

Scaring Saddam: The Message Must Be Consistent

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Brief Analysis

President Bush's decision to double U.S. force deployments in the Persian Gulf was designed to scare Saddam Hussein. Instead, it has frightened the American people and threatened his coercive diplomacy strategy.

The President faces a difficult dilemma. He cannot persuade Saddam Hussein of American resolve without a credible threat of war. This threat will not be credible unless Saddam perceives that the American people are ready for war. But the President cannot psychologically prepare the American people for war while reassuring them that war is a remote option. Moreover, the President's reassurances of peaceful intentions combined with the disquiet among the American public reinforces Saddam's view that the United States has no staying power. By next spring the President could be faced with the choice of backing down or initiating war without a strong domestic base of support.

To avoid that choice, the President must devote as much energy into explaining how he intends to use military power and shoring up his domestic coalition as he has put into rallying the international coalition.

Yet one week after the decision to dispatch additional forces, there is still no adequate, let alone compelling, explanation of this new phase in policy. The debate that should have taken place before President Bush's announcement of additional troop deployments is now unfolding without administration leadership. Congressional and other critics have dominated public discussion for the past week while administration spokesmen could hardly be found. Televised town meetings next week, while the President and his advisers are abroad, will be followed by Congressional hearings after Thanksgiving. By then the administration will find it difficult to regain the initiative.

Clear Questions, Unclear Answers

The administration's admirable success in orchestrating international support for the siege of Iraq undermines the basis for the administration's efforts to use force coercively. For many Americans, a sanctions-only strategy of waiting Saddam out is not only workable but eminently preferable to the risks and potentially high costs of war. For these people, patience appears a far better approach than threats to use force.

The administration has not yet explained that sanctions alone cannot reverse Iraqi aggression for the reasonable future, unless Saddam has an unexpected change of heart. At best, sanctions will have to bite hard for more than a year before Saddam feels any serious pressure to consider withdrawing from Kuwait.

Under a sanctions-only policy, Saddam will have at least twelve months to break up the coalition; at least twelve months to exploit the image in the Arab world that he has succeeded in absorbing Kuwait while the U.S. has come to occupy the oil fields and holy places of Saudi Arabia; at least twelve months for the American public to lose interest; at least twelve months for American troops sitting in the desert eating MREs to lose their will to fight; at least twelve months to negotiate a partial solution that will reward his aggression. Thus a sanctions-only strategy runs the very high risk of failing to achieve the stated objective of the total withdrawal of Iraq from Kuwait.

The President, backed by UN Security Council resolutions, is demanding Saddam's unconditional surrender. For

that objective to be achieved in a reasonable time-frame, the threat of much stronger medicine than sanctions is required.

Does that mean the U.S. must use force to achieve its objectives? Not necessarily. The President confronted this question in his CNN interview yesterday. In dispatching additional troops and directing the armed forces to prepare for the possibility of an offensive, the President was in his own words "sending a signal, a clear, clarion signal to Saddam Hussein: we are deadly serious about seeing you get out of Kuwait..." Bush's purpose is to back the UN's diplomatic demarche with the credible threat of force. This approach is based on the assumption that Saddam will respond to this clarion call with what the President refers to as "a 180-degree turn. I've seen him do that in his war with Iran and let's hope he does the same thing here."

There are three requirements for this strategy to work:

- To threaten war credibly, the U.S. must be prepared to go to war. The American public must be willing to fight and, if necessary, suffer high casualties to liberate Kuwait.
- Saddam must be convinced that the U.S. will fight and that Iraq will lose. This means that the threat Saddam receives has to be free of static. If he sees that the American public does not support the President or that the international coalition is not prepared to endorse a resort to force, he will calculate that -- as he told his troops in Kuwait -- "Bush can't do it." Moreover, if he believes that, as he says, the U.S. cannot absorb 10,000 casualties, he may prefer testing the U.S. will for war. For he has no compunction about sacrificing Iraqi lives to realize his ambitions.
- Saddam has to calculate that submission is preferable to war. He must be persuaded that Iraq and he personally will be far worse off after a war which destroyed much of Iraq and its Ba'athist regime than they would be if they complied with UN Security Council Resolutions. The United States does not have to offer Saddam a face-saving way out of the crisis, but it must make Saddam understand that his best option is to get out of Kuwait as soon as possible.

The President cannot threaten Iraq while reassuring the American public. If he wishes to persuade Saddam Hussein that war is inevitable unless he complies with Security Council resolutions, he must send the same message to the American people and Congress. It would be best for him to use his trip to the region to make his message strong and consistent.

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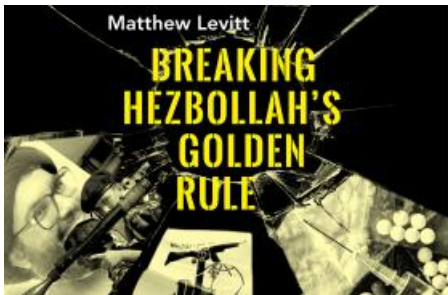
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