**1015- ARTICLE**

*Article Content*

# 

# THREATS AND RESPONSES: THE WHITE HOUSE; BUSH ORDERS START OF WAR ON IRAQ; MISSILES APPARENTLY MISS HUSSEIN

By David E. Sanger With John F. Burns

March 20, 2003

President Bush ordered the start of a war against Iraq on Wednesday night, and American forces poised on the country's southern border and at sea began strikes to disarm the country, including an apparently unsuccessful attempt to kill Saddam Hussein.

Mr. Bush addressed the nation from the Oval Office at 10:15 p.m. Wednesday night, about 45 minutes after the first attacks were reported against an installation in Baghdad where American intelligence believed Mr. Hussein and his top leadership were meeting. ''On my orders, coalition forces have begun striking selected targets of military importance to undermine Saddam Hussein's ability to wage war,'' the president said.

Speaking deliberately, with a picture of his twin daughters visible behind him, he added, ''These are opening stages of what will be a broad and concerted campaign.''

Mr. Bush sought to tamp down expectations of a quick victory with few casualties by warning that the battles in the days ahead ''could be longer and more difficult than some predict.'' [Transcript, Page A20.]

The results of the strike on Baghdad were unclear. However, Iraqi television broadcast a speech by Mr. Hussein, who is believed to have a number of doubles, after the attack. He denounced ''Junior Bush'' and promised the Iraqi people a victory.

The president's speech came about two hours after the expiration of his 48-hour deadline for Saddam Hussein to leave Iraq, an ultimatum dismissed with disdain by the Iraqi leader.

The first signs of the attack in Baghdad, which began just before first light there at 5:35 a.m., were an air raid siren followed by antiaircraft fire and loud explosions over the city that appeared to be bombs. The antiaircraft fire appeared to be ineffective.

At least one impact was visible about a half mile from the Rashid Hotel in central Baghdad, throwing a great cloud of dust into the air.

The initial round of explosions took place over a period of about 10 minutes and was followed by a lull. The first traffic of the day racing down the highway appeared to be drivers fleeing the attack.

It appeared that the war started earlier than the White House and top Pentagon officials had intended. During a nearly four-hour meeting at the White House late Wednesday afternoon -- participants included Vice President Cheney; George Tenet, the director of central intelligence; Donald H. Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense; and Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser -- Mr. Bush decided to act on fresh intelligence indicating an opportunity to decapitate the country's leadership early in the war.

It was a chance Mr. Bush missed, to his regret, early in the war in Afghanistan in 2001, when American forces sought to kill Osama bin Laden and the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar.

According to two senior military officials, American forces launched about three dozen Tomahawk cruise missiles from four cruisers and destroyers and two submarines operating in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf as part of an effort to kill Mr. Hussein, his two sons and other senior members of the leadership. Two F-117A Stealth fighters each dropped two one-ton satellite-guided bombs. But the initial attack was described as limited in scope, and fell short of the far more intense strikes to come.

Military officials said the more limited attack was intended to demonstrate that the United States would act on timely intelligence to strike what one official called ''targets of opportunity.''

''This is not the start of the air campaign,'' one senior military official said in Washington.

With his four--minute address to the nation, delivered after he finished a quiet dinner with his wife, Laura, in the White House residence, Mr. Bush embarked on one of the country's most ambitious military ventures since Vietnam, and on a war his administration began planning over a year ago.

Many of the hawks in his administration had talked for years of a war like the one that opened tonight, hoping to rid the world of Mr. Hussein, who survived the first gulf war, attempted to assassinate Mr. Bush's father, and killed untold thousands of his opponents.

The president had to act without the sanction of the United Nations Security Council, where he could not assemble the nine votes necessary for a specific authorization to go to war. Germany, France and Russia have declared that the war is, in essence, illegal.

In his speech, Mr. Bush said 35 nations support the United States. But he acted with significant military support from only a small handful of nations led by Britain. A small force was sent by Australia.

''Now that the conflict has come, the only way to limit its duration is to apply decisive force,'' Mr. Bush said. ''And I assure you, this will not be a campaign of heal measures and we will accept no outcome but victory.''

Mr. Bush argued anew that Mr. Hussein posed a grave threat to the United States, and would attack the country or its interests whenever he gained the weapons and the strength. But he addressed much of his brief speech to the American men and women in the Persian Gulf, telling them that Iraqis ''will witness the honorable and decent spirit of the American military.'' He contended that America had no visions of empire in the Middle East.

''We have no ambition in Iraq,'' he declared, ''except to remove a threat and restore control of that country to its own people.''

Earlier Wednesday, Mr. Bush formally informed Congress in writing, and then world leaders in a series of phone calls, that he was ready to depose Mr. Hussein by force. In a seven-page message to Congress, he argued that force was now the only way to ''adequately protect the national security of the United States'' and that topping the Iraqi government was ''a vital part'' of a broader war against terrorism. The message was required under a statute passed last fall explicitly authorizing war against Iraq after the president determined that a diplomatic solution was impossible.

