



## The Iraq challenge

As this issue goes to press, a war with Iraq now looks to be inevitable. As with all wars, that is regrettable but there can surely be no doubt that the responsibility lies with Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi regime. Given the determination of the United States and its allies, including Australia, Saddam's room for further avoidance of his obligations under the United Nations has been eliminated.

The United States has promised to disclose next week intelligence on both Iraq's concealment of its weapons programs and its links with the al Qaeda terrorist network. This disclosure is important and, in our view, long overdue. But already some in the anti-war camp are suggesting that the data will be inadequate. They may be correct but only if they impose on the United States a burden of proof beyond any doubt. That is not possible and the burden must rest on the balance of probabilities. Then it will be for Saddam to answer the charge convincingly. Protected as he has been for 12 years by his friends, he has so far refused to do so.

There are three substantial arguments for the current troop deployment which is, of course, significantly short of an actual strike on Iraq. The first - and most obvious - is that the deployment creates options for the timely use of force should the decision to strike be made. It would be an example of military and governmental incompetence to make the decision, then prepare and send the troops. By the time they arrived, the conflict would have ended and we as a nation would look supremely silly, some sort of international clown.

Secondly, the deployment of forces into the Middle East by the United States, Britain and Australia adds substantially to the diplomatic pressure on Saddam Hussein. It is naive in the extreme to expect that the traditional posturing of UN diplomats, even weapons inspectors, without the backing of a credible threat of force will persuade Saddam to dismantle or disclose his stocks of weapons of mass destruction. As UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, has said on a number of occasions: "You can do a lot with diplomacy, but of course you can do a lot more with diplomacy backed up by fairness and force." Saddam has shown on a number of occasions that, like most totalitarian dictators, he only understands force. He has to be persuaded that the troop build-up, more than that in 1998, presages a devastating strike akin to that in 1991 if he does not comply with the United Nations disarmament resolutions and the 1991 armistice agreements that left him in power.

Thirdly, the troop build-up puts necessary pressure on the United Nations Security Council. This body is responsible under the UN Charter for maintaining peace and security in the world. Over the 58 years of its life, it has presided over humanitarian disasters of immense magnitude in the Congo, Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo among others because it has lacked the determination to meet its responsibilities. It is possible to excuse its inaction during the Cold War. It is not possible to excuse its failures since.

The Security Council is dominated by diplomats working within a culture that not only decries the use of force in all circumstances but actively refuses to collect intelligence about the looming disasters. There is every reason to believe that the

current crop of weapons inspectors were not supposed to find evidence of weapons of mass destruction so that the Security Council could again walk away from its responsibilities. In fact, the inspectors have reported that Iraq has failed to co-operate, itself a breach of several Security Council resolutions. While that report was much more blunt than expected, nevertheless the UN culture of procrastination produced no more than a recommendation for continuing and probably interminable inspections.

The Security Council needs to be reminded that Article 1.1 of the UN Charter requires it "to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and *for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace*" (emphasis added).

The current public debate puts enormous faith in the UN as some sort of legitimate guardian of international interests. Regrettably, these days it is nothing of the sort. Rather it is a collection of timid diplomats, too heavily influenced by countries like France and Russia who are too close to Iraq and too negative to offer any credible alternative proposals to solve the Iraq problem. It is not the job of the Council to find excuses for doing nothing useful but to find the means of achieving proper outcomes. ●

## Iraq's armed forces

The accusation so often heard in Australia that the US armed Saddam Hussein is manifestly false. There is no credible evidence and the ritual denunciation of the US sounds more like a bit of crude disinformation.

Looking back as far as 1982 through annual issues of *The Military Balance*, the defence watcher's bible, equipment that can be identified as of US or British origin consists of generally small amounts of minor items, many dating back to pre-revolutionary Iraq when the country was a member of the ill-fated Central Treaty Organisation.

The vast bulk of Iraq's military equipment was and is Russian. T-72, T-62 and T-55 main battle tanks, BMP-1/2 infantry fighting vehicles, artillery of all types, anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles and masses of anti-aircraft guns.

Much of the most modern equipment is French and German with significant quantities of Chinese-made copies of Russian items. Perhaps this explains the utterly negative and opportunistic opposition of those countries to the United States and its allies. Other significant arms suppliers to Iraq include Italy, Brazil, South Africa, Switzerland, the Czech Republic and the former Yugoslavia. ●

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## The state of the national debate

As the likelihood of a shooting war in Iraq increases, the state of the vital national debate in Australia can only be described as depressing. Increasingly, disinformation is peddled while correct information is either not presented or is suppressed. Hysterical and mindless anti-Americanism has reached a crescendo perhaps not even equalled during the Vietnam war. The following represents our assessment.

