

BLOOD AND SAND

The Middle East crisis in bite-size pieces

By Michael Ventura

August 17,1990

Lo! We have prepared hell as a welcome for the disbelievers.

Say: Shall we inform you who will be the greatest losers by their works?

Those whose efforts goeth astray in the life of the world, and yet they reckon that they do good work.

The Koran, Sura XVIII:103-105

LIE OF THE WEEK: As of tonight, Sunday, August 12 – one sentence from the Iraqi crisis sticks out for me. The think-tank crowd mouths it in op-eds and on TV. Reporters state it in their dispatches as a self-evident assumption. Bush and his buddies repeat it whenever given the opportunity. With minor variations, it goes like this: “A land war against the Iraqi Army is the least likely possibility.”

When that many professional liars start telling the same lie, run for cover. (Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak, who needn’t worry much about being re-elected, and who presumably has a more intimate knowledge of what we’re dealing with, stated flat-out that, yes, of course there’s going to be land fighting. He had just come from a meeting in which representatives of Iraq and Kuwait, having no other weapons handy, threw their dinners at each other.)

STEREOTYPE OF THE WEEK: President Saddam Hussein was called, in an L.A. Times piece, “the Iraqi orangutan” – the implication that he’s far more murderous than our home-grown orangutans. This is typical of how he’s being portrayed. Of course, there’s no doubt that this is a man willing to drop chemical poison on civilians to make his point. But Lyndon Johnson were equally willing to drop chemical fire (napalm) to make *their* points; Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter (a sweet guy who began the “Reagan” arms buildup) both financed and trained torturers for the Shah of Iran, among others, to make their points; Ronald Reagan supported, and George Bush continues to support, government-by-death-squad in Latin America to make their points. Speaking as a non-combatant, I would rather be shot than poisoned, burned or tortured, but that wouldn’t make me any less dead. Not does it make Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan and Bush any less murderous, when they have a point to make, than Saddam Hussein.

Similarly, the pilots who drop Hussein’s poison are portrayed as wide-eyed fanatics, while the pilots who dropped our fire are – the boys next door.

The difference is between hot-blooded and cold-blooded murderers. In the West, we prefer cold-blooded, while hot-blooded sells better in most of the Third World. It’s a matter of taste. We like our murderers to behave like businessmen. (Not, as our history proves, that we seriously mind our leaders murdering civilians with our money and in our name; it’s just that we think it’s bad manners to make a show of it. And I agree: Saddam Hussein’s manners are intolerable.)

RUNNER-UP FOR STEREOTYPE OF THE WEEK: There is no doubt in the media’s collective mind that, compared to the West, most Arab countries are primitive, bellicose, downright savage stink-holes – breeding grounds for collective insanity. Except for

Kuwait, which is (or was) nice, and pro-Western; and Saudi Arabia, which is very big and rich and clean, has 25 percent of the world's oil under its sands *and* is pro-Western.

The United States is so much more civilized. We – along with *really* civilized places like France and the Soviet Union – just sell lots and lots and lots of weapons to these primitive, bellicose, savage stink-holes. We're so civilized, we've been goading them to fight proxy wars for us for 40 years. One side or other of the Cold War has encouraged and financed the worst elements in almost all these countries (including Israel) until there's virtually no hope that their saner citizens can be heard, much less prevail.

So what if Saddam Hussein nerve-gassed his own people? We still bought his oil. Last year Congress extended him \$1 billion in taxpayer-subsidized loans, while this year the amount was already up to \$500 million. The Russians sold him weapons and the French threw in nuclear technology because he was supposedly stemming the Islamic fundamentalism that the West and the Soviets are so afraid of. What's a little nerve gas among allies?

But somebody forgot to tell Hussein that the reason he was getting arms, the reason Iranians and Iraqis were dying by the hundreds of thousands – was to provide a kind of buffer to protect Russians, Americans and Europeans, who didn't want to fight directly, because hundreds of thousands of *them* might die, and that's not good for business. Setting up a proxy war and supplying both sides – *that's* good for business.

Excuse me, but I'm having a little trouble telling the savages from the civilized around here. True, I wouldn't want to live in an Arab land myself. In Iraq you can't own a typewriter without a police permit; in Saudi Arabia, drinking is a criminal offense, and women are not even allowed to be listed in the telephone directory; and Lebanon isn't even a country anymore, it's an institutionalized riot with a magically endless supply of ammunition. (Where does a land without a government or even an economy get all those bullets?) But I'm not prepared to say that an America in which the government protects banks but not children; in which there are more guns than adults, with the highest murder rate in the Western world; in which the so-called "underclass" (i.e., unprofitable class) is being literally left to rot – I'm not prepared to say we're higher on some evolutionary or ethical scale. Islam and Judeo-Christianity seem neck-and-neck for creating more suffering than they alleviate.