As the deadline passed on Wednesday night, Mr. Bush's dinner was interrupted by a call from Andrew H. Card, the White House chief of staff, Ari Fleischer, the White House press secretary, said. The president asked Mr. Card if there was any evidence that Mr. Hussein had left Iraq. There was none, Mr. Card told him -- hardly a surprise after Mr. Hussein's two days of defiant claims that he would stay in place, and defeat the invading army.

Even hours before Mr. Bush addressed the nation, there had been doubt the invasion would start this quickly. As punishing sandstorms swirled around the Army troops massed in Kuwait, the engineering battalions that will be in the vanguard of the invasion force -- breaching berms and clearing minefields -- were already on the move. Special Operations forces were reportedly already deployed inside Iraq, shaping the battlefield for the larger invasion force to come.

American and British warplanes flew bombing missions today against a dozen Iraqi artillery and surface-to-surface missile positions in southern Iraq, wiping out placements that could threaten advancing troops.

Roughly 17 Iraqi border troops surrendered along the border, and were taken into custody by Kuwaiti forces. A few administration officials seized on the defections as an early indicator of the mass defections they hope to see when the fighting begins.

But others in the administration warned against overconfidence, cautioning that toppling Mr. Hussein and the protective apparatus that has kept him in power for more than three decades is a far riskier enterprise than was ousting his forces from Kuwait 12 years ago in the Persian Gulf war.

Mr. Fleischer cautioned that ''Americans ought to be prepared for loss of life.'' He noted that while the White House sought ''as precise, short a conflict as possible,'' the unknowns -- from how American, British and Australian troops would be received to the elements of weather, accident and so-called friendly fire -- were numerous.

The notification to Congressional leaders, sent to Capitol Hill late on Tuesday night, provided the most detailed legal justification yet for military action.

Mr. Bush stayed largely out of sight until his speech, save for a brief meeting Wednesday morning with Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and the secretary of homeland security, Tom Ridge, to review New York City's needs to prepare for any new terrorist attacks. The White House later said it would go to Congress for a special appropriation bill to pay for the war and homeland security.

Washington was eerily quiet, and the area around the White House was sealed off by police.

But there were isolated voices of dissent. ''Today, I weep for my country,'' Senator Robert C. Byrd, the West Virginia Democrat and the war's biggest critic in the Senate, said on Wednesday. ''No more is the image of America one of strong, yet benevolent, peacekeeper. Around the globe, our friends mistrust us, our word is disputed, our intentions are questioned.''

The breach with Europe continued to widen. As Mr. Bush tried to convince Congress that the attack on Iraq would advance the war on terror, France's foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, said the war would spawn more terrorism. The German foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, said, ''Germany emphatically rejects the impending war.''

But while Germany allowed American troops to fly over its territory, Turkey was still arguing about opening its airspace. Turkey further said it would not allow United States forces to use its air bases to refuel -- a remarkable slap from a NATO ally. Mr. Fleischer made clear that the $30 billion in proposed aid and loans to Turkey -- dangled when it seemed as if the country would allow American and British forces to use its territory to invade Iraq from the north -- is ''no longer on the table.''

Mr. Fleischer disputed the view of Europeans and others who argue that the pending invasion is a violation of the United Nations Charter. He cited three Security Council resolutions that he said provided all of the authorization Mr. Bush needed. But he also likened the current preparations to the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, arguing that just as President Kennedy imposed a quarantine around Cuba -- ''an act of war,'' Mr. Fleischer said -- to force it to remove nuclear missiles, Mr. Bush is acting to protect the United States from a threat that it would never see coming.

Several scholars have disputed that view, noting that in the case of the missile crisis, the Soviet missiles could have easily reached the United States, and the weapons clearly put Americans at peril.

Mr. Bush argued on Monday night that waiting for the Iraq threat to develop was tantamount to ''suicide.'' The president's definition seemed to fit what scholars say is the classic war of prevention.

''We choose to meet that threat now, where it arises, before it can appear suddenly in our skies and cities,'' the president said then.

The document submitted to Congress laid out yet another argument -- Iraq's links to terrorists, an area in which the administration's evidence has been scanty, and its potential for greater links in the future.

''Both because Iraq harbors terrorists and because Iraq could share weapons of mass destruction with terrorists who seek them for use against the United States, the use of force to bring Iraq into compliance with its obligations under U.N.S.C. resolutions would be a significant contribution to the war on terrorists of global reach,'' the report to Congress said.

''A change in the current Iraqi regime would eliminate an important source of support for international terrorist activities,'' it said. ''It would likely also assist efforts to disrupt terrorist networks and capture terrorists around the globe. United States government personnel operating in Iraq may discover information through Iraqi government documents and interviews with detained Iraqi officials that would identify individuals currently in the United States and abroad who are linked to terrorist organizations.''

That rationale would seem, on its face, to support military action against many nations, from Pakistan to Indonesia. But Mr. Fleischer insisted that the conditions surrounding Iraq's defiance were ''unique.''