



IRAQ CRISIS

Americans deeply divided over Bush speech

AP, Washington

As Molly Tipton listened to President Bush's message to the nation, she found herself agreeing with parts of it. But she still sees the prospect of war with Iraq as scary.

"I understand that it needs to be done, but I hope it can get done as safely as possible and I hope it can get done as quickly as possible," the 19-year-old college freshman from Owosso, Michigan, said Monday night after the president's speech.

Tipton was among millions of Americans who watched Bush's televised ultimatum as he set a 48-hour deadline for Saddam Hussein to leave his country or face military action.

Some of those who listened to Bush's speech still had reservations about a US military invasion of Iraq, while others said it's time to topple the Iraqi dictator.

"He seemed resolved in light of 9-11 that this is a threat and he doesn't want to wait on the smoking gun," Ron DeBlanc, a pastor from Fairborn, Ohio, said of Bush. "I agree with that. He's got to protect the nation."

Virginia Hodges, 49, an account executive from Ridgeland, Miss., also said Saddam must be ousted to prevent future terrorist attacks. "We are just sitting targets," she said.

But others remained unconvinced.

Maurice Foster, a 20-year-old political science major at Alabama State University in Montgomery, said he didn't believe Bush made his case.

"It seems like he's thinking about what's in the best interest of the United States," Foster said, "but has failed to consider the rest of the world, and I think he should have taken that into consideration."

Jessica Robinson, 18, of Wooster, Mass., among a crowd of 100 people clustered around a man holding a radio in Times Square in New York, felt the president was trying to deflect attention from the nation's domestic problems.

"I think President Bush is just trying to think of something to take away from what's going right now in our own country - unemployment - and taking away money from education and putting it into war," she said.

A CNN-USA Today-Gallup poll released Monday showed the American public generally supports Bush's plan to oust Saddam. The survey found that 57 percent think the president has made a convincing case about the need for military action against Iraq.

Opinion was almost evenly divided when people were questioned about an attack without an attempt to gain UN

support.

Some of those gathered around television sets Monday night worried about the impact of a war on the Iraqi people -- as well as the US troops and Muslims in the United States.

"Certainly, we don't sympathise with Saddam Hussein," said retired research economist Monzer Kahf, who emigrated from Syria in 1971 and now lives in Westminster, Calif. "The real worry is the people in the area. The whole area is going to be inflamed. It doesn't take a match to burn it. It's already burning."

But Iraqi native Casey Mahbuba, who emigrated to the United States in 1992, said he looks forward to the day when the Iraqi dictator is gone.

"We don't care what happens to him," he said as he watched the president's speech with friends in Dearborn, Michigan, home to one of the largest Iraqi populations in the nation. "We don't care if he disappears. We don't care if he dies. I just want to wake up in the morning and have there be no Saddam Hussein."

Leona Hersh, 88, a retired homemaker, watched with 50 senior citizens at The Palace, an independent living community in Miami, and came away thinking Bush was on target in his description of Saddam.



PHOTO: THE NEW YORK TIMES

Fearing a chemical attack, Kurdish civilians began fleeing their homes in cities along the front lines with the Iraqi Army in northern Iraq.

Thousands of Kurds flee front-line cities

THE NEW YORK TIMES, Hamchamal

Kurdish civilians began fleeing cities or safeguarding homes today along the front lines with the Iraqi Army in northern Iraq, saying that as war draws near they feared a conventional or chemical attack from Saddam Hussein.

Crowded into taxis and buses, riding in trailers behind tractors, or simply piled into cars, they formed lines on the highways, seeking what they hoped would be safety in villages out of range of Iraqi artillery.

The exodus was apparent in the cities of Kifri, Kalar, and Dohuk, as well as in this city of 60,000 people, which sits just under a ridge occupied by Iraqi soldiers.

"We are afraid of chemical weapons, we are afraid of the tanks, we are afraid of the artillery," said Faizulla Karim Rahman, 66, a retired policeman who was moving 10 family members from Chamchamal. "We are going to a village away from here."

In Erbil, the largest city in northern Iraq, thousands fled during the

day. The withdrawal was marked by anxiety but not panic. Pickup trucks and station wagons bursting with children, clothing and food dotted the streets. Mile-long lines for gasoline snaked down avenues.

By late afternoon, nervous residents were also making a run on plastic sheeting for use against a chemical attack. Some said they would remain behind.

"We will use the plastic and stay in our home," said Infida Hussein, a schoolteacher who was searching for fast-selling plastic. "Fear is everywhere."

The last-minute preparations in the anticipated battle area came as diplomacy stalled at the United Nations and President Bush was expected to deliver an ultimatum to Mr. Hussein in a televised speech.

Already, tensions between Kurdish and Turkish officials have increased markedly over whose forces will take control of the oil-rich cities of Kirkuk and Mosul once the Iraqis are driven out. Both the Kurds and the Turks have massed soldiers and weaponry along the border between Iraq and

Turkey.

