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MY TELNO 2641: IRAQ/KUWAIT

SUMMARY

1. RECENT STATEMENTS BY PRESIDENT BUSH AND ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS SEND CONFUSING SIGNALS TO THE US PUBLIC. HAVING STARTED THE WEEK BY TRYING TO CLARIFY HIS POLICY TOWARDS THE GULF, THE PRESIDENT ENDS IT ON THE DEFENSIVE, WITH SOME SUGGESTIONS IN THE PRESS THAT HE IS FLOUNDERING.

DETAIL

2. THE PUBLIC STATEMENTS OF PRESIDENT BUSH AND THE ADMINISTRATION ON THE GULF HAVE SPREAD CONSIDERABLE CONFUSION IN THE PAST WEEK. UNDER HEADLINES LIKE QUOTE US RAISES THE PRESSURES AND THE RISKS UNQUOTE, THE PRESIDENT HAS MADE A NUMBER OF TOUGH STATEMENTS. BUT THE THRUST HAS NOT BEEN CONSISTENT.

3. FOLLOWING A PERIOD DURING WHICH THE ADMINISTRATION WERE INCREASINGLY ALLEGED BY THE PRESS TO HAVE LOST THEIR WAY ON THEIR GULF POLICY, THE PRESIDENT STEPPED IN WITH TOUGH LANGUAGE ON 29 OCTOBER (TUR) WHICH THE PRESS WIDELY INTERPRETED AS AN ATTEMPT TO REGAIN THE INITIATIVE. ON 31 OCTOBER, THE PRESIDENT INTENSIFIED THE WAR OF WORDS. HE SAID IN VIRGINIA THAT US DIPLOMATS IN KUWAIT WERE BEING STARVED BY A BRUTAL DICTATOR:

QUOTE DO YOU THINK I'M CONCERNED ABOUT IT? YOU'RE DARN RIGHT I AM. AND WHAT AM I GOING TO DO ABOUT IT? LET'S JUST WAIT AND SEE. BECAUSE I HAVE HAD IT WITH THAT KIND OF TREATMENT OF AMERICANS AND I KNOW OTHERS FEEL THAT WAY UNQUOTE.

ON THE SAME DAY, HOWEVER, SUNUNU DECLARED ON A MORNING TALK SHOW THAT THE PRESIDENT WAS COMMITTED TO QUOTE MAKING SURE HE DOES EVERYTHING ON THE DIPLOMATIC FRONT TO AVOID HOSTILITIES UNQUOTE. THE MEDIA QUICKLY PORTRAYED THIS AS A REPLAY OF THE BUDGET DEBATE, WITH THE PRESIDENT AND HIS ADVISORS TALKING SIMULTANEOUSLY IN DIFFERENT VOICES. AN UNIDENTIFIED SENIOR

OFFICIAL WAS QUOTED AS SAYING QUOTE IT'S THE BUDGET MESS ALL OVER AGAIN: FLIP-FLOPS, A MESSAGE OUT OF CONTROL AND NOBODY IN CHARGE UNQUOTE. A WHITE HOUSE OFFICIAL IS REPORTED AS ADMITTING TO QUOTE ZIGZAGGING, BECAUSE SOMETIMES IT'S LESS A MATTER OF A GAME PLAN AND MORE A MATTER OF THE PRESIDENT'S MOODS UNQUOTE.

4. ON 1 NOVEMBER, THE PRESIDENT INSISTED THAT THE ADMINISTRATION HAD BEEN QUOTE EXTRAORDINARILY CONSISTENT ON KEY POINTS REGARDING SUBSTANCE UNQUOTE. HE ADDED QUOTE I'M NOT TRYING TO SOUND THE TOCSIN OF WAR UNQUOTE. BUT HE HAS CONTINUED TO POINT OUT HIS CONCERN OVER HOSTAGES AND HIS IMPATIENCE WITH IRAQ: QUOTE THE SAND IS RUNNING THROUGH THE GLASS UNQUOTE. DESPITE THIS, HE HAS SUGGESTED THAT HE IS NOT SENDING MIXED SIGNALS BUT CHANGING HIS EMPHASIS INTENTIONALLY, OFFERING ALTERNATELY MORE OF A CARROT AND MORE OF A STICK.

5. THE RESULT SO FAR HAS BEEN CONFUSION. THE WASHINGTON TIMES AND THE WASHINGTON POST RAN COMPETING HEADLINES ON 2 NOVEMBER. THE TIMES SAID QUOTE BUSH PREPARES THE COUNTRY FOR WAR UNQUOTE, WHILE THE POST SAID QUOTE BUSH DENIES PREPARING US FOR WAR UNQUOTE. IN ITS LEADING EDITORIAL, THE NEW YORK TIMES COMMENTED THAT IN WARNING IRAQ THAT HE WAS PREPARED TO ATTACK WHILE IN THE NEXT BREATH TELLING CONGRESS THAT US TROOPS WERE IN NO IMMEDIATE DANGER OF WAR, BUSH WAS QUOTE FLOUNDERING. HE CANNOT HAVE IT BOTH WAYS AND STILL SEND A CREDIBLE MESSAGE UNQUOTE. THIS SORT OF SHARP CRITICISM OF THE PRESIDENT'S GULF POLICY IS QUITE NEW.

COMMENT

6. THE PRESIDENT'S PROBLEM IS THAT HE HAS TO BALANCE A NUMBER OF COMPETING AIMS: HE WANTS TO REFOCUS ATTENTION ON THE GULF AFTER THE BUDGET AND TEMPLE MOUNT DIVERSIONS: HE WANTS TO KEEP SADDAM GUESSING: AND HE WANTS TO AVOID ALARMING DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL OPINION. THE RESULT IS THAT HE RISKS FALLING BETWEEN A NUMBER OF STOOLS, WITH NONE OF HIS RESPECTIVE AUDIENCES RECEIVING OR UNDERSTANDING THE MESSAGE HE IS TRYING TO TRANSMIT. ANOTHER FACTOR IS THAT THE PRESIDENT IS ACUTELY AWARE OF THE DIFFICULTIES FACED BY REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES AT THE CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS ON 6 NOVEMBER. AFTER HIS MEETING WITH CONGRESSIONAL LEADERS ON 29 OCTOBER, THE DEMOCRATS CLAIMED THAT THE PRESIDENT'S SHARP LANGUAGE WAS MOTIVATED BY ELECTORAL CONSIDERATIONS. HE HAS DENIED THIS. BUT WITH LITTLE POSITIVE TO POINT TO ON THE DOMESTIC SCENE AND IN THE WAKE OF THE DAMAGING BUDGET DEBATE, THERE IS A STRONG TEMPTATION TO FOCUS ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS. TOUGH RHETORIC PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY TO APPEAR PRESIDENTIAL AND TO HIGHLIGHT TRADITIONAL REPUBLICAN STRENGTHS.

7. THE PRESIDENT CANNOT HAVE BEEN ENCOURAGED BY THE IMMEDIATE REACTIONS. WHERE HE HAS ATTEMPTED TO CLARIFY, HE IS ACCUSED OF

EQUIVOCATION. WHERE HE HAS TAKEN A TOUGH LINE, HIS MOTIVES AND TIMING ARE WIDELY SUSPECT. WITH THE PRESIDENT SEEMING TO PLAY BOTH HIS PEACE AND WAR CARDS AT ONCE, IT MAY BE DIFFICULT FOR THE ADMINISTRATION TO CORRECT THE PUBLIC IMPRESSION OF DRIFT, CONFUSION AND INDECISION.

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