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7/26/90 Sneezes

When Saddam Hussein "sneezes" these days, the world's financial and petroleum markets threaten to come down with double pneumonia. The latest example happened last Sunday.

On the eve of the United Nations' debate on extending the U.S.-led embargo to include air traffic, the Iraqi strongman delivered a bombastic blast, threatening to wipe out Middle East oil fields and obliterate Israel in the process.

Without pausing to consider that the threat scarcely made sense, the world's stock exchanges panicked. Monday was very "black" along Wall Street.

Petroleum traders drove future gas prices in the direction of benchmark highs as this business week opened. By this morning 1979's \$39 barrel may have been surpassed.

As I wrote in the first week after the invasion of Kuwait, our impatience is Saddam Hussein's greatest asset. He counts on Americans not being able to wait him out. He relies on the West's immense ignorance of his culture, his nation and himself.

In the current impasse, the Iraqi president's most powerful weapon consists of his enemies' conviction that he is crazy. On this basis, they will persist in twisting themselves out of shape, responding irrationally every time he gives them cause. Last weekend presented a prime example.

Of course Mr. Hussein is perfectly capable of attempting to blow up all his region's oil and launching an all-out attack against Israel. But not until every other single option is exhausted.

The Iraqi leader is clearly aware that touching off his neighbors' fields could very well wipe out his nation's own oil supplies, creating destruction on a par with the 13th century Mongol devastation. Some 700 years later the land has still not recovered.

In that part of the world, the underground petroleum pools are lakes, separated by narrow walls. They are not quite contiguous, but close enough that a massive explosion in one might well spread along the chain. A secular Armageddon could result, slaughtering hundreds of thousands, particularly Iraqis.

Similarly, an assault on Jerusalem would provide an excuse for Israeli hard-liners, who presently control the government, to let loose on Iraqis

terrible nuclear weapons, waiting in vaults beneath the Sinai Desert.

Whatever confusion the renegade Arab may harbor for his overseas adversaries, including Washington, he has every reason to know the Israelis are prepared to sacrifice everything but their national existence, if provoked by his attacks.

Furthermore, in the unlikely event that Mr. Hussein could somehow maul Israelis to the point that their state's survival might be at stake, he has hard evidence to believe they are willing to take down the entire region with them.

According to Western experts, those Sinai vaults possess the power to wipe out Cairo, Beirut, Amman, Damascus and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, as well as Baghdad.

Saddam Hussein's strong histrionic streak certainly would find

appeal in those sorts of fiery *Goetterdaemmerungen*. However, "the twilight of the gods" brought their complete disappearance from the lives of men.

Undoubtedly, Mr. Hussein might very well relish the space in history he would earn by causing such widespread desolation, from either source. But both scenarios could only result in his own death, in a most horrible fashion.

Nothing known about the Iraqi dictator indicates he is ready to die, even if his exit were made pleasant. His greatest tyrannies have been aimed at ensuring his continuing existence.

Alone among Middle East rulers, Saddam Hussein accepts no life beyond the grave. He is the only avowed atheist in the region. His branch of the Ba'ath party specifically disavows the hope of heaven. Not for him the Koran's promise of Paradise for all those who fall fighting for the Islamic faith.

His cries for support from his "fellow Muslims" lack all religious truth. They work only so far as they invoke the region's strong hatred and fear of those regarded as foreigners, Europeans and Americans.

In his plans his brother Arabs' intense mistrust of non-Arabs is the key to winning Iraq's confrontation with America and the other nations backing the embargo. As Washing-

ton and its allies strive to topple Baghdad's "big chair," the Iraqi manipulator wages campaigns to unseat every Arab leader who has failed to buy his bid to become the Middle East's supreme ruler.

All his threats and manipulations, calls and cries are aimed primarily at the Arab masses, the common people who have always lived at the edge of poverty. Writing nearly 1,000 years ago, the culture's foremost historian, Ibn Khaldoun, described conditions that still can be found today.

While consumed with staggering ambition, Saddam Hussein is neither crazy nor stupid. Indeed, he is a quick study, as his string of previous triumphs confirms.

Of late, without ignoring his target audience among the region's dispossessed, he has learned how to "sneeze" for the West's benefit. Which is to say, he has managed to exercise a selection of topics and phrases guaranteed to bring dismay into his enemies' camps, including the stock exchanges and the world's petroleum markets.

In this country, we are most directly affected at the gas pumps and through the oil that will provide heat in our homes these coming chilly days. As you have read, the economic impact from Mr. Hussein's sneeze tactics do not stop there.

As the Middle East standoff drags on, Americans' natural impatience will be further exacerbated by the damage to their pockets. The dollar continues to fall as prices soar, holding interest rates high. It figures to be a cold, cold winter, in more ways than one.

If that prospect seems foreboding, then consider the option. Going to war would force Saddam Hussein to make good on those hollow threats. He could wind up looking like an honest man. God forbid.