Jim Hoagland

The Pebble on Which Thatcher Slipped

PARIS—Gianni De Michelis is a European with ambitions as grand as his waistline, which is in the late Orson Welles-early Luciano Pavarotti league. But the Italian foreign minister did not suspect that a small rock he helped dislodge a few weeks ago would touch off an avalanche that would sweep Margaret Thatcher from office and change the course of European politics.

De Michelis pleads not guilty when I suggest to him in conversation here that he and Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti set out to isolate Thatcher at the Rome European Community summit in October. "We told her we had [German] Chancellor [Helmut] Kohl's agreement and that she should bring Britain in," the agile Venetian says with the faintest of smiles. "She wouldn't. She isolated herself."

Typical Italian understatement. Thatcher immolated herself. She angrily rejected the Italian-designed plan accepted in Rome by Britain's 11 European Community partners to form a unified central banking system by 1994 and a blueprint for political union. With the rock slide under way, Thatcher ignored her advisers and continued to lash out at De Michelis, Andreotti and assorted "Europeanists" in England after she returned to London. That was finally enough for "the dead sheep."

"Britain can change Europe as much as Europe can change Britain."

An opponent once observed that being attacked by the seemingly mild-mannered Sir Geoffrey Howe was like being savaged by a dead sheep. That line unfairly clung to Sir Geoffrey until two weeks ago. Then he rose in Parliament to resign as deputy prime minister and to deliver a devastating denunciation of "the very real tragedy" of Thatcher's anti-European unity policies.

That set the stage for Michael Heseltine's challenge and Thatcher's forced departure. Tomorrow the avalanche is due to come to an end with the selection by Conservative members of Parliament of a successor to Thatcher. Whether the new Tory leader is Heseltine, Douglas Hurd or John Major, Britain is now certain to draw closer to Europe than it would have under Thatcher.

Bad news for the special relationship between Washington and London? Not really. The Bush administration has been quietly encouraging Britain to get inside the EC tent and fight rather than stand outside and hurl insults. The EC will be able to draw on Britain's strong traditions of parliamentary democracy and free trade as it goes about drawing up continental institutions for the next century.

Depending on her mood and audience, Thatcher had dismissed the idea of European institutions as fanciful fairy tales or as dangerous leftist behemoths that would crush the British monarchy and parliament. Her Conservative Party rivals increasingly disbelieved and then discredited those visions.

They saw a dynamic new EC coming into being that would marginalize London's banks and financial markets if Britain stays out. They saw that they could help keep Eurocratic central planners from becoming the dominant forces in the community. Britain can change Europe as much as Europe can change Britain—if it moves now.

Kohl is preparing a major push for expanding the powers of the European Parliament and making it the core of a European political community. This is the quid pro quo Kohl wants from his partners for his agreement to the 1994 start for the centralized banking system.

Re-enter De Michelis, a member of the Italian Socialist party, to suggest to us why: "Helmut Kohl knows that he will be the leader of Europe when Europe exists politically. The German chancellor is also the head of the most important political grouping, the Christian Democrats, in the community. Key decisions are going to be made at the party level, both in the European Parliament or in governments."

That is, all politics is local. The Germans have experience with a strong party and parliamentary system and can expect to dominate the new European political system. Not so accidentally, the Italians are also ruled by a coalition led by the Christian Democrats and know a lot about running party machines and parliamentary governments.

The chief resistance to such a strong EC parliament will come from France, which lacks both Christian Democrats as an organized force and a strong parliamentary system. The French will press to keep power in the hands of the EC heads of state, meeting as a group, and the Community's Commission.

Post-Thatcher Britain could be a counterweight to France in the gathering debate over dividing power between the parliament and the executive. Later, Italy would presumably find a constructively engaged Britain useful in balancing off Germany in the parliament.

De Michelis states the goals of the December EC summit that he and Andreotti will host in Rome far more modestly and elliptically than that. But as Margaret Thatcher discovered, this Italian is good at rolling small rocks a long way and making big noises.

Lionel Rosenblatt

Horror in Liberia

African Hospitality, American Indifference

As a veteran observer of refugees in Southeast Asia, I was prepared to see more suffering when I went to West Africa to assess conditions for Liberian refugees. Like almost all refugees, the Liberians brought little with them except tales of horror—the kind of atrocities I had not encountered since listening to accounts of Cambodian refugees who fled the murderous Khmer Rouge regime more than a decade ago.

