

Can Bush survive his Persian Gulf war debacle?

by Kathleen Klenetsky

George Bush is about to suffer badly for his delusion that the war against Iraq would prove an easy victory, one that would bring him the global obeisance he thinks he deserves.

His obsession with the Gulf—and it is an obsession, even in the eyes of such close colleagues as Republican Party official Mary Matalan, who recently described Bush as a “man obsessed by his mission”—is becoming his political undoing.

On Jan. 24, the administration was forced to concede officially what by then had become apparent to all but the blindest: that the President’s war against Iraq will last far longer than anticipated, with far greater losses for the United States and its coalition allies.

“There are going to be ups and downs, there are going to be enemy victories, there are going to be days when we’ll see allied losses, and . . . we need to get into a frame of mind that allows us to accept those reverses and surges,” chief White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater told the press corps. “We need to get on kind of an even keel in terms of our public psyche.”

Faced with an adversary who is refusing to turn over and die, just because Bush told him to, the administration is being forced to backtrack rapidly on its promise of a short, swift conflict.

Another broken promise

That broken promise threatens to bring a rain of serious political penalties down on the President’s head. Although popular sentiment in favor of Operation Desert Storm remains strong, there are plenty of signs that people are having serious second thoughts. And those second thoughts can easily translate into outright opposition once the reality of the war—measured in broken limbs and dead bodies—starts to hit home.

Over 100,000 people turned out in Washington Jan. 26—

nearly triple the number who had turned out for an anti-war demonstration just one week earlier—to demand an immediate end to the war. Thousands more participated in smaller demonstrations throughout the country expressing the same sentiments. In Europe, Ibero-America, and the Muslim world, millions of people have taken to the streets to register their opposition to what is now perceived as a war by the U.S. and its allies against the developing sector as a whole.

In the event of a prolonged conflict, Bush will almost certainly have to resort to reinstating the draft, which will trigger a political explosion in the ghettos and on middle-class white college campuses.

Even public opinion polls have begun to pick up deepening concern about the way the war is going. A new CBS-*New York Times* poll released Jan. 29 found that only 34% believe that the conflict is going “very well” for the U.S., down from 50% just a week before.

“People here at home are finally beginning to find out that the war isn’t a video game; real people are getting hurt, and some of them are their relatives,” commented one Washington observer. “As more and more people are personally affected by the hostilities, a lot of anger will be turned on Bush. He shouldn’t have started out saying it would be so easy. Now he runs the risk that nobody will ever believe anything he says again.”

On Capitol Hill, the handful of congressmen, most of them members of the Black Caucus, who voted against a House resolution supporting Operation Desert Storm, say they have received an overwhelmingly positive response to their anti-war stand. Aides to Rep. Major R. Owens (D-N.Y.), who represents a district in Brooklyn, New York, report that letters from constituents are running 100 to 1 against the war.

Rep. Charles Hayes (D-Ill.) is getting a similar reaction. Only one out of 200 letters he received about his anti-war vote

was negative. "Everybody's supporting him," says Hayes's spokesman Bruce Taylor. "This is one of the best positions he's held."

Bush under the gun

The initial euphoria which greeted the opening salvos of the conflict has noticeably dimmed, including in Congress, where even some of Operation Desert Storm's biggest boosters are glumly admitting that, "It's not going to be a short war," as House Minority Leader Rep. Robert Michel (R-Ill.) put it after a briefing by Defense Secretary Richard Cheney Jan. 24.

Beyond this, some influential members of Congress are raising questions about U.S. war aims. In a speech to the National Press Club Jan. 24, Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), chairman of the House subcommittee on Mideast affairs, sharply criticized the Bush administration for changing its war objectives from pushing Iraq out of Kuwait, to subjugating Iraq.

Bush has made the U.S. role in the Gulf "more difficult" by expanding its war aims, Hamilton charged. "It is not clear to me what winning this war means. The President has stated limited objectives" centered on complete and unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait and complete compliance with the U.N. Security Council resolutions.

"But his recent statements and our military actions suggest that our goals are expanding to include the surrender of Iraq and the destruction of its military," he added. "To the extent that we expand our objectives, it will make more difficult the diplomatic task when the fighting stops."

A chorus of "I-told-you-so's" is also gathering, among them, William Odom, a retired general who once headed the National Security Agency, and who had published extensive warnings in the months leading up to the U.S. attack, about the military and political folly of going to war with Iraq.

In an interview televised Jan. 27, Odom declared that he could not do otherwise but support the President now that hostilities had broken out. But he nevertheless reiterated several times that the massive problems of which he had warned, were now unfolding. "The President is taking a huge gamble," he said.

Less polite was Edward Luttwak, a geopolitician based in Washington. In a scathing critique published in the French newspaper *Libération* Jan. 24, Luttwak mocked Bush's entire Gulf strategy. Exchanging insults with Saddam Hussein has demeaned the American presidency, while Bush has made himself look ridiculous by comparing Saddam to Hitler, wrote Luttwak.

Bush has shown virtually no understanding of what kind of total war he has provoked, and what the consequences could be for the United States itself, much less the rest of the world. To claim that the threat to Saudi Arabia's water supply through the massive oil spill is "militarily insignificant," simply shows the President's infantilism. Bush keeps com-

plaining that Saddam Hussein is not playing by his rules, even as the U.S. violates one tenet of international law after another. In the sense of trying to impose his own unworkable New world Order on the world, Bush is indeed clinically insane.

While Bush fiddles . . .

The status of the war itself is only one aspect of the President's vulnerability. While Bush has pursued his obsession with destroying Saddam Hussein and bombing Iraq back to the Stone Age, the collapse of the U.S. economy has proceeded at a record pace. Since the crisis first erupted, three U.S. airlines have gone bankrupt, more banks have failed, and hundreds of thousands of Americans have lost their jobs.

The conflict itself is causing major economic disruption at home. The call-up of hundreds of thousands of reservists for duty in the Gulf has created huge economic problems for their families and communities. Hospitals in rural and inner-city areas have had to implement drastic cutbacks in services, because so many of their medical and nursing staffs were reserve members deployed to the Mideast. Police and fire departments in many areas have been placed in similar positions. How long people will put up with these hardships, especially if the war drags on for months and the body count rises, is an open question.

With official administration estimates of the war's cost now passing \$50 billion—a figure based on the most optimistic projections of the length and cost of the conflict, and one which does not include such side expenses as Israel's demand for \$13 billion in exchange for its "restraint"—there is a mad scramble going on to figure out how to finance the operation.

Talk of a "war tax" is buzzing through Washington—an initiative guaranteed to provoke an angry reaction from the electorate, but which is almost certain to be proposed in some form or another, especially since the administration claims that the FY 1992 budget, which it will submit in early February, will keep the growth in spending to less than the rate of inflation. The only way Bush could possibly hope to accomplish that would be through huge increases in taxes and bone-deep cuts in spending—both loaded with political explosives.

Recognizing his vulnerability on the economy, Bush made a pathetic attempt to use his State of the Union address Jan. 29 to reassure the country that he hasn't totally forgotten home-front concerns.

He talked about a new national highway program, paid lip service to increasing investment in research and development, made another bid to cut the capital gains tax, talked about affordable housing. But the note that rang truest was his frantic appeal to the banks to start pumping out new credit. Bush hopes that a hyperinflationary binge will stave off the mantle of Herbert Hoover for a little longer, but that will backfire almost as surely as his great adventure in the Persian Gulf already is.