domestic opponents, a process that once begun can never really end, even when the tyrant achieves complete control.

That pattern, so pronounced in the life of Joseph Stalin, Mr. Hussein's model, has led to extraordinary cruelty against his enemies but it also provides the means to hold him in check. Mr. Hussein's love of power, Hobbes would infer, arises from a more fundamental urge to self-preservation. In that basic human desire, we have the means to control him.

Instead of accepting his obvious motive for wanting to possess dangerous weapons -- to protect his regime by deterring potential attackers -- the US administration's hawks say he believes a few nuclear weapons would give him mastery of the region. But there is a big gap between deterring others and compelling them to do what you want. What the U.S. has been unable to do with its undisputed military superiority, Mr. Hussein could not do with any arsenal he might build.

His resistance to unfettered access for weapons inspectors is also rational. The first round of weapons inspections convinced him that the U.S. would use the information for target selection, as it reportedly did in the bombing campaign of 1998. Total access to the crucial centres of his power, reinforced by a significant U.S. military presence, would ultimately lead to his demise.

The two things that Americans most deeply fear -- that Mr. Hussein will use weapons of mass destruction, or turn them over to others -- are only made more likely by the administration's course. By attacking him to prevent his future attacks, the U.S. would remove his motive for restraint. That observation -- belatedly and weakly advanced by George Tenet, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, points to a deep inconsistency in the case for war.

If Mr. Hussein is as strong as they say, preventive war risks fearsome consequences, above all that the war will bring about massive loss of life -- whether through bombing, poisoning, civil war, or a determined Sunni defence of Baghdad. But if, as is more probable, Mr. Hussein is much weaker than he is portrayed, the case for preventive war evaporates.

Throughout the cold war, the U.S. maintained a deterrent relationship with characters no less violent and no more stable than Mr. Hussein. Faced with a presumed choice between "suicide and surrender", the U.S. found a middle way that preserved the nuclear peace. Yet what worked then with Stalin, Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung -- in the context of power relationships much less favourable to the U.S. -- is rejected now. Instead, the administration espouses a doctrine of preventive war, which largely has a record of failure and comeuppance.

The U.S. now inhabits not a Hobbesian world but a Manichean one, in which its moral fervour prevents a sober assessment of enemy intentions. In effect, it is assimilating all its adversaries to the psychological type of an Osama bin Laden. Yet that kind of ascetic fanaticism is non-existent in political leaders such as Mr. Hussein, who have maintained themselves in power over long periods.

Containment and deterrence are a better way to deal with Mr. Hussein, one that enjoys widespread international support and offers a superior path to security. Only an irrational quest for absolute security prevents the administration from seeing that vital point and it is a misperception for which the U.S. seems destined to pay a terrible price.

*The writer is professor of political science at Colorado College*