

The Middle East Will Never Be The Same

By Mark Bruzonsky

President Bush is cautiously taking the U.S. to war in the Middle East. He is building up our forces in the region, provoking Saddam Hussein to respond if he dares, and setting the stage where an incident of any kind can quickly become the spark, the excuse if you will, for a full-scale American assault on Iraq.

President Mubarak in Egypt has already prepared his own countrymen on national television to expect "a massive military strike against Iraq."

But President Bush has presented a rather incomplete and simplified justification for the impending war. This is not really going to be a war about oil supplies or even oil prices.

After all, Iraq never threatened to cut off oil supplies, only to raise prices to levels they were at a few years ago. Indeed it is American actions which now threaten the possible destruction of major oil facilities and a severe, possibly catastrophic, escalation of oil prices. Furthermore, by allowing itself to again become dependent on imported Arab oil, and greatly cutting back on domestic oil production, the U.S. helped create today's oil situation.

Rather, the impending military clash in the Middle East is far more a confrontation about hegemony, political influence and control of resources.

Like the Suez Crisis of the 50s, the Six-Day War of the 60s and the Yom Kippur War of the 70s, the Kuwait Crisis of 1990 is another turning point in history. Whatever happens from this point forward, the Middle East will never again be the same.

American hegemonic interests have been challenged by Saddam Hussein of Iraq reminiscent, in some crucial ways at least, of Gamal Abdel Nasser's challenge to the British in the 50s and then to the Israelis in 67.

Nasser won his bet against the British and the French, but only because he then had the U.S. opposing a continuing role for the two former European colonial

powers in the Middle East. But Nasser failed terribly in 1967, this time with the U.S. backing Israel and falsely portraying him, as is being done now with Saddam, as a dangerous madman.

Then, of course, it was Anwar Sadat who first attempted to reach an accommodation with both Israel and the U.S. through diplomacy. But Sadat found himself having first to resort to war before he could successfully pursue his dreams of a Washington-Cairo connection predicated on Egyptian willingness to make an accommodation with Israel.

The basic lessons learned each past decade are that military force, diplomacy and the pursuit of hegemonic national interests are a complicated interwoven whole; and that the outcome of initial steps cannot always be foreseen, indeed is usually unexpected.

The same is true today with the current Kuwait Crisis.

It's not just a question of who will prevail in the current crisis, or of the specific outcome of the impending military confrontation which seems ahead.

Events taking place today, just like prior moments where history turned, will reverberate for years to come influencing and twisting the future considerations and policies of Arab governments far into the future.

Both George Bush and Saddam Hussein are acutely aware of this greater historic reality.

For Bush, American economic and strategic concerns are paramount. In short, the U.S. wants to remain the primary arbiter of Middle Eastern politics and economics. Once committed, the U.S. will not be able to back away without suffering severely in terms of influence and leverage throughout the Middle East.

For Hussein and many Arab nationalists, as President Mubarak of Egypt said on 8 Aug. "The very image of the Arab nation

is at stake." He is now committed to holding the former area of Iraq we all call Kuwait. And to achieve the mantle of Arab leadership that he seeks he has to hold on, or at least to put up a serious fight.

Throughout the Arab world--especially in Jordan, among the Palestinians, and among the impoverished masses that have not shared the oil wealth--there is considerable support for Hussein as became clear the other evening when CBS News anchorman Dan Rather took his cameras out to the man on the street in Amman. For many Arabs the confrontation brewing is one between Arab nationalism and American imperialism, the issue of Kuwait being seen as an internal Arab matter.

With the intifada still raging in Palestine and now American forces racing toward the Gulf, Washington has become once again fixated on what for most Americans is the inscrutability and instability of the Middle East region. War fever is on the rise here at a ferocious pace. And Americans are rather bewildered and increasingly afraid; a well-understood formula for preparing a society for conflict and sacrifice.

In this situation we Americans are not thinking back in history to the events of the past that have, taken all together, created today's dilemmas. Nor is there much thinking ahead, it seems, to where today's policies of military confrontation

may be leading some years down the road.

Rather the atmosphere in our country today seems increasingly to be one of self-righteous assertiveness and escalating belligerence. History be damned, our "national interest" are at stake! Yet we seem blissfully unaware that others too have national interests.

Even more ominously, though, popular Arab sentiments raise little interest from our leaders in Washington who seem to have gotten too comfortable just consorting with Arab Kings. Yet in the end it is these sentiments which may determine our fate in the region.

Once again American military might is going to make the difference, we are told; but this is not the first time we've heard such sentiments.

We are in the vortex of a fast-approaching historic storm likely to wreak major havoc and destruction. It is not foreseeable now what the situation may be when the storm has spent itself and moved on.

Mark Bruzonsky, an expert on the Middle East who has visited the region frequently over the past 15 years, writes a weekly column appearing in a number of Middle East newspapers. His most recent book, published by the Woodrow Wilson Center at the Smithsonian Institution, was titled *Security In The Middle East: Regional Change and Great Power Strategies*. ★

