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Trends. Brief Discourse Analysis of a Call to Arms: Rationale for Not Bombing Iraq

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On February 17, 1997 the United States (US) President delivered a speech from the Pentagon that was to make the case for military intervention against Iraq--if various unilateral and multilateral attempts at diplomacy to effect Iraqi compliance with United Nations (UN) resolutions failed. Through an analysis of the President's own words, a better case may have been made against military intervention.

The President stated that Saddam Hussein would be to blame if military intervention occurred. Yet surely there are options besides a prolonged bombing/missile attack that are being promulgated by various experts and pundits. The blame--as in responsibility--should be on the supporters of intervention. And if these supporters believe military intervention is appropriate, they should own up to it and claim responsibility. By denying or fudging the Issue, they reinforce the implication that they wish to engage in an action that is beyond their will, beyond their control, perhaps, beyond the pale. Is this what responsible leaders do?

The President stated that Saddam Hussein is guilty of violating agreements that the latter freely made at the end of the Gulf War. A reasonable observer might posit that these agreements were made as freely as those entered into by Germany at the end of World War I. In essence they were made in the face of extreme threat, coercion, and necessary capitulation. This is not necessarily a legal point but a moral one. One might even make a case that the agreements were made in a manner similar to incriminating confessions made under duress by interrogatees. A stronger Issue is Saddam's possession of, previous employment of, and demonstrated proclivity to employ weapons of mass destruction. (Here the President would need to differentiate the Iraqi regime from others that possess weapons of mass destruction and others, e.g., the US Government at the end of World War II, that have employed such weapons. The President also would need to demonstrate how his definition of weapons of mass destruction suggest evil beyond the pale of other evils from the past, present, and future.) If the Iraqi threat merits military intervention, then advocate this position by directly countering the concerns of opponents--especially as to opponents' advocacy for "moral equivalencies" of evils throughout the world and "consistencies" in foreign policy towards "equivalencies." Linking the threat to violations of UN resolutions is obfuscatory and weakens a stronger case that the President could make.

The President did not provide an analysis of why the consequences of military intervention would be worth the expenditure of time, money, materiel, and lives. The goal of seriously diminishing the threat of weapons of mass destruction is amorphous--the threats of the end of UN inspections (that have been responsible for more destruction of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction than the Gulf War), political reversals for the US throughout the Mideast, and destabilizing political violence if the Iraqi regime crumbles are specific and deserving of being addressed.

The President did not provide an analysis of why Saddam Hussein should not be driven from power--of why efforts should not be made to end his life. Many opponents of military intervention believe that these goals should be pursued. If the President disagrees, he might cite a rationale based on law, "blowback", or American values. Otherwise the President risks appearing weak as opposed to principled.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Military intervention has not yet occurred and probably won't at least until UN Secretary General Annan completes his trip to Baghdad. However, as to the information war, Saddam Hussein is winning by a mile. (See Iran, Iraq, and Dual Containment: An Unbalanced Balance. (December 19, 1997). IBPP, 3(20); Iraq: To Bomb or Not to Bomb. (February 6, 1998). IBPP, 4(5); Military intervention against Iraq: A script analysis of the opponents. (February 13, 1998). IBPP, 4(6); Why Bombing Iraq as Punishment is Contraindicated. (January 30, 1998). IBPP, 4(4).)