

Roy Meachum



8/10/90 Saddam

This is written with an awareness that last night another full day passed in the Middle East. Events could have overtaken this column while we slept.

Baghdad's clocks run seven hours ahead of Frederick's daylight saving time. For Iraq's Saddam Hussein each tick must seem an eternity. Every hour brings closer the gathering strength of a world determined to stand against his naked aggression.

Before this weekend is over, enough manpower and military hardware will be in place in Saudi Arabia to slow down the Iraqi leader's reckless hopes to crown himself Islam's new caliph. Each passing day now brings fresh blows to those hopes, the latest came when Jordan reluctantly subscribed to the U.S.-sponsored embargo.

Today's Cairo's summit figures as little more than a public hand washing, particularly for Hosni Mubarak. Egypt's president needs to show his fellow Arabs his lack of complicity in bringing "outsiders" into the region.

In reasoning that his Kuwait invasion would cause little stir among other Arabs, Saddam (as they call him) knew his "brothers." They are still more concerned with fending off colonialism, including Israel's existence in their midst, than cooperating for any common good. Furthermore, leaders on his immediate flank fear their ambitious brother.

In Jordan's case, fear was mixed with gratitude. The kingdom appreciated Saddam's promise to protect the Hashemite throne against Israeli attempts to unload the Palestinian problem across the Jordan River. In this regard, Baghdad was considered more reliable than Washington.

Furthermore, Iraq chipped in contributions to ease the strain on the kingdom's budget, a strain created by the consistent failure of the Saudis and Kuwaitis to make good on their promised subsidies. Left on its own, Jordan's economy would disappear into the sand.

Stepping away from Saddam demanded yet one more juggling act from King Hussein, the Middle

East's most adept survivor. Neighbor Hafez Assad knows very well that Baghdad would love dearly to see a new face in Damascus.

The presidents of Syria and Iraq pay lip-service to the principles of the Baath party, which has as its foremost principle unity among Middle East Muslims. Each country once exercised dominion over vast Islamic empires. Both had virtually disappeared from the world scene until the 20th century.

President Assad had already lost his bid for Arab supremacy before Saddam grabbed power in Baghdad. Syria became Iran's sole regional ally during the recent war less from any enthusiasm for the ayatollahs than out of a desire to clip Iraq's surge for supremacy.

In attacking Kuwait, Saddam almost assuredly anticipated the cheers of his fellow Arabs. They shared his repugnance and disdain for the conquered nation's royal Sabah family. The erstwhile rulers would win no popularity contest, not even with their oil-rich neighbors. They owed their throne to London's desire to prevent the Saudis from taking over the entire Arabian peninsula back in the 1920s.

There has traditionally been little love lost between the Sabahs and Saudi kings. They have quibbled

over the boundary line drawn by the British. They have accused each other frequently of violating agreements, including OPEC quota accords.

In any event, Kuwait's ruling family seems out of a job. Its members will have to content themselves with living off the billions they invested in the West. Their tenure was already shaky before the invasion. No U.S. soldier risks his life for the Sabah clan.

At this point Americans are reacting with predictable patriotism. They speak out against the Iraqi challenge to their nation and its power. In a real sense people are echoing their leaders and the media.

Over recent weeks news stories have repeated endlessly the atrocities committed during the eight

year war the Iraq's dictator launched against Iran. From videotape files we have been shown scenes of gassed Kurds, Iraq's non-Arab minority.

In a side effect to the latest Middle East crisis, the land of the ayatollahs is being viewed with more sympathy as the first to resist the "butcher of Baghdad," the pejorative label applied to Kuwait's invader by an "objective" TV anchor.

A bevy of politicians, keyed by George Bush, has supported U.S. intervention in the crisis as striking a blow for freedom and democracy. There has been considerable posturing and spouting about rights. Mixed up in the bevy and a valued member is Red China. Does anyone want to run freedom, democracy and rights by the old men responsible for massacring students last year?

Let's face it, the world's new-found unity in the crisis rests upon economic survival for the industrialized nations. They simply could not permit the capability of manipulating oil's price and supply left to Saddam. Survival is also on his mind.

Since grabbing power in Baghdad 11 years ago, the Arab dictator's highest priority has been saving his own skin. He made his debut into office by murdering 23 potential rivals and their supporters. Nobody can count his subsequent contributions to holding down the globe's population explosion.

Saddam's enemies seek to maim him by flattery. He is no Hitler. His attempted genocide against the Kurds cannot be fairly compared to the Jewish Holocaust. It was intended to chase the bothersome minority across the border into Iran, where they would become the ayatollahs' problem. The gassing worked.

The gross hypocrisy in the present situation arises from remembering the silent assent the West gave to Saddam's past atrocities. The assent enabled him to develop the war machine that now threatens world peace.

What happens next?

If this morning's news reported no new fighting, then expect a long and frustrating siege, made no more bearable for the impatient general public when it faces demands compelled by the siege.

In the end American impatience could prove the strongest weapon in Saddam's arsenal. The tenacity displayed in the long war against Iran might help him endure over the world's intention to displace him. While waiting to outlast the embargo, his firing squads stand ready to snuff out all budding contenders for Baghdad's big chair.