



“Facts on the Ground”

That was the much-hated phrase used to justify Israeli settlements on disputed West Bank territory. Hopefully, it is not a prediction for the outcome of the Iraq war because the Israeli strategy led to a paralysis in politics. What now seems inevitable is a second Iraq war, but too little attention on how we got where we are. Tom Friedman of the New York Times has tried to straddle the difficult decisions that are now being faced by this Administration, and he mentioned in a recent column that sufficient troops in the area make it hard to back down. A key fact on the ground in present circumstances is the presence of 220,000 plus troops in the theater, poised and ready to ‘go.’ A second fact is that number continues to grow. If we add the British contingent, assuming we have not lost our sole military ally, those numbers grow larger and create larger facts on the ground. They impel movement by their sheer mass.

What about political paralysis? What little disarmament there has been has been achieved through the UNMOVIC inspections buttressed by these same facts on the ground. Saddam responds to force, not to humanitarian appeals. That must be clear from his record over the years. That means that a pull out of American troops, while leaving Saddam in place, is a virtual impossibility. Friedman deduced that the early strategy of the Bush Administration was to put a large numbers of troops and to create sufficient facts on the ground to preclude a peaceful ending of this confrontation with Saddam still in power. Saddam is a smart player and he plays for time, hoping that world opinion will do what his armies cannot. Friedman refers to the process as a game of chicken. He concludes that we ought to get ready for a crash because we are, as it were, in the back of the bus. Yet, the facts on the ground have hardened into a kind of policy paralysis.

Even at this stage, however, this outcome is not guaranteed, provided our former NATO allies actually shared the American fear of WMD being more widely deployed. In principle, those same facts on the ground could be deployed in an alternative, non-war policy alternative that centered on Real Containment. That would require shutting off normal commercial arrangements by Iraq while disarmament proceeded. The debating society that the UN has become is focused on mere formalities, however, not on the substantive achievement of disarming Iraq.

Real containment would require many of these same troops and substantial amounts of real military hardware. Real containment would require complete monitoring of all ingress and egress of goods and people---in order to create a total embargo on new materials for new weapons. This recalls the Kennedy quarantine of 1962 as the Russian naval flotilla proceeded toward Cuba. The world waited anxiously and finally the Russians backed down. Subsequently, an agreement to take down the missiles in Cuba was reached. The Kennedy Administration received wide accolades for calmness in the face of crisis and for refusing to directly attack Cuba. A strong backbone created the desired result without the huge loss of life and property that real war will bring. Is the same option open with respect to the current crisis? Yes, if our former allies would agree to a rigidly enforced quarantine of all potential weapons and their precursors. The troops and military assets now in the theater could enforce such a quarantine. No ship, no plane, no truck would move in or out of Iraq without a rigorous inspection to remove all military contraband. Sooner or later, discoveries of other Iraqi lethal assets would occur.

Critics can claim that an embargo of this sort is an act of war. True, but it could be construed as a real enforcement of the requirements of the 1991 Cease Fire accords. Of course, that would require France, Germany and Russia to drop their objections to the use of armed force to ‘disarm Iraq.’ It would no doubt lead to these countries actually participating in the monitoring forces. It would also put these countries to a fair test. Will the UN enforce its previously agreed restrictions on Iraq? The world has a right to know. True, it would make the initial primary force the Anglo/American contingent, but that could change as these countries took on



some of the enforcement responsibilities.

The critics of current U.S. policy don't dispute Saddam's record, yet they vigorously hope that UN will continue inspections and, as a result, destroy prohibited weaponry. History suggests that is a fatuous wish, but under a rigid embargo, inspections would have that chance. The participation of the major objectors to American policy would make them part of the deal. This would be "real containment," something provisioned in the initial ceasefire agreement of 1991 but never carried out because many of these countries abandoned their responsibilities. It would legitimate the international community once again, but it would require real facts on the ground from the critics. What President Bush should ask them to do is to put their assets at risk, and put some of their own skin into the game of keeping Saddam away from lethality.

It is a simple request and it cuts to the chase. Let the real containment begin and the elaborate wordiness over international law stop. If the objectors want to avoid war, here is the way to do it. All they need to do is to fully participate in a true containment regime. One suspects that the request will fall on deaf ears, but it is time to let the world know what the real options are: Real containment or real war. Both require facts on the ground and the clock is ticking.