News media here have reported fully on the stalled diplomacy and the mounting regional tensions, also palpable on the Iraqi-Kurdish front.

In the last two weeks, the Iraqi Army has prepared new bunkers and trench lines on the ridge above this city.

Kurdish civilians have also watched a swelling number of Kurds fleeing from areas of Iraq controlled by Mr. Hussein, many arriving with tales of an Iraqi security crackdown in Kirkuk. The crackdown, they said, was aimed at rounding up suspected Kurdish underground members who are suspected of plotting uprisings inside Iraq.

As many as 675 Kurds fleeing Kirkuk have arrived in this city in recent days, according to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, which controls the eastern zone here. Northern Iraq, now administered by Kurds and largely under the protection of American and British aircraft, de facto seceded from Mr. Hussein's Iraq in 1991.



PHOTO: AFP

Leader of the House of Commons Robin Cook responds to Foreign Secretary Jack Straw at the House of Commons on Monday. Robin Cook resigned from the cabinet in protest to military action in Iraq.

'It is wrong to embark on military action without international support'

Extracts from Robin Cook's letter to Tony Blair

THE GUARDIAN, London

'At cabinet for some weeks I have been frank about my concern over embarking on military action in the absence of multilateral support. I applaud the heroic efforts that you and Jack (Straw) have put into the attempt to secure a second resolution at the UN.

It is not your fault that those attempts have failed. However, the evident importance that we attached to a second resolution makes it all the more difficult now to proceed without one, and without agreement in any other international forum.

As I cannot give my support to military action in these circum-

stances, I write with regret to resign. You and I have both made the case over the years for an international order based on multilateral decisions through the UN and other forums. In principle I believe it is wrong to embark on military action without broad international support. In practice I believe it is against Britain's interests to create a precedent for unilateral military action.

As your foreign secretary I was impressed by the energy and skill with which you ended Britain's isolation in Europe and achieved for our country equal status and influence to Germany or France. I am dismayed that once again Britain is divided from our major

European neighbours. As president of the Party of European Socialists... it troubles me that I know of no sister party within the European Union that shares our position.

I... am proud of the real achievements of your government. Among those many achievements, I take particular satisfaction from our record on delivering devolution, investing in hospitals and tackling poverty among children.

All of these have only been made possible by your successful leadership and two record election victories, which were your personal achievement.'

US opposition promise full support to troops

AFP, Washington

The Congressional leaders of the opposition Democratic party late Monday pledged unanimous support for US troops in the event of war against Iraq.

If US President George W. Bush decides "that force is the only remaining option to disarm Saddam Hussein, Democrats and Republicans will be unanimous in our strong support for our troops and for ensuring that they have all the tools and resources needed to be successful," said Senate Minority Leader Thomas Daschle in a statement.

Daschle added that if an anticipated US-led war does break out, "it is important that we continue diplomacy to pull together the broadest coalition to aid our efforts during and after the military conflict."

Daschle however noted that the United States "will need the support of our allies to rebuild Iraq once Saddam's regime is toppled."

He urged the US administration to "begin working immediately with the United Nations and our friends around the world to delineate the principles that will guide our reconstruction efforts."

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi described Bush's speech -- in which he gave Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein 48 hours to leave power or face an invasion -- as a "somber statement."

"Like many Americans, I have raised questions about whether military action at this time is the best way to disarm Saddam Hussein and whether we have exhausted every other alternative," Pelosi said.

Protesters plan instant rally after attack

THE GUARDIAN, London

Britain will be brought to a temporary standstill by waves of protests, rallies, sit-ins, strikes, occupations, civil disobedience and people taking personal direct action within hours of the first bombers heading for Iraq, claim peace campaigners.

The Stop the War coalition, which organised the London march of more than 1 million people in February, says the mood of quiet determination that marked protests a month ago is changing to one of anger. "People are furious. They believe the war is illegal and unnecessary. Large numbers can be expected to take direct action once it starts," said a spokesman, Chris Nineham.

The coalition is urging local demonstrations in every community on the afternoon and evening immediately after the bombing of Iraq starts, followed by a national rally in London the following Saturday. "We are expecting people to stop everything," Mr Nineham said.

The coalition admits to not knowing precisely what actions many groups and individuals are

planning but anticipates chaos in every city and disruptive demonstrations in many smaller towns. "It's hotting up. People have said they intend to sit down in streets, occupy roundabouts, go slow on motorways, block bridges, walk out of offices, and do whatever they can to stop Britain in its tracks. We expect university campuses to be occupied, and thousands of schoolchildren have pledged to stage sit-ins or demand debates. This is all unprecedented political action."

Some of the largest demonstrations are expected in central London, where tens of thousands of people are expected to go to Parliament Square on the first evening after war starts.

