

Good Cop, Bad Cop at the UN

By Ian Williams

Resolution 1441 is more an alternative “legal” road to war rather than an alternative to war itself. Extrapolating from Saddam Hussein’s previous behavior, the Security Council resolution will lead to war as surely as a position of unilateral U.S. belligerence. The Iraqi ruler will need an unprecedented political and psychological makeover to eat the copious and indigestible helpings of humble pie that the UN resolution prescribes being shoveled down his maw.

Even if Hussein were to cooperate in the total way demanded by the resolution, he could be fatally weakened internally by the humiliation of bowing to Washington. Already the near riots outside the prisons after Saddam Hussein’s amnesty offered a whiff of a “Ceausescu moment”: that critical time when the population senses that a hated regime actually has no clothes.

Washington has certainly won its major point at the Security Council. Regardless of differing opinions heard throughout the rest of the world, Iraq is the first item on the U.S.-shaped global security agenda—even if no other Security Council member would rank it so importantly. Even Tony Blair, the Bush administration’s closest ally over Iraq, has been vainly trying to point out the equal importance of the Israel/Palestine issue, both as a security issue in its own right and in terms of its potential for coalition building. The Pakistan-India nuclear stand-off, for example, poses serious threats to international peace and security. Even in terms of defiance of UN resolutions, Iraq is far from the worst scoff-law.

The final draft of 1441 echoes the sigh of relief that greeted George Bush’s September 12 speech announcing his new-found devotion to the United Nations. The alternative was having the world’s most important nation flout the

UN Charter and the major principles of international law established in the wake of the Second World War. It is hardly surprising, then, that so many were prepared to accommodate U.S. whims in the interests of preserving the appearance of the international rule of law.

Negotiators did succeed in grinding down some of the most unacceptably spiky portions of the original draft. In addition to the highly visible French role, the British quietly exhorted a multilateral approach while maintaining their publicly uncritical support for Washington. The fulcrum for the negotiations, however, was not between the Permanent Five in the Council, but rather was found inside what one Irish diplomat engagingly referred to as the “P-1.” The real battle was fought between Secretary of State Colin Powell on one side, and the Cheney, Wolfowitz, and Rumsfeld axis on the other.

In the end, Powell, leveraging the resistance of the French-led coalition in the Security Council, and indeed invoking the support of the British, was able to win in both senses. As a result, the final draft came a long way from its take it or leave it origins. It avoids giving the U.S. the automatic right to attack that the hawks had insisted on. Powell’s internal victory allowed him to deploy diplomatic skills that resulted in a resounding victory for the United States. In contrast, the bluster of the hawks had won over only a bare majority in the council. It is a lesson for Bush, and big boost to the Secretary of State’s position.

Powell’s pragmatic and principled commitment to multilateralism won the day. But this good cop/bad cop routine on the part of the administration is far from being an unalloyed blessing for the world. In effect, the other members of the Security Council have deputized an American lynch mob, giving the Bush administration search warrants and an almost definitive

promise of arrest and execution if anything is found. In return, the U.S. has not even renounced its claimed right of unilateral attack.

More positively, Washington has in effect pledged not to *exercise* its unilateral prerogatives—but only if the UN does the “right thing” and provides multilateral sanction for what the U.S. wants. Similarly, the original American position was that it did not *want* a second resolution, but by the end, its stand was more that it did not *need* one. Once the U.S. agreed to a

subsequent meeting of the Council that will consider any Iraqi breaches, the way was paved for the French to hastily table a proposal for a new resolution that would authorize military action in the event that Iraq fails to comply—an action that the U.S. is sure to seize with or without such a second resolution.

On a slightly more optimistic note, the long resistance and diplomatic campaign of attrition in the Security Council should send a warning to Washington—and constitute a rally-

ing point for the rest of the world—that the United States will not always have everything its own way. After all, even a superpower needs allies to conduct operations far from home. That’s small comfort for Saddam Hussein, but in the end the resolution does give us some small hope for a more multilateral future.

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