

JANUARY 24, 2003

Memo to Washington: When war is a rush

To: Washington's most powerful people

OK, let's review the main points. A basic PR problem remains. While you're in a hurry to launch an all-out war on Iraq, the main obstacle is that a large majority of Americans don't feel the rush. Uncle Sam's usual carrots and sticks have a long way to go at the U.N. Security Council. The big disappointment of January is that some key allies haven't caved yet.

No need to belabor the recent polling numbers. Newsweek did a national sampling of opinion midway through the month, and you went into a funk when you read the Associated Press summary: "Most Americans want the United States to take more time seeking a peaceful solution in Iraq rather than moving quickly into a military confrontation."

The next sentence was even more cautionary: "By 60 percent to 35 percent, people in the Newsweek poll ... said they would prefer that the Bush administration allow more time to find an alternative to war." And, what's more, "a majority would be opposed should this country act without the support of the United Nations and had no more than one or two allies."

But before you panic at the specter of peace breaking out, take a long cold look at another finding: "Support for a military option would be strong, 81 percent, if the United States were to act with full allied support and the backing of the U.N. Security Council." Such full support and backing is likely to be unnecessary. At home, appreciable war fever is available for inflammation below the surface, and an initial large majority of domestic public opinion will not be needed to get the war job done.

It may be possible to chip away at recalcitrant citizens by portraying the obstinate allies as mischievous or worse. Some media coverage has been apt. A quiet cheer is in order for your friends at The Washington Post, where strong editorial support for a righteous war often runs parallel with news articles. When the Post recently reported on its front page that France signaled plans to "wage a major diplomatic fight, including possible use of its veto power" on the Security Council, the newspaper

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informed readers that France and other balking countries had just engaged in “a diplomatic version of an ambush.”

An undertone of allied flirtation with treachery is a helpful media spin at a critical moment. It provides a wisp of underdog status for American diplomats as they salvage what support they can and preen themselves as courageous global visionaries — a posture that can augur well for the aftermath to a State of the Union text swaddling the president’s war cries in oodles of lofty rhetoric.

The cabinet and sub-cabinet heavy hitters naturally pile on with a renewed blitz of network talk shows. One way or another, they explain that the USA’s war train is leaving the station, and other nations would do well to hop on board.

Not many pundits emphasize that the war dealers in Washington have, as an ace in the hole, the ability to begin large-scale bloodshed and then let the devil take the hindmost. When warfare becomes a fait accompli — with high-tech missiles suddenly flying and with American soldiers killing and even dying — the public’s numbers quickly shift away from antiwar sentiment (at least for a while). It’s not necessary to consolidate a supportive majority before war gets rolling. It’s sufficient to have enough people cowed and numbed so that opposition to starting the war stays within tolerable bounds.

As thoroughly modern masters of war, you comprehend the captivating power of television to simultaneously mesmerize and anesthetize. Once the Pentagon’s carefully screened video clips are streaming onto TV sets in wartime, a kind of intoxication sets in; the journalists seem to feel the rush, and they pass it along. The media pace is frenetic, with adrenaline pumping; the new conditions of carnage are exactly suitable to play to the U.S. government’s unrivaled strength — its capacity to inflict massive and overpowering violence. And, helped along by media spin, most people back home can be induced to revere the inevitable winner.

“A conqueror is always a lover of peace,” the Prussian general Karl von Clausewitz remarked two centuries ago. The more you yearn to launch a war, the more you must strive to burnish your image as someone who craves peace.

On your terms, of course. ■