LAMEST LIE OF THE WEEK: Nobody anywhere believes that we care about the freedom of little Kuwait. We made nary a peep when China invaded Tibet; did no more than perfunctory posturing when Israel invaded Lebanon; and the legality of our presence in Grenada and Panama (not to mention Vietnam) was a joke.

George Bush shouldn't waste lies like that. If this situation continues, he's going to need as much lying room as he can manage. This was a useless lie – not only didn't America believe it, America didn't need it. In the heartland of our country you see bumper-stickers that read: "Kick Their Ass, Then Take Their Gas."

MYSTERY OF THE WEEK: Just a few days ago the United States didn't have the money to educate its children, care properly for its sick, safely store toxic waste, rebuild it's infrastructure or house its homeless. Suddenly we are embarking on a military adventure that, according to the Center for Defense Information, will cost us \$14.6 million *per day*.

WINNERS OF THE WEEK: *George Bush* – However much one may dislike his motives, the president sensed a unique world-consensus out there, and he played his hand

brilliantly. If that consensus holds for even a month, it will stand as a benchmark of 20th-century diplomacy. (“Diplomacy” is a word that means “making money through politics.”) The guy must sure give good phone. Equally brilliant: going on “vacation.” The Arabs get CNN too (that’s what the Arab League watched during their summit), and footage of Bush golfing as though he hadn’t a care in the world, must drive Hussein bananas.

The Soviet Union – They have passed the test. They’re being viewed basically as allies. They’re going to get a lot of what they ask for from the U.S. and European community over the next year. And watch, within a year Bush will okay buying oil from them, and not even Pat Buchanan will be able to say hey.

China – What do you want to bet that their next request for our technology will be approved? That had to have been the deal on *that* phone call.

Turkey – a shoo-in now for the status as part of the European community it’s so desperately wanted.

Iran, Venezuela, Mexico, Great Britain, Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, California – Their oil’s worth a lot more now.

Syria – With the world ganging up on arch-rival Iraq, the strongest Middle Eastern power when the smoke clears, will be Syria’s Hafez Assad. He’s very glad to have an issue to agree with Bush on, since his days of being a Soviet proxy are waning and everybody’s dying to sell out Israel.

The Pentagon – There’s not going to be much talk about cutting the military budget now.

Congress – The American public was on the verge of demanding that they do something about the budget, the S&L’s and all sorts of other little domestic problems. Iraq has wiped all that off the headlines.

Nuclear power – Lots of “analysts” (i.e., PR people) in the don’t-think tanks are prating about how great nuclear power is because it’s “clean” and it isn’t Arab. We’d rather have Chernobyl than Saddam Hussein.

BIGGEST LOSER: *Israel* – Economically, the United States lusts after closer ties with the Arabs, while Israel just costs us money. Bush has been trying to distance America from Israel, by inches, ever since he got in; now he’s having epiphanic moments of cooperation with Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia – establishing ties that bypass the Palestinian issue.

We’ve supported Israel because, indirectly, it was a good investment: America’s only real beachhead in the oil-rich Middle East. It gave us a proxy army and an excuse for being “concerned” that could pretend (until the invasion of Lebanon) to some kind of idealism. Now, with the world’s economy much more unified and the Soviets no longer a threat, Israel is becoming more a liability than an asset. Bush is going to do what he’s always done: go with the money.

And there’s this: Israel has depended for its security not only on arms, but on disunity among the Arabs. If Arab unity strengthens or even just barely hangs together during the Iraqi crisis, watch for Israel to get a lot more “understanding” about the plight of the Palestinians, but it will probably be too late.

DELAYED SQUELCH OF THE WEEK: The religion of Islam. Commerce, technology and war have always been the most powerful, and irresistible, cross-inseminators. The Arab world may learn that you can’t take our money and our toys without getting capped

by our consciousness (or lack thereof). As the history of the church in the West has proved for a thousand years, fanaticism can't stand up against technology.

MOST INTERESTING FACT OF THE WEEK: According to Turkish sources (and they're close enough to know), 45 percent of Iraq's population is under 14 years of age. Many of the feared Iraqi Army are only 15 or 16, reports from Kuwait indicate – and they're not well-disciplined. Westerners escaping Kuwait tell of young soldiers trading their weapons for televisions and cars.

This perhaps explains why the militarily astute Hussein didn't take advantage of his "window of opportunity" to invade Saudi Arabia. He had no reason to expect United Nations unity, much less Arab League unity against his invasion of Kuwait – a job 15-year olds, commanded by veteran officers, could handle. He expected to dictate terms from Kuwait, or wait until things quieted down and *then* invade Saudi Arabia. But faced with real opposition, he can't afford to waste his veterans; his reserve army consists of children; and no one will replace his weapons and ammunition. In the present situation, if he makes a military move and it fails, he's finished. So he waits.