The government moderated its earlier militancy when it offered a non-existent armoured brigade to a much more measured position insisting on Iraqi compliance with the Security Council and pressuring the Council to meet its obligations. In our view, the government is showing strong and generally consistent leadership on the international scene.

It has failed, however, to win sufficient support in the community because it has failed to communicate its policy in credible terms. In its handling of what are clearly substantive military commitments, its petty obfuscation and crude attempts at information management have generated distrust. Commitments are foreshadowed, denied and then announced sometimes within hours. Even then, the announcements are accompanied by refusals to admit that the forces could be committed to combat and assertions that rules of engagement have been drawn up. The prime minister has also indicated that, regardless of events, the Australian commitment will be time limited. The government's credibility is significantly at risk. It rates a bare Pass.

For its part, **The Labor Opposition** began well with leader, Simon Crean, and shadow foreign affairs spokesman, Kevin Rudd, taking a principled and cautious approach. In recent days, however, the Opposition has painted itself into a corner from which it cannot now escape. It pre-empted the weapons inspectors' report and, regardless of outcome, will look silly. Not for the first time, Labor fell into the trap of the anti-US hysteria. Labor's mark is Fail and it will probably be required to repeat a term in opposition.

The hard Left opposition (**Greens, Democrats**) were considered too inexperienced to sit the test and have not qualified for an assessment.

The **media** generally were doing quite well acting as transmitters of information and commentary. In recent times, however, too many elements of the media have fallen into the anti-US trap. Some of the more extreme anti-American disinformation has been peddled but countervailing hard data (see above) suppressed.

In recent days, too, one television network has planted a reporter in Baghdad (not wrong in itself) but has allowed him to be manipulated into becoming an uncritical propagandist for the Iraqi regime. The network does not qualify his reports by admitting that he is working under control. This is no doubt due to incompetence rather than treachery (of which it has been accused) so the media's grade is just a qualified Pass subject to further testing. ●

## Disclosing intelligence

The challenge for any democratic government contemplating military action is how far it can release the intelligence on which it bases its decisions. Intelligence organisations are properly cautious about publishing material which could compromise sensitive sources and methods.

Yet, there is a vast amount of authoritative public discussion about intelligence sources and methods just as there are many ways in which the sources of information can be concealed. Security of information is important but can be overdone.

The risk for the decision makers is that over-protection of its intelligence leaves room for substantial misunderstanding on the part of the community. Australian government is generally too secrecy ridden so that the potential for flawed decision making is increased rather than diminished.

In this climate of official secrecy, the role of the non-government commentator becomes more significant than perhaps it should be. The expert commentator will not always be accurate but, in the absence of credible official information, will carry more authority than a government whose obfuscation simply arouses suspicion.

Furthermore, government secrecy leaves open the field for those peddlers of disinformation whose motivation is questionable. Mere assertions that such partisan commentators are wrong carry no weight.

There is a balance to be struck here but the US practice of giving more rather than less information is preferable. ●

## Politics is not about party

Devoting some two thirds of its Opinion page to two former political staffers claiming the electoral benefits or otherwise of the current Middle East troop deployment for their respective leaders represented poor taste by the national daily concerned.

Who cares about their very temporary prospects? One of the great strengths of our system is that John Howard and Simon Crean, both reputable men, could disappear tomorrow and the system would replace them with reputable and experienced people. After an initial flurry, no one would notice the change.

National security ought to be discussed in national rather than party terms. Politics is a means to the end of good government; it is not the end in itself. That is not to say that bipartisanship should be the objective. Democracy envisages and tolerates fearless political debate. But it should be debate about policy rather than electoral advantage.

The political groupies, whose manipulation of our political discourse not only generates unnecessary divisiveness but is all too often based upon a lack of understanding, would be better advised to leave their pontificating to the party back room. ●

## From the national president

Michael O'Connor, ADA's Executive Director, would always wish to see his sustained, rigorous and unique contribution to Australia's defence and strategic thinking, debate and policy formation as just one example of Australians working for and with other Australians. His special work, conducted in a spirit of fairness and honesty, and with neither fear nor favour, has touched all sorts of people and organisations, both in Australia and overseas. The latest Australia Day announcement of his receiving an AM [Member in the General Division] for 'raising public awareness of defence, security and strategic issues' is an especially pleasing recognition by Australia and Australians of his highly effective and generous use of a combination of personal, intellectual, and organisational gifts. Well done and thank you Michael! ●

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