Sometimes the terror in Liberia is random: villages burned, inhabitants massacred. Sometimes the terror is dreadfully focused, as in the instance of a young woman who told us how her brother had pleaded for her life, saying to take his instead; his captors obliged, killed him before her eyes and then let her go on to a lifetime of nightmares.

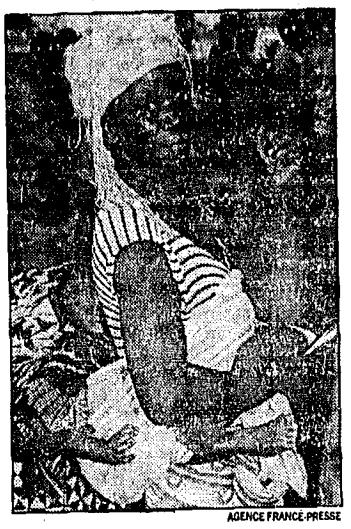
I found two things astonishing about the Liberian situation and its refugees—the hospitality of neighboring countries and the apparent willingness of the United States and the international community to tolerate continued violence in Liberia, which indiscriminately generates more dead, more wounded and more displaced.

The problem is large and growing—more than half a million Liberians have fled to the neighboring countries of Sierra Leone, Guinea and the Ivory Coast. Counting those displaced inside Liberia, half of the country is homeless, which may be the current world record for displacement.

Yet there are no refugee camps. Hospitality for those who manage to flee across the border is given by villagers in neighboring countries. To see this personal generosity is deeply moving—an extraordinary willingness of those who have little to share with those who bring nothing. In effect, the villagers were the sole international donors to Liberian refugees until the slow-moving relief machinery began to respond months after the first refugees fled.

The advantages of living in a village environment instead of confinement in a refugee camp are great. Village life permits dignity and freedom of movement, not possible in the confinement of a camp and at a much lower cost. The refugees may be poorer than those in Southeast Asia, but their daily existence is immeasurably better. It is now past time for the international community to reimburse the front-line village hosts. Yet the rice and other food now finally being distributed in these villages goes to refugees only.

An international appeal for aid to some



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200,000 villagers in Guinea to replenish their food supplies has received only scant international support. One hopes that the United States will lead the way in generating the overdue response to this appeal.

If it is time to recompense the villagers of the neighboring countries. It is also time to encourage an end to the fighting in Liberia. Even before the Gulf crisis the United States apparently decided to sit on the sidelines rather than seek a settlement in the Liberian civil war.

Where are the voices for a more responsive approach to Liberia?

There is bitterness among the Liberian refugees toward all factions, but there especially is grief that the United States—long a special patron of Liberia's since freed slaves returned there from America—has failed to play a strong role to end hostilities. Officials in Guinea and the Ivory Coast, as well as U:S. diplomats in the two countries, believe that active U.S. intervention months ago could have saved hundreds, perhaps thousands of lives.

It is now time to put other solutions in place. Though the cease-fire engineered by Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen in late September lasted only days, this peacemaking attempt does show the potential for constructive U.S. involvement.

What is needed from the United States is a presidential push for a settlement in Liberia, starting with a new cease-fire. Perhaps a U.N. peacekeeping component could be added. U.N. Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar should appoint a high level representative immediately. But with the African group at the United Nations split, the secretary general can only move ahead with support from major powers like the United States.

Where are the voices in and out of government for a more responsive approach to Liberia? Those in Congress who follow Africa—including the Black Caucus—have been generally passive. Meanwhile, the media continue to allow the Gulf to dominate their radar screens.

While pressing for a more effective U.S. approach to the Liberian civil war, we should encourage recent, belated U.S. actions to get food to Liberia. Starvation is looming. As helpless as the Liberian refugees are, they never forget to remind a visitor of the need to get food to their brethren back home and the imperative to stop the fighting. Obstacles to increased food delivery need to be addressed: maritime carriers must be insured, the interdiction of food must be ended and the facilitation of distribution on the ground improved. These problems are soluble and the world should be doing more than watching Liberia starve.

