

Bush's Iraq Trap

Courting Saddam Was Smart—Demonizing Him Wasn't

10/28/92

By Milton Viorst

WITH THE election contest seemingly decided, the two challengers for the presidency are piling on, attacking George Bush in the sector where he is supposed to be the strongest. In the last of the debates, both Bill Clinton and Ross Perot bashed him for alleged mistakes in dealing with Iraq in the months leading to the Gulf War. Faithful to precedent, President Bush offered up only the feeblest defense.

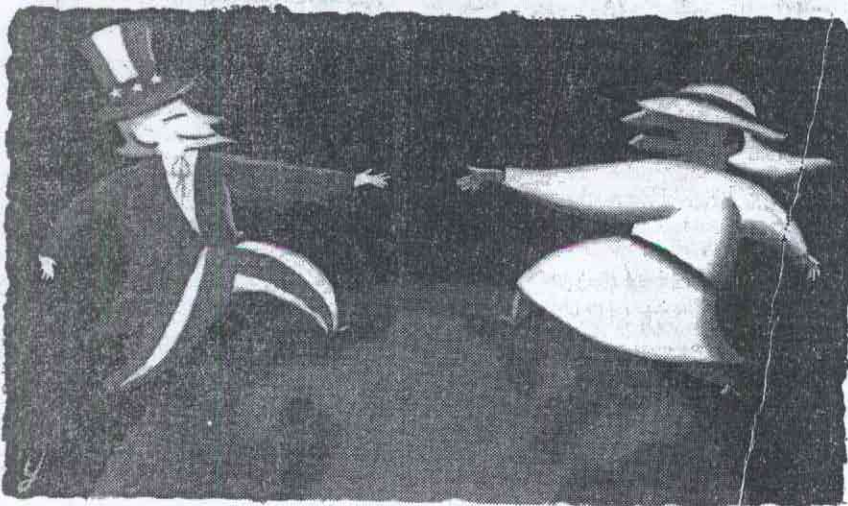
Bush unquestionably made mistakes in his Iraq policy. But he did not "coddle" Sad-

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dam Hussein, as Clinton charged, and he surely did not consent to Baghdad's taking "the northern part of Kuwait," as Perot claimed. In fact, in the two crucial years after Iraq's victory over Iran in the summer of 1988, Bush pursued a sensible and prudent policy designed to avoid war in the region. If it failed, he was only in small measure to blame.

It is a commentary on George Bush that he created his own electoral problem on Iraq policy. After the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, the president denounced Saddam so viciously (remember "Hitler," "gangster" and the like?) that he denied himself all opportunity to justify to the public the reasons for having offered the hand of friend-

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IRAQ, From C1

ship to the Iraqi dictator. Bush had done what the national interest required, then proceeded to repudiate it. Just as he did by his "read my lips" pledge, Bush trapped himself.

Bush's gulf policy between 1988 and 1990, with Saddam puffed up by his triumph and his army a loose cannon in the region, was, as he put it, to bring Iraq "into the family of nations." It was the correct policy. Iraq had suffered huge losses in eight years of war, and there was every reason to believe that its first concern was reconstruction. For Bush to have followed a more hostile course at that time would have been unconscionable.

Notwithstanding the historical revisionism of the electoral campaign, nobody in the administration was ever deluded into regarding Saddam as anything but a thug. But he was also a bulwark against Iran, still a dangerous power, with a far greater population and a far more aggressive ideology than Iraq's. It was in the interest of the United States, and of our client states in the gulf, to try to coax Saddam Hussein into contributing to the stability of the gulf region. The way to do this was not by provocation but by friendship and economic assistance.

In retrospect, it is possible to see that Saddam was not only rebuilding but rearming, at a pace that exceeded concern over an Iranian resurgence. There is evidence, much of it in the documentation of the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro (BNL) scandal, that Washington learned later than it should have about the big money moving illicitly into Saddam's accounts, to be used for the purchase of arms. Although

some American-made arms technology was obtained by Saddam, there is no evidence that the U.S. government supplied him with arms.

A far greater lapse by the Bush administration—at least in terms of triggering hostilities—was the failure to keep a closer eye on its gulf clients, and particularly on Kuwait.

Iraq and Kuwait had serious differences, mostly over money. Kuwait demanded repayment of loans made to Iraq during the Iran war; Iraq argued that these were not loans but a non-repayable investment in the shared objective of defeating Iran. This was basically the position taken by the other gulf "lenders." Iraq also argued that Kuwait during the war had illegally pumped millions of barrels of Iraqi oil by "slant-drilling" across the border, a charge that some Western oil experts supported. Finally, Iraq accused Kuwait of trying to increase its share of the global market by overproducing to drive down the price of oil—and there is no question that Kuwait far exceeded its production quotas.

