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Turn of the Screw in Iraq

THE IRONY of President Bush's latest turn of the screw in Iraq is acute. It unquestionably has a domestic-political quotient, and most people will think so anyway. But it also has a foreign policy quotient that may get lost in the political shuffle. Given Mr. Bush's lagging reelection campaign and the central role in it that fate has assigned to Saddam Hussein, there seems no good way for the president to escape this squeeze.

As foreign policy, the decision to join coalition allies in driving the Iraqi air force out of southern Iraq has a realistic rationale. It is not simply, as Mr. Bush said, that Saddam Hussein has been tightening repression of the Shiite insurgency in violation of the U.N. cease-fire. Serbian repression of Bosnia is hardly less but, because of differing circumstances, evokes no similar response. Setting up a "no-fly zone" also serves an American strategy of encouraging both the democratic opposition and an undemocratic but potentially anti-Saddam regime opposition. One or the other of these prospects is what has sold the zone to Arab governments otherwise leery of condoning Western intervention, playing into the

hands of Shiite Iran and creating a precedent of separatism on religious lines.

It is hard to establish, but even harder to believe, that politics played no part in the Bush decision. But that need not mean that the president is determined at all costs to force a campaign-reviving showdown with Saddam Hussein or that he has lost control and cannot avert one. The politics works two ways. The same condition of presidential weakness that kindles suspicions about Mr. Bush's new step could conceivably restrain him from escalating lest he be accused of acting to ensure his November reelection.

The terrain is cluttered, but about one matter there must be absolute clarity. The United States cannot move from putting up an air umbrella over the Shiites, to inviting Shiites to rise up, to abandoning them to ground assault by Saddam Hussein. Something like this was allowed to happen a year ago with both Shiites and Kurds. This is not sentimentalism. It is moral duty. A no-fly zone is a good idea if it is put into effect with responsibility and care.