Others have suggested they will try to barricade the Ministry of Defence and government buildings including 10 Downing Street, and go to the US embassy in Grosvenor Square.

Demonstrations on Saturday have been planned for some time at military bases including RAF Fairford in Gloucestershire, where US warplanes have been based, and at RAF Fylingdales in Yorkshire.

What went wrong?

BBC NEWS ONLINE

The collapse of efforts by the United States and Britain to get clear Security Council support for a war against Iraq is the most serious diplomatic failure in a long time.

And yet late last summer, when they embarked on the United Nations route, it had looked promising.

Both governments produced dossiers that provided evidence that Iraq had begun to make chemical and biological weapons again, and had even restarted its attempt to make a nuclear bomb since the departure of weapons inspectors in late 1998.

After lengthy negotiations, the Security Council passed by unanimous vote a demand that Iraq disarm and cooperate with the inspectors.

Then it began to go wrong. It turned out that resolution 1441 was subject to differing interpretations.

Britain and the United States said that it by itself allowed for military action but France and Russia, joined by Germany, said that it did not.

Washington and London then made a big mistake. They underestimated the French.

France not only believed that inspections were working. It suspected the Americans of simply wanting Council backing for regime change in Iraq, and saw the American approach as symptomatic of their new hegemony and something that had to be challenged.

Britain made another mistake in pressing for a second resolution.

This was something Tony Blair felt he needed to head off domestic criticism. He unwisely predicted success. The Americans went along with him grudgingly.

The British dossier had contained an alarming claim that Iraq had tried to acquire uranium from an African country despite not having a civilian nuclear programme.

The UN inspectors managed

to establish that the claim was based on forged documents. Collapse of case.

Another suspicious consignment, of thousands of aluminium tubes, thought to be for uranium enrichment, was accepted by the inspectors to be for the manufacture of rockets.

Then another document produced by the British Government about the evils of Saddam Hussein turned out to have been based on a student's thesis.

The thesis was not necessarily wrong but it had not been credited. Collapse of document.

Most damaging of all, the inspectors made progress and did not find any of the weapons of mass destruction the dossiers had said were there.

Even a presentation by the US Secretary of State Colin Powell to the Security Council proved unconvincing. He produced photographs and even audio tapes but failed to make a decisive impact.

Nor did he convince everyone that there were links between Iraq and al-Qaeda.

He did not appear to throw himself into the fray, failing to travel much even though votes and support were urgently needed.

He failed to get Turkish approval for the use of bases there for an invasion from northern Iraq

And throughout all this, the inspectors were not finding illegal ammunition.

Instead they were giving political ammunition to France and the other critics by reporting some progress. The French logic was that inspections should therefore continue.

In vain did Britain and the US argue that Saddam could not be trusted. Nor could they dispel the



PHOTO: AFP

British Prime Minister Tony Blair (L) and US President George W. Bush are seen upon arrival in Portugal's mid-Atlantic Azores islands, 16 March 2003.

Demand for arms goes high in Baghdad

WASHINGTON POST FOREIGN SERVICE, Baghdad

With a crash, Nahad Shukur slammed down a plastic bag stuffed with rounds for an AK-47 assault rifle on the display case of his gun shop. There are 50 in here, he said, but more are available if you need them.

Shukur pointed to a row of eight bags behind the counter and ticked off the offerings: 100 rounds in this plastic bag and 200 in that one. In the rainbow-coloured bag were 500 rounds and in the other one, 1,000. He paused, then, with a knowing glance, waved a visitor to a back room.

"These are the big ones," he said, grinning, as he pointed to a lumpy bag sprawled across the floor with 2,000 rounds. "When customers come, we're ready, whatever they want. The way things are, we don't even have time to count."

As the veneer of calm fades across Baghdad, Iraqis are emptying gun stores of their weapons, stocking up on ammunition whose price has gone up fourfold and repairing everything from World War I-vintage rifles to the latest in double-barrelled Czech shotguns. At Shukur's store, many shelves were bare after what he said was a run of hundreds of customers since the weekend.

"Every day we get closer to war, we sell more," said Shukur, drinking sweet lemon tea as he showed his wares to a crowd of customers in the working-class neighbourhood of Bayaa. "It's nonstop, all day. Families are buying guns like they are stockpiling food and water."

For weeks, Baghdad maintained an almost eerie tranquillity. Residents continue to boast of their ability to endure a U.S. attack. But the run on the gun stores that dot upscale neighbourhoods such as Mansour and working-class enclaves such as Bayaa provides a hint of the anxiety that courses beneath the surface.

In public, and in the presence of government escorts, Iraqis make clear that the US military is their target.



PHOTO: THE WASHINGTON POST

Brick masons build a wall in front of display windows at a furniture store to prevent possible looting if war breaks out.