The two nations also squabbled over a pair of islands—uninhabited sandbars, really—that cover the access to Umm Qasr, Iraq's only gulf port. The issue was a very sensitive one to Iraq. All Iraqis believe that Britain, the colonial power that drew regional borders early in the 20th century, had deliberately weakened Iraq by severing Kuwait, its natural outlet to the gulf. To cover the deficiency, Iraq at great expense had transformed a tiny fishing village into a major harbor. It needed the islands for Umm Qasr's security. It offered to lease them, buy them, whatever, but the Kuwaitis would not yield.

In my visits to Kuwait since the war, offi-

cialists told me that Iraq never intended to negotiate over these matters, that it used the disputes as a pretext to take over their country. Iraqis, of course, deny this charge. But many Kuwaiti citizens told me privately that they were convinced that their government—the Kuwaiti ruling family—had been careless and greedy, needlessly provoking Iraq. The ruling family's responsibility for the catastrophe of the war was, in fact, a major issue in the recent Kuwaiti election in which opposition candidates won a surprising majority.

As for the United States, despite longstanding security commitments to Kuwait, it paid no attention in the first half of 1990 while the dispute with Iraq raged. Some observers hold that the president and the State Department were too preoccupied with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany to turn their attention to the gulf. In any case, Washington issued no words of caution to Kuwait. In effect, the Bush administration's indifference to the growing crisis gave the Kuwaitis carte blanche.

"After the Iran-Iraq war, we had exchanges with the United States about the growing danger of Saddam Hussein," Sheik Sabah Salem Sabah, Kuwait's foreign minister, told me. "Iraq had military camps in Safwan, Basra and Fao, very near our borders, and after the war there was a great deal of movement in the region. We had questions about how normal this was, and there were several border incidents, which we suspected were military probes. [Gen. H. Norman] Schwarzkopf came here a few times and met with the crown prince and minister of defense. These became routine visits to discuss military cooperation and coordination. By the time the crisis with Iraq began, we knew we could rely on the Americans. There was an exchange of talks on

the ambassadorial level just before the invasion. No explicit commitments were ever made, but it was like a marriage. Sometimes you don't say to your wife, 'I love you,' but you know the relationship will lead to certain things."

In Baghdad, meanwhile, Ambassador April Glaspie was following her instructions in dealing with Iraq: She was cultivating Saddam's friendship while discouraging his adventurism. In July 1990, she notified Secretary of State James Baker that Saddam, who regarded Kuwait as Washington's client, was planning to ask for American mediation in his dispute with Kuwait. The instructions Glaspie received in reply—to say that there would be no change in American policy—has led to one of the major misunderstandings of the events that led to the Gulf war.

The Iraqi version of the conversation, leaked to the press, has Glaspie saying to Saddam, "We have no opinion on Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait . . ." The accuracy of that statement has not been disputed. But in context—as a reply to Saddam's request for American mediation—Glaspie's words constituted a rejection of the Iraqi request, not an acquiescence in Iraq's designs on Kuwait. Absent from the Iraqi version is Glaspie's warning, noted in her account to Washington of the conversation, that "we can never excuse settlement of disputes by other than peaceful means."

In leaving the meeting, Glaspie was told by Saddam that his people would be joining the Kuwaitis for negotiations on Aug. 1 in the Saudi city of Jiddeh. Until then, he said, he would make no military moves. The Iraqis and Kuwaitis met in Jiddeh and each blamed each other. The meeting was a disaster. The next day, Saddam's troops crossed the border and occupied Kuwait.

Some Kuwaitis told me that the ruling fam-

ily had been ready to accept Iraqi occupation of northern Kuwait, which it considered preferable to formal concessions. As recently as 1973, the Iraqis had seized several Kuwaiti border posts, and subsequently relinquished them. The Kuwaiti government was sure the West, with Arab support, would sooner or later persuade the Iraqis to withdraw. American diplomats, both in Baghdad and Washington, recognized in the spring of 1990 that the odds of a partial occupation were growing, but they did not act. Perot's assertion that Bush knew of such a possibility, much less consented to it, has no support at all. No one thought Saddam would blunder into occupying the entire country, which virtually assured a response from the West.

Bush, unquestionably stunned by the invasion, reacted as if he had been personally betrayed. Among his options was to offer, in return for withdrawal, to serve belatedly as an honest broker in the Iraqi-Kuwaiti dispute. Instead, Bush denounced Saddam and issued him an ultimatum to withdraw. Would an offer to mediate have worked? A few observers believe it would; most do not. In any event, no such offer was made.

But Bush was hardly wrong in feeling betrayed. He had tried to play fair with Saddam—though not to coddle him—and wound up being kicked in the teeth. He had earned the right to tell the voters that he had pursued a wise and honorable policy, and that it failed. His opponents in the election might, in retrospect, have claimed that, given Saddam's personality, its chances of success were always slim.

But that is conjecture; the candidates could not deny that the policy was worth a try. Unfortunately for Bush, when the policy was challenged, he lacked the conviction to defend it. This, as much as anything, explains why he is unlikely to be reelected.