This, in turn, may explain why Bush is moving with such confidence, although there are 3,500 Americans, 9,900 Soviets, 500 Britons, hundreds of Europeans and many thousands of Asians, working in Iraq and Kuwait. (In Iraq, a nation that's half children, grown-up workers have to be imported.) Bush thinks Hussein has no option but to back down. If he backs down, he loses face, but still keeps power within his own borders, and waits to fight another day; if he makes a move, it's unlikely that he'll win (he's got the numbers but he hasn't got the supplies), and he can't afford to lose.

FOOTNOTE TO THE MOST INTERESTING FACT OF THE WEEK: According to Turks who've just returned from Iraq, there's already a ferocious scrambling for food. If Bush's blockade is successful, Hussein's only alternative is near-starvation rationing. If you are Hussein, how do you enforce such brutal austerity measures on a population half of whom are children? I mean, you *can* – but what good does it do you? The half that doesn't grow up hating you will still be too starved, sick and scared to do you much good. (As for Bush, the issue of hungry children doesn't bother him much in his own country, so he won't lose sleep over Iraq's.)

THE LINCOLN MANEUVER: Bush is using one of the greatest strategical moves in modern history, the Lincoln Maneuver. It goes like this: when the South seceded from the Union in 1861, there was a small contingent at Fort Sumter in the Southern port of Charleston. Lincoln said, in effect, "We're going to supply the fort with food, nothing else, and if you don't fire on them, they won't fire on you. If you let Fort Sumter remain, you'll lose face with the rest of the world and not be taken seriously as an independent nation. If you attack, you'll be viewed as aggressors, who fired the first shot in a civil war." Either way, Lincoln had the political high ground.

Bush is doing the same thing by putting our forces in Saudi Arabia. If Hussein doesn't attack, he loses serious face. If he does, he's the aggressor, and the entire world has decided that Iraq is disposable.

THE BAIT: In this Lincoln Maneuver, our American ground-soldiers are the bait. Given the brutal temperatures; the fear of chemical warfare, which will force them to wear rubber suits that are impossibly hot in the best of climates, thus cutting American effectiveness to nothing; the fine-blowing sand that will jam our engines and weapons; the heat and light distortion that makes our sophisticated instruments undependable; the lack of tanks; and the sheer problems of logistics – they're as tempting an enemy as

Hussein could have been given. But if he's silly enough to go for them, it gives us an excuse for an unlimited use of air power.

WILD CARD No. 1: Hussein might think, "If I'm going to go down anyway, why not go down in style and take a lot of people with me? It won't make much difference in the long run, and at least I'll have a good time. I'll go down in history. Who knows, I may, by an outside chance, even win!" That's the trouble with murderers who don't dress up like businessmen. You never know when they're going to behave like a movie – say, *White Heat* or *The Wild Bunch*.

WILD CARD No. 2: The message Hussein is broadcasting to the Arab world isn't so dumb. He's telling them they've been sold out by oil-rich kings and Westernized leaders – and they have; he's telling them that they live in poverty while an elite live in luxury – and they do; he's saying that they have 70 percent of the most valuable resource in the modern world, and hence could be the most powerful people, if they would only throw out their leaders and follow him. If you were a poor Arab who'd grown up in a chaotic world and saw no hope for anything different – you might listen to him.

In fact, you might be a fool not to.

THE WILDEST CARD OF ALL: The new world economy is an organism that no one understands. The United States has begun what is advertised as a "mild recession". This description is about as trustworthy as any other advertisement. The fact is that all the experts disagree, Congress can't act, and everybody's nervous. There's probably going to be a recession, if not a depression, of some sort – America's consumer, bank and business credit is stretched way over the limit, and nobody knows how much of a shake we can take.

The last time we had a depression, our politics, economics and total world view changed drastically. That will happen again. It is far beyond anyone's capacity to predict or control, except that we're in for quite a ride. But it's worth noting, at least in passing, that the root reason for this depression isn't Arab oil, corporate greed or sunspots. The reason is very simple. The West, and America in particular, is not willing to give up the unreasonable and irresponsible ideal of comfort. We all want cars and VCRs and nice houses. But the resources to sustain that standard of living don't exist. "But surely there's enough for *my* car and house and VCR!" No, not really. The white West wants a lot more than its fair share, and that makes for chaos, and will, until our system collapses from the very insatiability of our lust.

UNSUNG HEROES OF THE WEEK: Of course, if the Iraqi crisis had happened a year or so ago, we'd all be wondering when the bombs were going to fall. Bush and Gorbachev are getting lots of credit for defusing that, but the credit really belongs to the people who took to the streets last year in China, Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Lithuania, Azerbaijan, the Ukraine, Mongolia – all those people who pushed the leaders of the world into a new order. All those very common, unarmed people who decided that enough was enough. Because of them, we are not on a nuclear alert right now, and a flight of geese on a radar screen isn't liable to end the world.

If that isn't cause for hope, then nothing is.

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