
CONGRESS VERSUS IRAQ

by John R. Bolton

DURING THE HOLIDAY SEASON, Iraq all but slipped from public view—doubtless to quiet prayers of thanks from the Clinton administration. Since Saddam Hussein effectively barred United Nations weapons inspectors from carrying out their responsibilities in late October, the administration's strategy has been to strike a macho pose for domestic consumption but do next to nothing diplomatically, and as little as possible militarily, to end Iraq's evasion of the Security Council's post-Gulf War constraints.

Surprisingly, the president has escaped damaging criticism, not only for five years of waning attention to the Iraq problem, but even for his sloppy handling of the last three months. By now, the administration's Middle East policy has dwindled to sheer political image-making; characteristically, the president has invited Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and PLO leader Yasser Arafat to the White House for photo opportunities next week. The "peace process" is nearly in ruins, Saddam is daily gaining confidence and resources, and the administration remains passive and unconnected to reality.

Thus, on November 20, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said with assurance, "The Iraqis are prepared to have the inspectors return unconditionally." Today, only the defiantly ignorant could agree. Sure enough, Defense Department spokesman Kenneth Bacon stepped up to say last week that "... the U.N. is still working for complete access. I think the situation has changed dramatically." What has changed dramatically is that Saddam Hussein's answer to the question, Are you better off today than you were three months ago?, is unequivocally yes.

This transformation is due largely to the administration's unwillingness to confront Saddam, either unilaterally or through a reassembled international coalition, with or without Security Council approval. Richard Butler, chairman of the U.N.'s special commission on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, said last month that Saddam's agents told him the commission will "never" be able to inspect the "presidential sites," as the U.N. sanctions require. This is not a subtle disagreement, a "nuance," as they like to say at the State Department. It is flat defiance, which awaits an American response.

One reason for the administration's passivity (although not the only one) is that Congress has been in recess throughout the present crisis. Some members have been available for media interviews, but the lengthy congressional absence from Washington has

precluded the formation of a critical mass of opposition that might have stiffened the president's spine, or at least heightened his interest in the opinion polls. The

palpable absence of hearings, floor debates, congressional resolutions, press conferences, and the attendant flood of press releases and sound bites has left the administration without discernible opposition to its limp-wristed policy.

Ironically, in August 1990, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Congress was also absent from Washington. That recess gave the Bush administration breathing room to launch the diplomatic and political initiative that culminated in Operation Desert Storm—and to do so free from the carping of members of Congress unwilling to use force.

By contrast, President Clinton has used his free hand to do what he does best: talk issues into obscurity. Alexander Hamilton wrote in *The Federalist*, "Energy in the executive is a leading character in the definition of good government. It is essential to the protection of the community against foreign attacks. . . ." But the administration exemplifies Hamilton's alternative case: "A feeble executive implies a feeble execution of the government."

The reconvening of Congress this month offers one last chance to convince the administration that its flaccid Iraq policy only encourages defiance by Saddam, equivocation and retreat by America's former Gulf coalition partners, and disrespect for Washington from rogue regimes. To seize the opportunity, however, Senate and House leaders must assert their authority in concert. Although Congress was never intended to initiate foreign policy, it is eminently capable of shaming a president into doing so.

Congress should act before the State of the Union message on January 27. During the week of January 19, while the president is smiling for the cameras with Netanyahu and Arafat, the four key committees in the House and Senate responsible for foreign policy and national security should schedule back-to-back hearings. Secretary Albright and Pentagon chief William Cohen should be summoned before their respective authorizing committees to testify. The intelligence committees and the key appropriations subcommittees might also schedule hearings during the same week.

The purpose would be not political one-upmanship (which the administration has already carried to excess) but two relatively simple tasks. First, the committees should lay out clearly for the press and the public the decline and fall of America's Iraq policy in the five years since Clinton took office. The public deserves to know, for example, how successfully Saddam Hussein was evading the constraints imposed by the U.N. even before his October defiance. Second,

members of Congress should spell out for the administration, in both political and military terms, what “a real president” (in Bob Dole’s phrase) would do with Saddam Hussein.

History will record the progressive collapse of the Gulf War coalition in Clinton’s first term, caused largely by his administration’s inattention to Iraq. And the record will show, in the last year, the accelerating decline of U.S. influence in the Gulf and the increasing likelihood that Saddam Hussein will break out of the ring so laboriously built around his regime. In default of executive leadership, Congress must detail the steps necessary either to bring Saddam’s regime back under control or to make it pay the full price of its transgressions.

Congress’s failure to seize this opportunity will leave President Clinton unembarrassed by his weak and ineffectual stewardship. The only way to instill energy in such an executive is to threaten domestic political consequences for inaction. As the president prepares the State of the Union with his legacy in mind, Congress must keep the citizenry’s attention on a true threat to our national security—and our president’s alarming lack of response.

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