

COLUMBIA JEWISH NEWS

January 2003

"Whose Political Behavior Should Prevail?"

By Kenneth W. Stein

You tell me. Is this New Year's 1991 or 2003? What is different about the current confrontation with Iraq?

Prime Minister and American President are preparing to use force to reverse Saddam's actions. President Bush leads the international coalition's charge against Iraq; U.S. troops and war material wind their way to the Persian Gulf. Arab leaders weigh factors in joining the coalition: need for American strategic and economic assistance on the one hand and pacifying Arab populations, who do not want to be too cozy with U.S., support for Israel on the other. No Arab League or Arab-state solution is available as an alternative for the pending attack on Iraq. The Arab media criticizes an inept, weak, and disorganized Arab leadership. Former American political leaders counsel restraint in the use of force. Israel is asked by the United States to refrain from engagement in the coming confrontation with Iraq. War with Iraq is estimated to take place in January or February.

You tell me. Is this New Year's 1991 or 2003?

What is different about the current confrontation with Iraq?

It is not about redrawing international borders, or a Trojan horse for long-term American occupation of Iraq, or control of international oil reserves, although one can not totally rule out these unlikely outcomes. Do you want to bet that Bush's intention is to depart Iraq four months prior to the 2004 elections?

This clash is about Saddam's sinister behavior in acquiring the capability to produce and disseminate weapons of mass destruction. Unlike the 1991 Gulf War that protected borders, this confrontation is about how regimes behave inside their borders. Leaders in Iran and North Korea are watching closely.

After World War II, when Britain and France withdrew from the Middle East physically, regimes were left with Western-originated political institutions (parties, elections, constitutions, parliaments). These were grafted onto indigenous tribal, autocratic, and dynastic rule. The power of

traditional; elites was preserved; upward mobility was stifled.

In essence, this clash is about how Iraq and other Arab states are ruled. It is about a two-hundred-year-long interaction where the Middle East and its peoples have accepted, rejected, or reworked concepts of nationhood, civil society, and individual human rights.

In 1991, Middle Eastern states concurred that Saddam could not unilaterally change the borders which the British and French basically imposed upon the region three-quarters of a century earlier. Without hesitation, Saddam was told that he could not steal a country, its assets, or liquidate his creditor. The sovereignty and territorial integrity of existing Arab states was protected; and the West was asked to be "Wyatt Earp" and enforce international law. And yet, Saddam survived, as did his nefarious production of weapons of mass destruction. He persevered. Like regimes around him, he used coercion, huge military machines, and pervasive security services to stay in power. Only with Saddam, it is blatant dictatorial rule, not benign autocracy.

Today, many in the world community could live with Saddam's voluntary abdication and Iraq's weapons controlled or destroyed. A different Iraqi regime in power, more attuned and responsive to its people's needs, would be universally accepted. No one can predict for certain what a post-Saddam Iraq will look like. The last time a major Middle Eastern leader was tossed from office-- the Shah's demise in Iran in 1979-- the unexpected occurred: another authoritarian leader emerged, however, Khomeyni wore the cleric's cloak nor Western clothes.

Something more temperate than Saddam's excesses means Arab political governance elsewhere will remain under scrutiny. Permissiveness, or turning a blind eye to those who sponsor or spread terrorism or threaten their neighbors and citizens, is being replaced by pro-active standards of behavior and pre-emptive enforcement.

Only the very naive believe that Jeffersonian democracy will emerge in a post-Saddam Iraq. But the clash with Iraq, whether he stays or goes, hastens the glacial pace of internal political change.

This is not a clash of civilizations; this is a clash about tomorrow's political behavior. While the Arab media publicly vilifies the United States for cowboy-type action against Iraq, one has to wonder how widespread is secret Arab glee for his early demise, and how discomfiting the coming clash is to regional autocratic rulers.

At Emory University in Atlanta, Professor Kenneth W. Stein teaches Middle Eastern History and Political Science.