One last problem: Why is it so difficult for those Liberians with relatives and other close ties to the United States to get non-immigrant visas? Thousands of Liberians have been granted the right to remain indefinitely in the United States until conditions improve at home. This should be extended to those close family members who arrived after July, and the State Department should instruct our embassies to interpret the visa law flexibly and humanely.

It is unconscionable that the United States and the international community are not acting more effectively on Liberia across-the-board—inside the country, along its borders and at ours.

The writer, executive director of Refugees International, recently visited Liberian refugees in Guinea and the Ivory Coast.

William Raspberry

Americans Don't Want War

The Bush administration will be trying this week to win U.N. Security Council endorsement for a military strike to force Saddam Hussein's occupying forces out of Kuwait. Better the president should be seeking international *participation* in such an adventure. A Security Council go-ahead would only intensify his dilemma.

The dilemma is this: He has boxed himself into a corner where war is becoming his sole credible alternative, and the American people don't want war.

So far he has been able to avoid the implications of the dilemma, because Saddam doesn't want war either. But Bush seems to believe that time is on the side of the Iraqi, who not only is spared the problem of girding for a war halfway around the world but is also free of the necessity to win popular support for his actions. Moreover, Saddam knows that we don't want war.

Thus he is likely to discount any Security Council resolution as he has discounted the initial deployment of U.S. forces to defend Saudi Arabia and the subsequent augmentation that transformed America's gulf presence into a potential offensive force. Why should he pay attention to the buildup, whether of troops, armaments or diplomacy, if he believes that we won't fight?

Suppose the Security Council passes the war-authorizing resolution. Bush would hardly order an attack (absent some further Iraqi provocation) without seeking the approval of Congress. But if he thought Congress would approve a war against Iraq—even for the limited purpose of liberating Kuwait—he would already have summoned the legislators back to Washington for that purpose.

You know that, and so does Saddam.

It isn't that Americans are too chicken to fight or that they fear losing to the Iraqi despot. The problem is that all the reasons Bush has offered for going to war if all else fails do not strike the American people as sufficient justification for launching one.

Oil? We're getting all we need, though the price is higher than we'd like. World order? No one believes that the world—particularly Saddam's part of it—will be an orderly place even if Iraq is defeated. Jobs? Secretary of State James Baker's notion that Iraq's invasion of Kuwait is, at bottom, a threat to America jobs and therefore worth a war, is ludicrous on its face. Vital American interests? And what might those be?

A friend whose 19-year-old son recently enlisted in the Air Force makes the point. "He asked me a question I couldn't answer," the friend told me the other day. "He reminded me that the administration made a big deal about the export of cocaine into this country—said it was against our vital interests and even declared a 'war on drugs.' And yet, he said, we have not bombed, we have not attacked overtly or covertly, the countries that are supplying thosed deadly drugs. 'If Bush is serious,' he asked me, 'why aren't we massing troops and planes and helicopters for an attack on the drug cartels of Colombia and elsewhere?' I didn't know what to tell him."

I don't either. Surely it isn't that Bush doubts the deadly nature of the traffic in drugs. Thousands of Americans—most of them, like my friend's son, young black men—die every year as a direct or indirect result of drugs. Surely it isn't that he doesn't know where the drugs are being produced and processed or who is principally responsible for their importation. Surely he doesn't doubt that drugs amount to a kind of chemical warfare on the youth of this country.

The only plausible reason he has not translated his "war on drugs" rhetoric into military action is that he knows that to do so risks unacceptable consequences.

In short, Bush's reason for not making war on Colombia is roughly the same as his reason for not launching an attack on Baghdad.

He would have done so if he had been given an acceptable pretext—as happened with Manuel Noriega in Panama. Bush would have done so as part of an international force aimed at eliminating the drug traffic. But he wouldn't do so alone.

And so it is in the Persian Gulf. For all the provocation of the "naked aggression" against Kuwait, Saddam has studiously avoided any further action that might give Bush a politically salable reason for attacking. And the international support Bush has mustered against Iraq is either of a non-military or merely defensive nature.

If we go to war against Iraq, it will be America's war, and Americans don't want it.

Whether the U.N. resolution succeeds or fails, Bush will still lack the go-ahead he most desperately needs: from the American people.

What is left for him to do? Either he must find a politically acceptable reason to risk the lives of thousands of American troops, or he must convince America to exercise the patience it takes to give the economic sanctions a chance to work.

