

Tighten the Finger on the Trigger

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Whenever he's been cornered over the last decade, Saddam Hussein has demonstrated his skill under pressure at stalling, dividing and diverting the West by appearing to cooperate. His strategy has been one of token progress cloaking substantial delays.

"Time is working for us," he said in a rare interview last month with the Egyptian weekly Al Usbou. "We have to buy some more time, and the American-British coalition will disintegrate because of internal reasons and . . . the pressure of public opinion in the American and British street."

Already, the comment heard in the corridors of the United Nations is: If the inspectors find nothing, there is no basis for military action; and if the inspectors find something, that proves the process is working and so there is no basis for military action.

The problem here, of course, is that the inspectors in the field might compromise over one seemingly minor point after another while the world grows tired of the Iraq problem -- until inspections become ineffectual and Hussein breaks through to a nuclear weapon.

Washington must not allow this.

If the United States and the world community accept an Iraqi pattern of incomplete and delayed semicompliance, inspections simply will become a form of enhanced containment -- only delaying Hussein's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles. That is not the assured and prompt disarmament that Security Council Resolution 1441 promises and that the United States has demanded.

Washington's decision on enhanced containment versus assured disarmament is fast approaching: The defining event will be how the U.S. reacts to the declaration that Iraq is required to file by Sunday and says it will issue Saturday.

Iraq must disclose not only weapons and delivery systems but also "the locations and work of its research, development and production facilities, as well as all other chemical, biological and nuclear programs, including any which it claims are for purposes not related to weapons production or material."

The declaration is central to the immediate and total disarmament required of Iraq. Without a guide provided by the

Iraqis to exactly what programs they have, inspectors would have to search a country the size of California for deeply hidden programs.

The risk is whether simple containment will erode and ultimately fail, leading to the question: Will the U.S. go to war if the inspectors are on track to achieve enhanced containment but not assured disarmament?

Unfortunately, it is implausible that there will be a "gotcha" moment, when U.N. inspectors open a secret door and find Iraqi scientists assembling a nuclear bomb.

The tough earlier inspections team, led by Rolf Ekeus, needed four years to uncover Iraq's biological weapons programs. The timetable on which the new inspectors will operate will also probably be years, with conclusions that may be ambiguous and subject to differing interpretations. And diplomats will be reluctant to endanger the ongoing inspections, no matter how meager the results.

Like many of the two dozen declarations that Iraq has filed with the U.N. in the past, the one due this weekend will probably provide some limited new information while leaving a lot of questions. Will that be enough or will the Bush administration insist on full disclosure?

By saying there will be zero tolerance, President Bush has drawn a line in the sand. That puts a heavy burden on the White House to prove that the declaration is inaccurate, perhaps by revealing detailed U.S. intelligence at the cost, if need be, of exposing some secret collection capabilities.

Some will say the requirement for a full declaration is a niggling legal point unworthy of a crisis. But if Bush decides to put some teeth behind his tough words, he will have to show Iraq that there are serious consequences for half-truths.

The best response to an incomplete Iraqi declaration would be to turn up the pressure on Hussein. Bush would be well advised to announce that 100,000 more troops are being sent to the Middle East. And Hussein should be told that once those troops are deployed, which will take at least a month, the U.S. will invade unless the U.N. Security Council finds that Iraq has made substantial progress toward completely dismantling its prohibited-weapons programs.

The moment for decision about Iraq is almost certainly at hand. We are not likely to have the luxury of clarity based on a blatant Iraqi transgression. Instead, the choice will be between limited and inconsistent progress that may be only temporary, on the one hand, and war on the other. ❖

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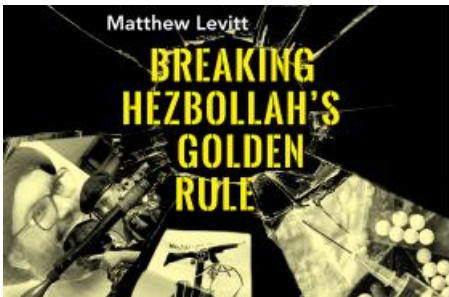
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