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MY TELNO 2742: IRAQ/KUWAIT

SUMMARY

1. CONTINUED CONGRESSIONAL AND PUBLIC CRITICISM OF PRESIDENT BUSH'S GULF POLICY. ADMINISTRATION CONCERNED TO COMBAT EROSION OF PUBLIC SUPPORT AND WILL NEED TO WORK HARD TO REGAIN INITIATIVE.

DETAIL

2. SINCE TUR, A COMBINATION OF OUTSPOKEN CONGRESSIONAL REACTIONS TO THE DEPLOYMENT OF ADDITIONAL FORCES TO THE GULF AND AN APPARENT EROSION OF PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR ADMINISTRATION POLICY HAS INCREASED THE DOMESTIC PRESSURES ON PRESIDENT BUSH. SENIOR CONGRESSIONAL LEADERS HAVE MADE INCREASINGLY CLEAR THAT THEY EXPECT TO BE FULLY CONSULTED AND THEIR APPROVAL SOUGHT BY THE WHITE HOUSE IN ADVANCE OF ANY OFFENSIVE ACTION BY US FORCES. SENATOR NUNN (D-GEORGIA) HAS SUGGESTED THAT THE ADMINISTRATION ARE MOVING TOO QUICKLY TOWARDS THE USE OF FORCE. SENATOR MOYNIHAN (D-NEW YORK) HAS ACCUSED THE ADMINISTRATION OF MOVING TOWARDS WAR WITHOUT EITHER ALLOWING ENOUGH TIME FOR SANCTIONS TO BITE OR PROVIDING AN ADEQUATE EXPLANATION OF US INTENTIONS. EVEN SENATOR LUGAR, A SENIOR REPUBLICAN ON THE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE, HAS RECOMMENDED THAT THE PRESIDENT CALL CONGRESS BACK INTO SESSION TO DEBATE A DECLARATION OF WAR AGAINST IRAQ, ALTHOUGH BOTH MITCHELL AND ASPIN HAVE RULED OUT RECALLING CONGRESS FOR THE MOMENT.

3. CRITICISM EXTENDS BEYOND CONGRESS. THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS HAVE URGED THE US TO PRESS IRAQ FOR A NON-VIOLENT SOLUTION: FAILING THAT, TO WAGE ONLY QUOTE LIMITED WAR UNQUOTE, SPARING CIVILIANS. THE MEDIA HAVE ALSO COMMENTED ON THE GROWTH OF AN UNUSUAL COALITION OF LEFT AND RIGHT, UNSEEN SINCE THE EVE OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR, AND UNITED ONLY IN QUESTIONING THE PRESIDENT'S GULF POLICY.

WHILE SUCH A GROUPING - SOCIALISTS AND LIBERALS, ARDENT CONSERVATIVES, RELIGIOUS GROUPS AND SOME MEMBERS OF CONGRESS - IS INHERENTLY UNSTABLE, WITH BOTH THEIR FOCUS AND IMPACT UNPREDICTABLE OVER THE LONGER TERM, IT PROVIDES FURTHER EVIDENCE THAT THE ADMINISTRATION HAVE SURRENDERED THE INITIATIVE IN THE PUBLIC PRESENTATION OF POLICY.

4. SO FAR THERE IS LITTLE OUTRIGHT OPPOSITION TO US MILITARY ACTION. WHILE MANY REMAIN UNDECIDED ON THE QUESTION OF WHETHER US INTERESTS ARE SUFFICIENTLY AT RISK IN THE GULF TO WARRANT HEAVY LOSS OF AMERICAN LIVES TO DEFEND THEM, THE CONCERN AT THIS STAGE IS RATHER MORE THAT THE ADMINISTRATION APPEAR TO BE MOVING TOWARDS WAR WITHOUT A THOROUGH TESTING EITHER OF CONGRESSIONAL OR PUBLIC OPINION. RESTON, THE VETERAN COLUMNIST SAYS IN THE NEW YORK TIMES OF 13 NOVEMBER THAT HE IS HEARING QUOTE A LOT OF PEOPLE HOPING THE PRESIDENT WILL THINK BEFORE HE JUMPS. TO SAY MY PRESIDENT RIGHT OR WRONG IN THE PRESENT CRISIS IS A LITTLE LIKE SAYING MY DRIVER, DRUNK OR SOBER, AND NOT MANY PASSENGERS LIKE TO GO THAT FAR UNQUOTE. MEANWHILE, PUBLIC OPINION APPEARS TO BE UNDECIDED. THE LATEST POLL (13 NOVEMBER) SHOWS 51 PER CENT APPROVAL FOR BUSH'S HANDLING OF THE CRISIS, SHARPLY DOWN FROM THE 82 PER CENT APPROVAL RATING IN AUGUST.

