

# The danger of politics by illusion

By Michael A. Weinstein

The tangled web of rhetoric that has billowed up in the wake of the Iraqi attack on the USS Stark in the Persian Gulf indicates a more serious failure in national policy than is evidenced by a single tragic event.

For more than 20 years, since Lyndon Johnson executed his ill-conceived policy of "guns and butter" in order to prosecute the Vietnam War and at the same time satisfy the social and economic demands of emergent groups, politics as usual has been ruled by the pleasing illusion that we can have our cake and eat it too.

Only Jimmy Carter challenged the dominant myth. He received instant unpopularity for announcing the truth that life isn't fair and for preaching the wisdom of acknowledging limits. Ronald Reagan swept into the presidency in 1980, proclaiming the belief that all we have to do is to wish hard enough for what we want and we'll get it. The Reagan fantasy was far more appealing to the electorate than were Carter's home truths. In 1984 it was more seductive than Walter Mondale's suggestion that it might be prudent to consider raising taxes.

Now we are entering a new period of national life in which we will run up against the limits to which many of us have tried to blind ourselves through the 1980s. The Stark incident is especially exemplary of the danger of politics by illusion because questions of life and death, and of what principles people will live by, are directly at stake.

Having one's cake and eating it too has meant, in the Iran-Iraq war, adopting a public pose of neutrality and, for the most part, giving valuable intelligence aid to Iraq. Such a weak policy was bound to be counterproductive because it offered the United States no leverage over Iran and did not do enough for Iraq to persuade it to take account of American interests.

A weak policy reacts thoughtlessly to outside pressure. In the Persian Gulf war, the United States has reacted to Israeli opposition to Iraq by dealing with Iran, and to Saudi and Kuwaiti hostility to Iran by helping Iraq. We have been used shamelessly by our

so-called allies in the region to no effect but to worsen the situation and to lose our credibility and respect. This is not the way a great power should comport itself; it is the behavior of a querulous giant who is too protective of his present comfort to make hard choices and intelligent sacrifices.

Our reactive policy in the Gulf war has finally produced some very unfortunate consequences. Despite all of the inquiries that will be conducted, we will probably never find out just what lay behind the attack on the Stark. But we can be sure that, intentionally or not, Iraq has forced our hand. Through a grisly irony, by firing Exocet missiles at our ship, the Iraqis have compelled us to come out on their side in the most public and visible way.

The rhetoric surrounding this affair becomes tangled and Aesopian in the scramble to rationalize contradictions. Faced with an alarmed public opinion, the administration has been forced to choose, rewarding Iraq for its dreadful mistake, if indeed it was a mistake. It seems never to have occurred to our reactive policymakers that we could be coerced to show our cards by what amounts to an enormous Iraqi bluff.

There is nothing that the Iraqi regime, which represses a war-weary people, would like better than to involve the United States on its side without having to pay any of the costs of alliance. American flagging of Kuwaiti tankers plays directly into Iraq's hand and satisfies the Arab oil states. The possibility of a replay of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, which began the Vietnam War, becomes more probable than it was before, but that does not trouble the oil states. It should disturb us.

Iran is not powerless to endanger American interests in the Middle East. Already, guerrillas under the control of the Shiite Hezbollah Party, which is linked to Iran, have attacked the Christian enclave set up by Israel in southern Lebanon, causing a major Israeli military response.

The cross-cutting and divided interests of the parties to conflict in the Middle East create conditions of extreme instability without any clear pattern to guide an American commitment. The Stark incident shows that it is perilous for the United States to pursue a weak and reactive policy in the region. Until we get an administration that is thoughtful enough to develop, through patient debate and analysis, a prudent policy that protects our interest in a regional balance of power, we would be best advised to have our cake of neutrality and to refrain from gorging ourselves on it.

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