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Different Man, Different Moment

By ADLAI E. STEVENSON III

CHICAGO — Pundits and officials in Washington have dubbed Secretary of State Colin Powell's attempt to make a case for war against Iraq in the United Nations Security Council an "Adlai Stevenson moment."

I couldn't disagree more. My father was Adlai Stevenson, who in 1962, as President Kennedy's representative to the United Nations, presented the Security Council with incontrovertible proof that the Soviet Union, a nuclear superpower, was installing missiles in Cuba and threatening to upset the world's "balance of terror."

That "moment" had an obvious purpose: containing the Soviet Union and maintaining peace. It worked, and eventually the Soviet Union collapsed under its own weight. This moment has a different purpose: war. The Bush administration clearly rejects the idea of containing Iraq through committed monitoring by the United Nations, even though this course is the better option.

With so much comparison between Secretary Powell and my father, I've been trying to think back to the days leading up to my father's famous moment. While his appearance became the stuff of historical legend, he rarely talked about it with his family. One weekend, he merely announced that he had to go to Washington because something important had come up. (President Kennedy, we learned later, was giving him his marching orders.) There was no visible worry or excitement. Maybe he was saving up for his moment.

After all, his entire adult life had been defined by seeing to it that the Soviet threat was contained — preventing it from erupting into war. My father, President Kennedy and others remembered the lessons learned from the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian archduke and his wife in 1914. Serbian nationalists behind the killings expected a reaction. But they did not expect to bring down the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Politically motivated terrorists are fanatics, not fools. Yet the empire delivered an ultimatum to Serbia, bringing on World War I and its own demise.

My father visited the military cemeteries in Europe as a young man. France lost a quarter of its men between the ages of 18 and 30 during World War I. He remembered Woodrow Wilson's efforts to create a world order that preserved the peace, and the hopes destroyed by the old guard in the Senate, which defeated that League of Nations.

Veterans of World War II, men like my father and Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy, went on to pick up where Wilson had failed. The old guard was defeated. The United Nations was established. A new world order contained the Soviet Union, controlled the strategic arms race and preserved peace. America was a real superpower then, its embassies the outposts of hope and security.

Clearly, we live in a different world now. But would going to war truly make it a safer one? A contained Saddam Hussein would remain a pariah in the Middle East. A Saddam Hussein under attack would win sympathy on behalf of his long-suffering people and perhaps the support of terrorists inflamed by the mighty reach of the United States. A war could also set back Iraq's oil production and destabilize other oil-producing states. The economic consequences of war and reconstruction are incalculable; the federal budget is already plunging into deficit from surplus at the fastest rate in history, without even provision for war.

Why, then, the enthusiasm for war? Even top officials at the Central Intelligence Agency have acknowledged that Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction are only a threat if Iraq is attacked. And Iraq's government, after all, is the same Baathist regime aided by the Reagan administration when Baghdad used chemical weapons in its bloody war against Iran. If anything, Iraq was stronger and more dangerous then. (I first became acquainted with this regime in 1976 when its minions tore toenails from the feet of my driver, a Kurd, in Baghdad — apparently for having been insufficiently forthcoming during a periodic interrogation).

Many curious explanations are circulating for suddenly making this infamous regime a unilateral casus belli of the United States while North Korea, which may take advantage of the administration's preoccupation with Iraq to develop more nuclear weapons, is an object of relative indifference. Maybe the most plausible is Iraq's purported link to terrorism.

In 1978, I led the first in-depth Congressional study into the growing threat of terrorism and how to combat it. Such a threat reaches far back into history, beyond the label of terrorism. In 1962, President Kennedy read Barbara Tuchman's book "The Guns of August," a history of the unintended chain of consequences that led to the devastation of World War I. He wanted to avoid similar missteps.

The Bush administration would benefit by the same lesson. Sept. 11 was not all that different from Sarajevo at the turn of the century. The 19 men armed with box cutters did not expect to bring down all of America. Only America can do that. They expected a reaction. The one they should get is to be treated as criminals, hunted down and brought to justice. Bringing war only confirms complaints that the United States is waging a war against Islam. It can also give terrorists the reaction they seek.

Whether made by Al Qaeda or Saddam Hussein, today's threats require a multidimensional response, including efforts to address the widening gap between the haves and the have nots, the horrible conditions in which most people around the world struggle to survive. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a good place to begin. The United States loses credibility when perceived as supporting terror in one part of the Mideast, while professing to fight it elsewhere.

I like to think that if my father were in Secretary Powell's shoes, he would have presented proof of an aggressive deployment of weapons of mass destruction and evidence that Iraq was closer to obtaining nuclear arms, a claim the administration made not so long ago. The Bush administration would have supported the United Nations, its inspectors and international containment of Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Members of the Security Council and other nations would not have to be cajoled into going along. The international community, for which this administration still presumes to speak, would support the United States, as it did in October, 1962, when America waged peace.

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