5. THE DEBATE CONTINUES TO HIGHLIGHT THE IMPORTANCE OF THE UN DIMENSION (PARA 5 OF TUR) AND THE POLITICAL COVER THAT AN APPROPRIATE RESOLUTION WOULD PROVIDE. WHILE THE ADMINISTRATION REMAIN CLEAR THAT ARTICLE 51 PROVIDES ALL NECESSARY LEGAL COVER, THEY SEE THE POTENTIAL FOR A UN RESOLUTION - ASSUMING IT IS ACHIEVED WITHOUT MAJOR DIVISIONS IN THE SECURITY COUNCIL - IN STEADYING PUBLIC AND CONGRESSIONAL OPINION.

6. THE ADMINISTRATION ARE FULLY CONSCIOUS OF THESE CONGRESSIONAL, PUBLIC AND INTERNATIONAL FACTORS AND ARE CONCERNED BY THE SLIDE IN DOMESTIC SUPPORT. THEY RECOGNISE THAT THEY WILL HAVE TO WORK HARD TO REGAIN THE PUBLIC RELATIONS INITIATIVE. IN A DIRECT RESPONSE TO CONGRESSIONAL CONCERNS, THE WHITE HOUSE SPOKESMAN SAID ON 12 NOVEMBER THAT THE PRESIDENT WOULD FOLLOW THE CONSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENTS AND WOULD WANT TO CONSULT WITH CONGRESS EVERY STEP OF THE WAY. HOW FAR BUSH TAKES THIS PROCESS OF CONSULTATION WILL HOWEVER NO DOUBT PARTLY DEPEND ON HIS CALCULATION OF THE EXTENT TO WHICH SUCH CONSULTATION WOULD HELP OR HINDER HIS FREEDOM OF ACTION.

7. THE WHITE HOUSE IS ALSO ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM OF CLARIFYING AND ARTICULATING ADMINISTRATION OBJECTIVES. THE PRESIDENT'S THANKSGIVING SPEECH TO THE NATION FROM THE GULF WILL BE IMPORTANT. NSC SOURCES HAVE TOLD US THAT IT WILL BE LESS A QUESTION OF SAYING SOMETHING NEW THAN OF PUTTING US OBJECTIVES IN TERMS WHICH PUBLIC OPINION CAN UNDERSTAND AND ACCEPT. THAT SAID, WE ARE TOLD THAT ADDITIONAL EMPHASIS WILL PROBABLY BE PLACED ON TWO OBJECTIVES THAT HAVE NOT SO FAR BEEN EXPLICITLY STATED:

- Point, when you have made for the beginning.*
- I) THAT IT IS VITAL TO US NATIONAL INTERESTS TO PREVENT A DICTATOR LIKE SADDAM FROM CONTROLLING THE FREE WORLD'S ECONOMIC LIFELINE:
 - II) THAT A RETURN TO THE STATUS QUO ANTE IS UNACCEPTABLE, IN TERMS OF IRAQ'S MILITARY CAPABILITIES BEING LEFT UNCONSTRAINED.

MEANWHILE, IN A SPEECH IN ALABAMA ON 12 NOVEMBER, GENERAL POWELL (CHAIRMAN, JOINT CHIEFS) CAREFULLY EXPLAINED THE REASONS FOR US MILITARY INTERVENTION IN THE GULF, AND REFERRED TO ECONOMIC INTERESTS AND TO REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY. THIS IS THE FIRST STATEMENT OF THE THEMES IN (I) AND (II) ABOVE THAT THE PRESIDENT WILL NEED TO AMPLIFY AND PROMOTE.

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