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Saddam's Shell Game

The agreement Kofi Annan brought back from Baghdad may not last long

LAST TIME, JUST BEFORE THE CRUISE MISSILES SWOOPED in over Iraq in 1991, peace-minded Germans hung white sheets from their windows. Since Berlin wasn't the target, the symbolism was a bit muddled. Were they capitulating to the Americans? Did they want to surrender as surrogates of Saddam? Hardly.

The white-sheet warriors wanted to conquer the moral high ground and tell those retrograde Americans that, by unleashing their might, they were more evil than Saddam. The message of the pure-at-heart was: Absolutely nothing is worth fighting for.

This time, there was no bedding at the windows because the script had changed. This time, the United States wasn't calling in its chits or twisting arms to harness a worldwide coalition against Iraq. As a high U.S. official put it in early February: Please join, but if you won't, do not undermine us and kindly get out of the way.

This whiff of irresolution—and the option of neutrality—made all the difference. Cheering from the sidelines, Germany pledged, in the words of Chancellor Helmut Kohl, “full political support,” and there was only a smattering of German protesters who took to the streets.

The serious opposition came from America's oldest ally France, and its more recent comrade-in-world-order, Russia. This bodes ill for the dicey business ahead as Washington and London try to enforce the Iraqi commitment to “immediate, unconditional and unrestricted” access to all suspected weapons sites. Indeed, one might well argue that France's and Russia's increasingly pronounced tilt toward Iraq caused the November-to-February crisis in the first place. Watching the battle for pride and prestige unfold in the U.N. Security Council, Saddam surely concluded last fall that this was a fine moment to test great-power cohesion and to drive a few more wedges into the crumbling coalition.

Has he been disabused? Not at all, as already demonstrated by the events since Kofi Annan, U.N. Secretary-General, returned from Baghdad. While the United States and Britain demanded a new resolution pre-authorizing swift retaliation if Iraq fails to comply, French President Jacques Chirac loudly rejected any “automatism.” Hearing this, Saddam must have purred with pleasure. The scenario is proceeding exactly as he had calculated. Soon, the Anglo-American armada assembled around the Gulf will dwindle away. Soon, he will play the “Inspector's Game, Part II.”

He will attack the procedure and the personalities—what might be inspected when, who might be on the team (“I want Monsieur X, and not this American spy”). He will play Kofi Annan against the hardliner head of UNSCOM, Richard Butler. He will watch calmly as Washington and Britain, railing furiously, will be stymied by Moscow, Paris and Beijing in the Security Council.

Meanwhile, Saddam continues with his old shell game, only opening up those sites where materials of mass destruction have been whisked away. Then, arguing the finer

points of the agreement, he will stonewall where the inspectors want to intrude.

Why is this so easy to predict? Because Saddam has not been seized by a sudden epiphany, and because he has devoted all of his almost 20 years in power to amassing nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. War in 1991 has not stopped him, and neither have the sanctions and inspections since. Indeed, a man who would rather starve his people than yield surely has priorities other than rejoining the community of nations as its most recent convert to the gospel of meek-mindedness and responsibility.

Although Saddam may have “blinked” when he signed the Annan pledge, it is the United States and Britain who have been swallowing hard ever since. Theirs is a tactical victory that might yet turn into a strategic debacle because the anti-Saddam coalition is no more.

France and Russia, aspiring to be world players again, have put the U.S. on notice that they are going back to the oldest game of nations: countervailing No. 1 to maintain the balance of power. The other Europeans, with the exception of Britain, will rally to the posse with the same enthusiasm as did the good townsfolk who left Gary Cooper alone to confront the three baddies in *High Noon*. And the U.N.'s Kofi Annan, having tasted the glory of high-level mediation, will not so soon play handmaid-en to American strategy.

But the Anglo-American game is not lost. Clinton's best argument continues to be that only the dispatch of superior firepower has sobered Saddam. Washington and London could remind their half-ally France that anthrax “Made in Iraq” might not be worth the glory of standing up to No. 1—or the profits to be made from Iraqi oil fields. Mr. Clinton might also tell Mr. Yeltsin that, next time, he will have to choose more discriminately between American and Iraqi benevolence.

And to the rest of the world, Mr. Clinton might pose this simple question: If you don't want us to do the dirty work, are you willing to dispatch your fleets and your planes? For diplomacy without swords is but words. ■

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