

Lally Weymouth

Lost Victory?

Post 2/17/92

In some ways, Saddam is stronger now than before the war.

Only a year ago President Bush seemed unbeatable. He was—deservedly—the hero of the free world, having led a worldwide coalition into battle to resist Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

Today, Congress and the media are fixated on discovering whether Bush administration policies actually helped provoke the war. An argument is raging in Congress over whether to appoint a special prosecutor to trace the extent of the U.S. government's role in allowing American companies and banks to give Saddam credits and to sell him dual-use items that he deployed for military purposes.

All but ignored on Capitol Hill and on the op-ed pages is a far more crucial issue: Has the U.S. military victory in Desert Storm essentially slipped away?

Sad to say, it appears that as President Bush spends his time and energy fighting Bill Clinton, Saddam Hussein is rebuilding his military at an awesome pace. Indeed, despite last month's attempted coup, Saddam—according to a recent National Intelligence Estimate—is actually stronger today, in certain key respects, than he was before the war.

The Iraqi ruler, for example, is blithely ignoring one of the key elements of the cease-fire: Not only has he actually begun to use his air force again, he's even deployed the specifically forbidden fixed-wing aircraft, a category that includes fighter bombers, fighters and interceptors. In fact, according to U.S. intelligence sources, during the past two months the back-in-action Iraqi air force has flown in excess of 300 missions using fixed-wing aircraft. Some of the flights served Saddam's continuing campaign against the Kurdish minority in Iraq.

This bold new pattern began back in April, when Iran struck at a military base inside Iraq. Baghdad sent up fixed-wing planes in response. Saddam, in all likelihood, was testing the U.S. reaction.



When Iraq realized that Washington would not take action, the Iraqi dictator then went one step farther. Baghdad began turning on its air defense radar and tracking system to follow U.S. reconnaissance aircraft. In addition, Saddam—according to U.S. intelligence—is rapidly reconstructing one plant he used in the past to manufacture biological weapons and another that had produced chemical weapons. Both of these sinister factories were heavily damaged during the war.

Bent upon circumventing the dismantling requirements of the truce, Saddam still has a considerable number (approximately 800) of Scuds left in his arsenal, U.S. intelligence sources maintain. Saddam, moreover, is apparently engaged in a clandestine effort to build new Scuds. To make matters worse, Saddam has acquired chemical inserts for these warheads—probably from North Korea.

Finally, it should be noted that some members of the U.S. intelligence community believe Iraq still nurtures an ambition to develop an atomic arsenal. Saddam, it is said, actually operates a covert nuclear weapons development program.

So where is Jim Baker? Where is George Bush? Have they, in effect, won the battle and lost the war?

The fact that there was a coup attempt last month in Baghdad demonstrates that there is still dissent within Iraq. Indeed, it appears that an entire unit of the elite Republican Guard may have been involved. Four guard officers have reportedly been executed, and some 200 others have been detained by Iraqi secret police for taking part in the plot. (These are the conclusions of U.S. intelligence officials.)

Feeling threatened, Saddam has once again taken to wearing body armor; he refuses to let anyone near him who is armed. The Iraqi dictator is said to blame King Hussein of Jordan and army officers associated with the Hashemite kingdom for the coup attempt. Leaving little to chance, Saddam is busily purging both the army and the guard.

It seems manifestly clear that President Bush needs to send Saddam Hussein a firm message: Stop using your fixed-wing aircraft, or expect to face American retaliation. By allowing Saddam to use his air force, the administration is sending a very different signal: the clear implication is that Bush is reconciled to Saddam's continued rule in Iraq.

The administration also needs to alter its posture toward the Iraqi opposition in exile by offering both more encouragement and greater access to high administration officials. For some reason, Bush & Co. persist in ignoring the leaders of the opposition. It was not until after the Kurdish and Shiite uprisings had been crushed by Saddam in April 1991 that the administration agreed to receive any Iraqi opposition leaders, even at a low level.

Saddam will draw an obvious lesson from continuing American passivity. He'll conclude—perhaps correctly—that Washington has no long-term staying power. Bush's inability fully to focus on Iraq in the middle of an increasingly desperate political campaign is altogether understandable. But the president needs to make sure that hard-won battlefield victory doesn't slip away while he engages in combat with Perot and Clinton.

The stakes for the region, for the world and even for the president, personally, are simply too high.