

NEWS ANALYSIS

Bush Presidency in trouble at home as it ponders next move in Gulf

By Mark A. Brusonsky

WASHINGTON — The Bush Presidency is rather suddenly in trouble. George Bush is wounded — though the extent of the wounds are as yet uncertain. His powers of persuasion and more importantly of Presidential coercion have been seriously called into question.

The early November elections now lurk forebodingly for the White House.

True, the main issue is the economy — a long-creeping-up problem which has now been considerably heightened by the Democratically-controlled Congress's sparring with the White House over the budget.

Indeed the Congress and the President are in competition to see who can blame the other more for the ridiculous imagery of the American government being threatened, weekly, with a "shut down."

But the confusing situation in the Middle East, with hundreds of thousands of American troops seemingly awaiting the order to attack, also has many Americans considerably on edge.

Earlier this month *Washington Post* readers, here in this capital city, awoke to a front-page story headlined "Poll Shows Plunge in Public Confidence."

But it was the subhead to that

story which contained the shocker: "Bush's Rating Plummets; Overall National Mood at Two-Decade Low."

The article began with the following round-up of the country's

deteriorating psychological health:

"A souring economy, the federal budget impasse and second thoughts about the U.S. troops deployment in the Persian Gulf have pushed public

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LONDON — Middle East governments and analysts were thrown into utter confusion this week by a statement issued by the Syrian government that violently attacked U.S. policy in the Middle East and urged all Arabs to reconsider their support of American intervention in the Gulf.

Arab diplomats appeared at a loss to explain the Syrian about-face.

Some wondered whether it was a reaction to the perceived ingratitude



The Coalition includes (l-r) a PLO representative, Casey Kasem, a Palestine Solidarity Committee representative and former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, who served during the Vietnam War.

Bush Administration faces crisis of confidence...

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confidence in the condition of the country to its lowest level in nearly two decades, according to a *Washington Post-ABC News* poll.

"President Bush's popularity is in a nosedive. The poll found that 56 percent of those questioned approved of the job he is doing as president — the lowest point of his presidency and 19 points lower than it had been a month before..."

"More ominously for the incumbent administration," the article continued, "the survey also found that nearly eight out of 10 persons questioned — 79 percent — said the country was 'pretty seriously off on the wrong track.' Only 19 percent said the country was headed in the right direction, about half the percentage that expressed a similar positive view just a month ago."

While the White House is privately quite alarmed, Bush, Sununu, and other senior officials are all maintaining their outwardly cool and calm postures when in public view.

...But this quite rapid deterioration

in the political fortunes of the Bush Administration comes, of course, at a particularly historic and sensitive time.

For the White House is attempting to decide whether to move further toward war or a bit backwards toward a political settlement in the face-off with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The decision is basically Washington's at this point.

Earlier this month while campaigning in Illinois Bush faced his first major heckling over Middle East policies — all too reminiscent of events 20 years ago during the Vietnam era.

Indeed, it's become much clearer in recent weeks that the country is far more divided about the Administration's rush of forces to Saudi Arabia than had at first seemed to be the case.

The original rationale that Washington had no choice but to rush unprecedented forces to the region because of a possible Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia did have broad support.

But now that such a threat to Saudi Arabia itself seems no longer the situation, if it ever was, the idea of going to war to push Iraq out of Kuwait and restore the Emir, or alternatively the notion of destroying Saddam Hussein along with Iraqi military power in a massive attack, are both being met with considerable skepticism and dissent.

From the left, a growing coalition of groups have organized around what is called the "Coalition to Stop U.S. Intervention in the Middle East." Former Attorney General during the Johnson Presidency and the Vietnam War, Ramsey Clark, is the godfather of this coalition. But many other prominent personalities, including Arab American television host Casey Kasem, have signed on.

It is this broad-based "Coalition" that was the umbrella organization sponsoring the demonstrations last Saturday, October 20th, in over a dozen U.S. cities as well as Toronto, England, Rome, Panama, and Australia, according to the organizers.

From the politically conservative right as well there is a rather unexpected alliance of major personalities — most prominent among them former White House Communications Director from the Reagan years Pat Buchanan as well as syndicated columnist Joseph Sobran of *The National Review* magazine and former Deputy Director of the *Voice of America (VOA)* Phil Nikolides. These persons have loudly been warning Bush in a growing chorus against taking any "offensive" action against Iraq while repeatedly questioning the desirability of going to war to retake Kuwait and restore the Emir.

