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IS THIS ANY WAY TO WAGE PEACE?

John E. Mack and Jeffrey Z. Rubin

"THE WAR in the Gulf is not a war we wanted. We worked hard to avoid war. For more than five months we . . . tried every diplomatic avenue. . . . But time and again, Saddam Hussein flatly rejected the path of diplomacy and peace."

These were the words President Bush used in his State of the Union address, in a bid to be remembered kindly by the generations of tomorrow as a leader who pursued every avenue toward peace but was reluctantly drawn into war.

On the contrary, the actions and decisions taken by the United States after August 2, while having the appearance of diplomacy for peace, were in fact the result of deliberate choices toward a very different end. It was these choices—the president's assertions notwithstanding—that moved us inexorably along the path to war.

We demonized and dehumanized our adversary. We indulged in personal name-calling, false analogies to past wars and demonic leaders of earlier times, then deliberately provoked Hussein through threats and insults. In this way we demeaned and humiliated our opponent, while lessening his incentive to respond to the pleas that were directed to him by so many individuals and nations.

We denied our own contribution to the problem. By placing the blame entirely on the shoulders of our adversary, failing to acknowledge our own

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contribution (bolstering Iraq's war machine and giving permissive signals before the conflict began, for example) we put him on the defensive and further limited his ability to respond constructively.

We relied exclusively on the threatened use of force. The value of personal, quiet diplomacy, even with a leader as brutal as the Iraqi president, was disregarded and surely added to his defiance. In an interview with ABC's Peter Jennings in November, Hussein asked that a dialogue be conducted between himself and President Bush "... in which the eyes can meet." What he got was not dialogue but preconditions for capitulation.

Having taken the position that only military power could "solve" the Gulf crisis, we then shrouded our belligerent intent in the guise of collective will. Using the newly invigorated United Nations as a cover, we represented our determination to use force as being the result of a genuinely joint decision by the international community, rather than what it largely was: an American-engineered unilateral initiative.

We disregarded the other side's stated grievances and claims, while demanding unconditional surrender. Our original position was doomed to failure if what we sought was peace. By demanding that Iraq give up Kuwait unconditionally, while offering no negotiating incentives, we forced Hussein into a corner from which he could perceive no way out but martyrdom or fighting back.

We took no account of cultural differences. We listened to those who said that Hussein was nonreligious, and interpreted his invocations of Allah and the Koran as cynical political manipulation. We failed to consider the people's dual heritage as Iraqis and Muslims, and thus Hussein's willingness to martyr himself and to sacrifice his people in standing up to the Western "infidel."

Our policymakers relied exclusively on advisers who, following the conventional logic of power politics, predicted that Hussein would surrender Kuwait rather than permit his power to be destroyed.

We offered a response that was disproportionate to the problem. We assembled an overwhelming destructive force in the Gulf without adequately anticipating the consequences of using it as threatened. We exaggerated the original problem by arguing that international boundaries are inviolate—"sanctified," declared Representative Stephen Solarz, one of the principal proponents of the war policy. This overstatement of reality contributed a further element of ideological rigidity to justify the use of violence. In fact, Kuwait's boundaries were arbitrarily drawn in 1961 by the withdrawing British colonialists.

We overcommitted ourselves to a course of action. By developing a U.N. deadline, to which we adhered with rigid insistence, we lost room to

maneuver and to explore peaceful methods of resolving the conflict. Instead, we locked ourselves into a belligerent military position and swiftly came to believe that we had invested too much in it to quit. An offer to negotiate after the January 15 deadline would have placed us in a position of unacceptable weakness, given the scope of our commitment by then.

We used public presentation of conditions in order to intimidate the other side. Our public assertions—"no negotiation, no face-saving, no linkage"—had the effect of hardening Hussein's response, not intimidating him. Withdrawal from Kuwait under the conditions we had publicly defined would have all but guaranteed his personal humiliation—something we may have wanted but that he would never have accepted.

We paid lip service to efforts at diplomatic solution. We indulged in a hypocritical pretense by announcing our "willingness to go the extra mile for peace," then refusing Hussein's demand that a meeting take place closer to January 15 than we liked. We were willing to talk only on our terms, which we knew Hussein would have to reject.

We derogated the other side's conciliatory gestures. By warning that Hussein would attempt to use concessionary behavior to pull the wool over our eyes, we made it all but impossible to give the other side the benefit of the doubt. For example, Hussein's initiative in releasing hostages was viewed not as a show of good faith, or a desire to move toward settlement, but as a cunning attempt to manipulate world opinion.

We insisted that the conflict be regarded as zero-sum. We entertained only two possibilities: Hussein could get out of Kuwait, or he could remain there and invite expulsion by force. Consistently overlooked or dismissed were all alternative approaches that could turn a win-lose exchange into one with opportunities for both sides to do well. For example, we might have expressed a willingness to address the Palestinian-Israeli conflict while officially disclaiming linkage to the Gulf crisis.

In conclusion, the Bush administration's approach to dealing with the unjustifiable Iraqi invasion of Kuwait violated the principles of political psychology, negotiating theory and the appropriate conduct of international relationships. If our purpose was to destroy Iraq as a military and political power in the Middle East, which now seems apparent, the American people were never informed of such an intention.