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HEADLINE: Should we go to war just because we can?;
Saddam: King of Terror, Con Coughlin, Ecco Press: 350 pp.,;
\$26.95 The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading **Iraq**, Kenneth M.;
Pollack, A Council on Foreign Relations Book / Random House: 498 pp.,;
\$25.95 War on **Iraq**: What Team Bush Doesn't Want You to Know, William;
Rivers Pitt with Scott Ritter, Context Books: 96 pp., \$8.95 paper

BYLINE: Andrew Cockburn, Andrew Cockburn is the co-author of "Out of the Ashes:, The Resurrection of Saddam Hussein."

BODY:

Faced with Saddam Hussein, the former teenage hit man from Tikrit, our government appears to feel the need to talk as tough as any Tikriti. Ari Fleischer, speaking from the White House briefing room, calls for "one bullet" to take care of the Iraqi leader; George Bush talks blithely of "taking him out"; and Tom Lantos, ranking Democrat on the House International Relations Committee, recently, according to Ha'aretz, assured a visiting Israeli lawmaker: "We'll be rid of the bastard soon enough, and in his place we'll install a pro-Western dictator, who will be good for us and for you."

Such violent sentiments are not necessarily a reaction to Hussein's well-documented cruelty. We can, after all, be understanding about such foibles among our friends. The gassing of the Kurds was greeted with barely more than a bleat of **protest** from Washington, as was his earlier use of chemical weapons in the war with Iran, but we were allies then. It took Hussein's apparent bid for control of the world oil market by invading Kuwait to turn him into "Hitler," capable, as was faithfully reported in the propaganda buildup to the last Gulf War, of tossing Kuwaiti babies out of hospital incubators. That myth, dreamed up by the PR firm Hill and Knowlton, was exposed soon after it had served its purpose. Others, such as the notion that Hussein is both ready and able to unleash some super-weapon on the United States, have proved more enduring. Now more than ever, myth looms larger than reality when it comes to **Iraq**, which may be why Iraqi Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan has suggested that the dispute be settled in an OK Corral shootout between Bush and Hussein, flanked by their respective veeps and umpired by U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

In the prologue to "Saddam: King of Terror," Con Coughlin strikes a no less mythic note, citing as part of the indictment against the Iraqi leader his links to Osama bin Laden and an alleged meeting in Prague between hijacker Mohamed Atta and an Iraqi intelligence officer, a story now effectively discredited by the Czech intelligence service that spread it in the first place. Once past the obligatory threat-mongering, however, Coughlin, a British journalist well-versed in Middle Eastern affairs, deploys more credible sources, especially the reminiscences of former Baathists who once worked closely with Hussein, to present an engrossing account of how this semi-educated peasant boy advanced to power through the bloodstained shoals of Iraqi revolutionary politics.

While accounts of his subject's brutality and ruthlessness are familiar, though no less chilling for that, Coughlin reminds us that Hussein did not achieve his eminence through terror alone. Not only was he extremely skillful politically -- steadily accumulating power through

the 1970s while maintaining a low profile in the shadow of his cousin, President Ahmad Hassan Bakr -- he also displayed considerable constructive talents as an administrator.

Iraqi leaders, for example, had long chafed at the control of the country's oil resources by the cartel of foreign oil corporations that made up the **Iraq** Petroleum Co. Efforts by various regimes to alter this colonial relationship by taking over those oilfields that the IPC refused to develop had proved fruitless: Among other disciplinary measures, the international oil companies simply refused to supply oil to any country that bought oil directly from the Iraqi government rather than from the IPC.

Beginning in 1971, Hussein (then deputy to Bakr but already the key power in the country), advised by the gifted oil minister Murtada Hadithi, took the initiative in outmaneuvering the cartel. After first securing the Soviet Union as a great-power sponsor (despite a career built on persecuting Communists), he induced the French to break ranks with the consortium by promising them lucrative contracts and discounted oil prices. The scheme worked, finally allowing **Iraq** unfettered access to its own fabulous oil riches. It was, says Coughlin, "the single most revolutionary event to take place in **Iraq** since its establishment" -- one which has doubtless not been forgotten or forgiven by the oil companies -- generating a tidal wave of cash, which the Baath used "to turn the country into a modern state, and to raise the living standards of ordinary Iraqis."

Carrying out this vast undertaking required skilled assistance. Hussein has always drawn a distinction between "those who are loyal" and "those who are expert," the former being those very few trusted individuals -- first and foremost his immediate family -- through whom he maintains his grip on power. When it comes to experts, however, Hussein always displayed an eager eye for, as one former apparatchik recalls, "young people with good qualifications who were intelligent and courageous." Even today, anyone who encounters his officials -- such as oil minister Amer Rashid; Amir Sadi, chief negotiator on the weapon inspection issue; or Foreign Minister Naji Sabri -- can see that Hussein is served by an impressively accomplished team. Of course, as the charming Sabri could explain, competence does not guarantee a long life in Hussein's Baghdad. His cousin was Hadithi, the former oil minister who later became ambassador to Moscow. Hadithi was summoned home soon after Hussein took supreme power in 1979 and executed (perhaps because the newly enthroned leader did not want anyone around sharing credit for the oil coup). Sabri's brother was killed as well, and rumor has it that Sabri himself was on the list until an attentive Hussein struck it off with the words "not him, he can be useful."

Kenneth M. Pollack's purpose in "The Threatening Storm" is less to tell a well-rounded story than to argue the case, as declared in his subtitle, for invading **Iraq**, displacing Hussein and building a new **Iraq**. Pollack, a former CIA analyst and National Security Council staffer in the Clinton administration, argues that such action is imperative because Hussein is not only a bloodthirsty tyrant but a really stupid one to boot, prone to irrational gambles such as the attack on the Kurds in 1974 as well as the attacks on Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990. Such reckless adventurism, Pollack insists, is a threat to us because Hussein is on the point of acquiring nuclear weapons. Therefore, he and every aspect of his regime must be eliminated as quickly as possible. This martial intervention will ultimately reverse anti-Americanism in the Arab world once the U.S. has built a "strong, prosperous, and inclusive new Iraqi state."