When it comes to the conservatives, there is plenty of rhetorical commentary, but these circles lack the tradition of street protests and lack as well the street troops for such activities.

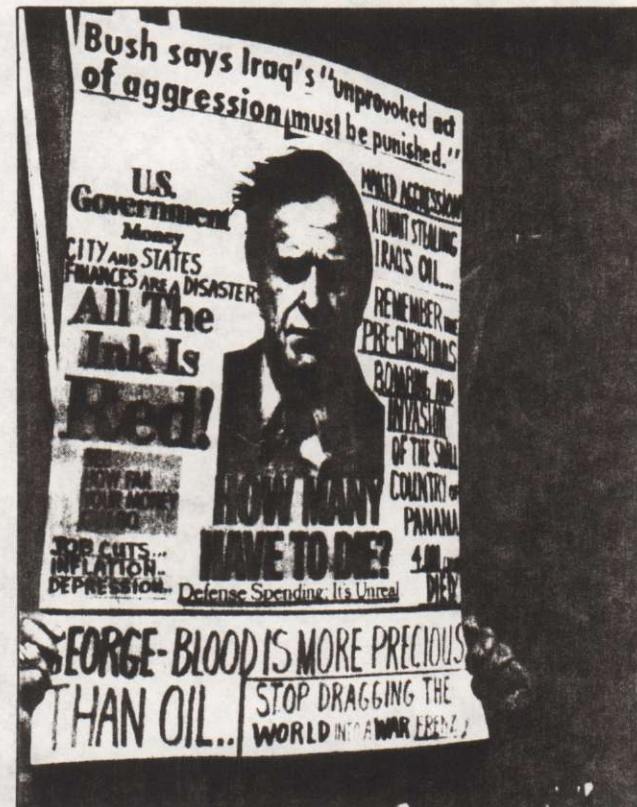
So it's only on the left that potential mass protests are building.

And last Saturday's demonstration in cities throughout the United States — with the participation of a diverse coalition of primarily progressive, socialist, Black, religious and Palestinian organizations — was an inconclusive test of the potency of what appears to have the potential at least to become a mass protest against the American build-up of military forces in the Middle East.

The Coalition organizers have stated the following five demands:

1. The immediate withdrawal of all U.S. troops, nuclear weapons, aircraft carriers and other weapons of mass destruction from the Persian Gulf.
2. No establishment of temporary or permanent U.S. bases in the region.
3. Legislation to prohibit the president from usurping war powers delegated to Congress.
4. Support for peaceful diplomatic efforts to end the Gulf crisis.
5. Money for housing, education, medical care, AIDS research and veterans benefits — fight racism and poverty, not a war for Big Oil.

And according to a fact sheet being handed out by the Coalition, "As far as the Pentagon is concerned, an invasion of Iraq is a forgone conclusion. The only question is the timing: holding together the shaky U.S.-led coalition of countries long enough to make it look like the options of diplomacy and 'sanctions'



A placard in the anti-war demonstration in New York says it all

had been given time to work, and that no option remained except war."

"The purpose?" the fact sheet continues, "to take political and military control of the Arabian Peninsula in order to be able to dictate the price and production levels of Arab oil."

"Essential to this strategy," according to the organizing leaflet which has been sent to thousands of organizers throughout the country, "is maintaining the illusion of support of the government's actions by the U.S. public. And it IS an illusion! According to recent surveys, nine out of ten people oppose the U.S. going to war in the Middle East. On the contrary, since literally days after the crisis broke on August 2, there have been picket lines, meetings, demonstrations and rallies in scores of cities across the country, but with very few exceptions they have been deliberately ignored by the big commercial media."

And so, the leaflet concludes, "The

vast majority of the people in this country do not want a racist war for Big Oil, but unless we make our voices heard loud and clear, Bush, the Pentagon generals and the Oil Barons will charge straight ahead and start one. October 20th is more important than ever — let's make it so big the media won't be able to censor it!"

It's probably true that so far the various protests from both right and left seem to have had little visible impact on Bush Administration policies.

But as the days pass by — and especially now that there is this combination of sinking public opinion ratings, growing economic problems, second thoughts about the human and political costs of a Middle East war, and growing voices of protest from both left and right — there should be little doubt that the White House will be paying more attention to public opinion, no matter what the President says.

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