

Dithering Gets us Nowhere or: Games Politicians Play

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There is a difference between intellectually-honest debate and dithering. We are now caught in a crisis with yet another totalitarian dictator, one who has defied UN Security Council resolutions for a decade. What Canadians needed last fall was a real debate over what Canada's interests in the Persian Gulf region are and how they are threatened by the continued existence of the Hussein regime. We should not be haphazardly having that debate now: Canadians decry the fact that the UN is driving Canadian policy-and they are right. By having our own independent debate last fall when it was obvious to knowledgeable observers (including those in government keeping such a watch), that the situation would reach the advanced state that it is in now, we could have avoided being painted into a corner. There would be no pressurized backbench or caucus revolt, we could have avoided the charges of being an extension of the United States and we would not look as indecisive and foolish as we do now.

My main concern, however, is for Canada's soldiers. There is nothing wrong with putting Canadians in harm's way as long as they are properly prepared for the experience and taken care of when they come home. The dithering that we find ourselves in may be a delay tactic conducted by those who know that if we cannot prepare our forces for service in the region in a timely fashion, they will be unable to participate. As with any military

operation, four things must happen. We must marshal our forces and prepare them doctrinally, physically and mentally. We must transport them to the region: this includes acquiring lift from allies or from private sources-and we must bid for that lift. We must acclimatize our forces to the weather, the desert, and the time zones. Finally, our forces need time to ensure that they are interoperable with our allies: communications is critical so that we avoid another friendly fire incident. This process needs to be operating now. We can always stop it later. Having Canadian forces in the region alongside our allies adds to the coercive element necessary to convince Hussein we mean business this time and are prepared to go all the way. The French, at least, understand that. Waiting for a final UN decision and last minute dithering means that the deployment process will start later and we may not make it. It will force the planners and logisticians at National Defence to cut corners and dramatically increase risk. And who wears it when things go wrong? Not the PMO. Not DFAIT. Somebody wearing a uniform will get blamed.

What does this mean for Canada? We look indecisive and incompetent, not only politically or militarily but as a nation. If we do not participate effectively, we will lose the saliency we need for political influence. We will not be looked upon as an important contributor to the coalition. Finally, our soldiers will be put at increased risk because Canada's political leadership is unacquainted with soldiers' needs and requirements.

Those politicians who oppose intervention to dismantle the Hussein regime and wish to continue efforts to merely contain him (that is, continuing sanctions which Hussein will use to kill more Iraqi civilians than war will) should be open and up front with their arguments. They should not hide behind the UN imprimatur. Conversely, the argument for intervention should be clearly and honestly spelled out and explicitly connected to Canadian interests. The Canadian government must stop treating us like children. We as Canadians can handle the arguments and the risk. We have before: The Gulf War, Croatia, Bosnia, Iraq in 1998, Kosovo, and

Afghanistan. The surreptitious games being played by certain factions in the PMO and DFAIT to generate alternative military deployments to the West Bank and the Congo in order to draw off our military capability from a potential Iraq war are intellectually dishonest. There is no solution to the Palestinian-Israeli problem (Canada tried to find one from 1954 to 1967) and we cannot afford the humiliation of another 'bungle in the jungle' like the 1996 fiasco. What are our interests? Who is the biggest threat to those interests? Canada has committed military forces to the Persian Gulf since 1988-and from 1990, we have been involved in containing Saddam Hussein. It is the longest regional deployment of the 1990s: even longer than Bosnia. We are entitled to know what the stakes are: not through the media but from our government, our leaders. This has not been done. We have a tradition of policing and defeating totalitarian dictatorships when they threaten our interests and the Hussein Regime qualifies. "Give us the tools and we'll finish the job" as Churchill once said.