

The Failure of Diplomacy

Here in the Philippines, we have been so busy talking about and preparing for the economic and political consequences of the war in the Middle East that we have not had much time to ponder the complex reasons behind the remarkable readiness of the people of Iraq to be decimated as a result of their steadfast refusal to heed the UN Security Council resolution ordering them to leave Kuwait not later than January 15.

Iraq's forcible annexation of Kuwait on August 2 last year is not to be regarded as justifiable -- for the same reason that most reasonable people would consider the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan, Indonesia's annexation of East Timor in 1975, the US invasion of Grenada and more recently of Panama, Syria's incorporation of Lebanese land, and Israel's take-over of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank from the Palestinian Arabs all unwarranted.

What is at issue here is not the rationality or truthfulness of a claim, but rather the use of military might to enforce it, especially against an unprepared and relatively weak nation. Saddam Hussein is guilty of this. While he may find enough people everywhere who would sympathize with the view that Kuwait historically was part of Iraq until it was wrested away from it in 1922 by the British colonialists, or that Kuwait had done the Iraqi people a grave injustice by stealing oil from its oil fields in Rumailah and by demanding immediate repayment of the loans extended to Iraq during its war against Iran, nevertheless, in invading Kuwait, Saddam Hussein clearly violated international norms.

The Iraqi leadership had not been totally unrelenting and insensitive to world opinion. Otherwise, why would they allow the thousands of foreigners trapped in Iraq and Kuwait to leave. It may be that Saddam was simply courting global opinion. Even so, it still shows that he was looking for sympathy outside of Iraq.

It may also be instructive to see how Iraq has turned to a variety of reasons in an effort to justify its invasion of Kuwait. A few days after the invasion, the Iraqi government made the preposterous claim that they had been asked by the Kuwaiti people to help liberate them from the tyranny of the Al-Sabah emirate. Subsequently, they decided that they had taken over Kuwait because it was historically Iraq's 19th province. Iraq has linked its withdrawal from Kuwait to a settlement of all pressing Middle East issues, especially the Palestinian question. The point that it wants to demonstrate is that in world affairs, it is dangerous to maintain a double standard of morality. As the Iraqi Foreign Minister put it: why is it right for Israel to take Palestinian territory forcefully, but "when it comes to the Arabs, you raise a stick?"

Never mind that the belated reference to the Palestinian question would make it seem that it is nothing but a rationalization of an act committed for other reasons. The more important question is: why is Iraq's deed being dealt with through a multinational threat of war, whereas equally unilateral actions by other nations in the past had not warranted the deployment of so massive a military force as that which now encircles Iraq?

Some quarters have suggested that what is really at stake for America here is not the sovereignty of Kuwait, but rather the control of oil and military access to the Arabian peninsula, which hitherto had been denied the United States, but which it has now completely secured, thanks to the present crisis. It has been suggested that the US fears the possibility of Arab unity under the leadership of a strong nationalistic and anti-West leader such as Saddam Hussein, and will do anything within its power to prevent this from happening.

There is enough basis to doubt the purity of US motives. Just as we must exercise discernment in assessing the value of such

speculations as those that have appeared in the biased American press concerning Saddam's ulterior motives. It has been suggested for instance that Saddam's real intention, reminiscent of Hitler, was to overrun the whole Middle East; that if the US had not deployed its troops to Saudi Arabia, that country would have been next in line, and that an unchallenged Saddam Hussein would establish himself as the undisputed master of all Arabian oil who would virtually hold the entire world to ransom.

In any confrontation, it is usual to dramatize and exaggerate the evil of one's enemy. But the maligning of Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi people has few parallels. (An American dispatch that was given prominence here pictured Saddam Hussein as a homosexual). And what is more, it feeds upon existing stereotyped images of the Arab which the West has so effectively created and maliciously promoted everywhere.

By the manner in which the United States has behaved on this question in the last six months, contrary to Bush's contention, it has hardly left any room for diplomatic negotiations based on mutual respect.

Many people ask what type of madness is this that seems to have gripped Saddam Hussein such that he is ready to go to war against almost the rest of the world? This is not so difficult to explain. For it is a madness -- if one should call it that -- that seizes the consciousness of all people who believe that they are fighting for the freedom and self-respect of their motherland. It is the same sentiment that fired our ancestors when they fought against the great United States of America in 1899. It is the same madness which sustained the Vietnamese in their war against the American aggressor for one whole decade in the 1960s and 1970s. It is the fever of nationalism and patriotism.

It is a madness that is not unfamiliar to the Americans themselves, for they are among the most patriotic people in the world. We can suppose that those young soldiers who have left their wives and children and parents over Christmas to fight in the searing heat of the Arabian desert are fired by the same beliefs. So why should such sentiments so abundantly extolled as American virtues elicit shock when they become the motives of struggle for other nations?