Because so much of the "debate" over war with **Iraq** has barely risen above the level of sloganeering, Pollack's considered, empirical style and intellectually rigorous tone is likely to strike a chord with many undecided observers. Each stage in his argument comes buttressed with well-footnoted facts and sources (albeit secondary and mostly non-Iraqi). Still, this is probably the best presentation of their case that the war party can hope for, especially because Pollack takes a hardheaded approach to various postulated alternatives to a full-scale land invasion, such as a bombing campaign a la Kosovo or a sponsored assault by the

Iraqi opposition with U.S. air support, along the lines of the recent Afghan campaign. He is surely right in deriding these latter notions, although I think he has been a little naive about the opposition-based variant, which was most likely crafted by the opposition leader Ahmed Chalabi with the express design of drawing the United States into a full-scale land war with **Iraq**.

As with any work of advocacy, facts and viewpoints inconvenient to the basic thesis sometimes get short shrift. His muddled account of Hussein's dealings with the Kurds in the mid-'70s -- actually a masterful display of cunning by "Mr. Deputy" that crushed the threat of Kurdish separatism for a generation -- may be due to simple ignorance. However, though he glosses over or fails to mention them, he must surely be aware of the various covert U.S. interventions in Iraqi affairs, including the CIA-supported 1963 coup that first put Hussein's Baath Party in power, or the Carter administration's encouraging support for Hussein's attack on Iran in 1980. He does concede that the U.S. ambassador to Baghdad, April Glaspie, might have led Hussein to believe he had a green light to attack Kuwait, but he discounts the significance of the encounter.

Similarly, Pollack refers delicately to Israel's "purported" nuclear arsenal. This might be dismissed as a mere quibble, save that the argument of his book -- the case for invading **Iraq** and occupying **Iraq** -- rests on the assumption that a dangerously reckless Hussein is about to have the bomb, with no "purported" about it. It is this threat alone -- biological and chemical weapons are not, he persuasively suggests, instruments of mass destruction because they are ineffective or at least unpredictable -- that justifies war.

In late 1998, when the last United Nations weapon inspection mission ended in debacle and a rain of American bombs, the inspectors concerned with the Iraqi nuclear program were fully satisfied that the program was dead and buried. One U.S. official supervising the work of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the institution charged with Iraqi nuclear disarmament, said to me at the time, "The United States pushes the IAEA to find little discrepancies in **Iraq's** nuclear accounting so that the file can be kept open, but short of lobotomizing or killing all the Iraqi nuclear scientists, the Iraqi nuclear program is finished. We have closed down all their nuclear facilities and activities." And in its October 1998 report to the U.N., the IAEA itself stated, "There are no indications that there remains in **Iraq** any physical capability for the production of weapon-usable nuclear material of any practical significance."

Such assessments do not find favor with Pollack, who regards Hussein's acquisition of nuclear weapons as "probably inevitable." His major source for this conclusion appears to be an exiled Iraqi nuclear physicist, Khidhir Hamza, who is described without qualification as "the former head of **Iraq's** nuclear weapons program." Hamza, who defected in 1994, claims that Hussein will most likely be in possession of three nuclear weapons by 2005 (though occasionally he amends that to "a bomb" within "months"). This individual is furthermore a key source for the suggestion that Hussein planned to fire a nuclear warhead, should he have had one available in time, at Tel Aviv during the Gulf War, thus inviting retaliatory immolation from Israel. If true, this certainly bolsters the case for Hussein's being impermissibly reckless.

However, not everyone takes Hamza at his own estimation as "Saddam's bombmaker." In his forceful debunking of the Iraqi threat, former senior weapon inspector Scott Ritter states flatly in "War on **Iraq**," that Hamza "wasn't a designer and he certainly wasn't head of the program.... [He] is not who he says he is." David Albright, a Washington-based expert on nuclear proliferation who helped give Hamza initial credibility, recently claimed that Hamza exaggerated his own importance in the Iraqi program and recycled information he had picked up from the press, including specious revelations about biological and chemical weapons, as his own firsthand knowledge. Despite such reservations, Hamza still finds a

respectful hearing among journalists and Congress, despite the lack of confirmation from other sources. It is telling that, while the United States detected a North Korean uranium enrichment program in its early stages, the administration has been unable, despite huge effort, to uncover hard evidence -- which it would quite certainly broadcast -- of any similar Iraqi activity.

Ritter, meanwhile, a hero among the hawks, is now vilified, when he is not ignored, because of his assertions, backed up by detailed information from his days as a star weapon inspector, that the former U.N. inspection effort effectively destroyed all Hussein's weapons of mass destruction as well as his means for constructing them. The very fact of Ritter's relative obscurity nowadays, compared to people with more palatable messages, such as Hamza, points to the lack of any real debate on the official justifications for the proposed invasion.

But then, who needs justifications? In December 1989, the U.S. attacked Panama on the flimsiest of pretexts and overthrew its government, killing more than 300 Panamanians in the process. The invasion was officially code-named "Operation Just Cause." But, inside the Pentagon, cynics dubbed it "Operation Just Because." As a former defense official said to me recently, "we invaded Panama just because it was there and we could."

Perhaps the same will be said of **Iraq**.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: Saddam Hussein PHOTO: (Cover) Should we invade? Andrew Cockburn on Saddam Hussein and the rush to war. PHOTOGRAPHER: Susan Tibbles / For The Times

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