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

The Cost of Scrounging for Allies

The rising price being paid by President Bush to build his global coalition against Saddam Hussein was registered at the Paris peace conference last week when Mikhail Gorbachev easily barred access to the three Baltic nations seeking to regain their freedom from the Soviet Union.

Diplomatic suspicions were raised that the United States helped Gorbachev keep out Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, which the Soviets brutally seized in 1940. The purpose: to win Soviet support for a United Nations resolution approving force against Iraq for its brutal seizure of Kuwait.

That adds to the price Bush is paying. He met with Syria's President Hafez Assad even though Syria remains high on the U.S. list of governments supporting terrorism. The harshest cost may be tacit agreement that most of the "international" force assembled to fight Iraq disappears to the rear once combat starts. That means that if war comes, casualties will be almost exclusively American.

Although U.S. officials refused to admit it, there were many signs that Bush privately supported Gorbachev when he threatened to torpedo the Paris conference if the three imprisoned Baltic nations were allowed in, as both France and Denmark urged. Without U.S. opposition, Gorbachev treated the Danes more harshly at the conference that ended the Cold War than hard-liner Leonid Brezhnev ever had at its height.

Getting Gorbachev's consent to the U.N. resolution authorizing force to free Kuwait clearly has precedence over the Baltic campaign for freedom at such an awkward time. Even so, the Chinese are so negative about war in the Persian Gulf that a U.N. Security Council veto by them may negate the apparent U.S. support for Gorbachev's Baltic policy.

No U.S. representative turned up at Latvia's National Day celebration in Paris Nov. 19. Nor did Bush make a single reference to U.S.-backed Baltic demands for self-determination in his Paris speech about the brave new world of freedom that he is trying to create in Europe.

The U.S. Treasury last week abruptly canceled the visit of Deputy Assistant Secretary Bruce Bartlett to Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, to discuss problems of moving to a free-market economy. A Treasury spokesman told us the trip was "inappropriate." It would certainly be inappropriate for Gorbachev, who wants to run economic reform out of Moscow, not from Soviet republics seething with nationalism.

The final costs of backing down from long-standing U.S. policies are not fully known, especially in the treatment of Syria's Assad, who is anti-Saddam for his own purposes. The very fact that the president of the United States sat down with him in Geneva was a major victory for Syria.

While it is worth exploring aspirations to join Washington's team now that Moscow seems to be out of the game, Assad is no fool. He and every other world leader being importuned by Bush and Secretary of State James A. Baker III know the United States will pay a bundle to recruit them against Saddam.

Cutting much closer to domestic U.S. politics are the costs of almost exclusive American casualties if combat begins. A sober warning came largely unnoticed last week in a report from House Armed Services Committee Chairman Les Aspin (D-Wis.), who said that a war resolution by the U.N. Security Council "is going to look like a vote by other countries to let the United States go to war."

In the first effort of any U.S. political leader to make a systematic listing of what our allies are doing, Aspin's conclusion was: not enough. He warned that Americans "won't stand for our allies sitting out the fighting while Americans are dying."

But Pentagon sources say privately there is little doubt that most U.S. allies in the Gulf will be "sitting out" combat. Even the highly-touted British force, still numbering less than 15,000 but with reinforcements said to be on the way, is woefully low on modern tanks.

As for Arabs, Egypt is cited as the best example of a fighting ally but hardly will be shoulder to shoulder with its American comrades. "The Egyptians will be in the rear lobbing artillery shells," a diplomatic source said, ready to move into Kuwait only if the Americans can make it safe for occupation. This is in no way intended as an aspersion against Egypt. To U.S. commanders, foreign forces in the line with Americans only spell confusion and trouble.

Bush seems to have agreed to Saudi Arabia keeping an average $150 million in windfall profits every day since Saddam seized Kuwait. According to Aspin's analysis, that amounts to a $10 billion windfall—far more than the Saudi financial help extracted by Bush. But in contrast to Japan and Germany, Saudi help has been profligate.

The president's energetic trip to Europe and the Middle East had a double goal: to spell out to American troops what was at stake and to firm up the military coalition. In both missions, he made abundantly clear he is getting ready for war, no matter what the cost.

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Mark Alan Stamaty

The cartoonist is a contributor to the Village Voice.