

The Right Priorities for the Nineties

Let's not get hypnotized by the Persian Gulf: Let's start fighting the battles that really matter

by Charles Peters

Practically everyone realizes that Jimmy Carter was wrong to let the hostages in Iran dominate the final months of his presidency. But George Bush is making an even greater mistake in dealing with Iraq. Not only is his own time largely absorbed by the "crisis," but his response to it has been so dangerous that the rest of the nation has had to become absorbed by it too, if only to try to keep the president from getting us into war.

Even if the policy of intimidating bluff that Bush is pursuing works and Saddam Hussein withdraws from Kuwait, it appears that the president is determined to continue to play a policing role in the Persian Gulf that carries with it a continuing hazard of war. And, of course, if the bluff doesn't work, Bush is going to be tempted to use the large force he has assembled in an attack soon after the January 15 deadline of the United Nations resolution.

All this means that we are in danger of paying too little attention to the other serious problems that confront this country. This danger concerns those of us at *The Washington Monthly* enough to prompt us to resolve to make a special effort during the coming months to tug at the sleeves of our fellow citizens and say "Hey, wait a minute, here are some matters you should be thinking about and trying to do something about. They deserve your attention just as much as, if not more than, Saddam Hussein."

Five of the articles that follow are part of this effort. David Halberstam reminds us that if there are nations in the world that we should focus our attention on they are not Kuwait and Iraq but Japan and Germany and our other economic competitors, not only because of the wrongs they are doing to this country but, even more significantly, because of what we can learn about our own weaknesses, like for example our education system, the radical reform of which is far more crucial to our future than the restoration of the emir.

The articles by Paul Glastris and Scott Shuger remind us that with deficits of \$320 billion and \$337 billion looming before us in 1991 and 1992, even without including the cost of Desert Shield, it is imperative that we find ways to increase revenues and decrease spending. The revenue should come from taxes that do not

burden the average worker but instead, as with the significantly higher estate taxes Glastris recommends, merely moderate the affluence of the privileged elite. And huge sums can be saved by junking expensive and useless weapons systems such as the stealth bomber, the fraudulent case for which is exposed by Shuger.

Morton Mintz's article makes a compelling case for the kind of moral capitalism—in this instance in the insurance industry—that *The Washington Monthly* has long advocated. Even though capitalism has now clearly established itself as a better economic system than socialism, capitalism needs to be informed by the kind of conscience and human caring that caused Karl Marx's outrage at the treatment of workers in 19th century England.

When Michael Lewis describes the corrupt lunacy at Finley, Kumble, he reminds us that we cannot continue to countenance the diversion of more of our best and brightest into the morally marginal or positively harmful activities that constitute the principal pursuits of our major law firms any more than we could continue to accept the disastrous follies that another legion of the best and brightest committed on Wall Street during the eighties.

In order to free our minds to deal with these and the other vital issues the *Monthly* hopes to raise in coming months, we must free ourselves from neurotic obsession with what Bush might do in the Middle East. The simple way to do that is to insist that most if not all ground troops be brought home. That way he can't create a disaster, so worry about that possibility won't have to keep us from thinking about the important things.

What concerns me now is that Sam Nunn and many other critics of Bush's rush to Armageddon, even though they are saying "not so fast," are also conceding that ultimately, if economic sanctions aren't working after a year or so, we should take military action against Saddam Hussein. They're wrong.

If Iraq develops and threatens to use nuclear weapons, military action might then be necessary. But only then. Not now. The embargo is the right course. The administration should be concentrating on making it effective instead of arguing that it can't work. □

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The Stealth Bomber Story You Haven't Heard

It doesn't work, and it'll probably crash

by Scott Shuger

It was star date 5027.4 when the *Enterprise* was suddenly surrounded by Romulan spacecraft that swooped in undetected by any of the Federation starship's sensors. Spock, of course, figured out how that happened: "I believe the Romulans have developed a cloaking device." Later, Spock and Captain Kirk were able to infiltrate the enemy commander's vessel and teleport the gadget back aboard. The plan was for the *Enterprise* to use it to slip away unnoticed. But the engineering officer, Lieutenant Commander Scott, soon discovered that this was easier said than done. After working feverishly, Scotty reported to Kirk, "I've got the device installed, but bless me if I know whether it's going to work. It's the biggest guess I've ever made. . . . I don't know whether our circuits can handle this alien contraption."

Well, thanks to cheap special effects, the thing worked perfectly and the *Enterprise* escaped undamaged. But Scotty was right—you wouldn't put much faith in such a revolutionary idea as "cloaking" without doing a lot of testing first.

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And that, in a nutshell, is the difference between Star Trek and the Pentagon.

In the past few years, the Defense Department's most elaborate attempt at cloaking, the B-2 stealth bomber, has certainly drawn plenty of attention for its price tag and the obscurity of its mission. In 1981, the Air Force estimated that a force of 133 B-2s could be procured for \$32.7 billion. By mid-1989, that cost had grown to \$70.2 billion. When in mid-1990 the Department of Defense (DOD) decided to acquire only 75 B-2s (10 have been funded thus far) it estimated the cost of that reduced purchase to be \$62.8 billion. Last September, the General Accounting Office (GAO) concluded that the total cost of buying and operating the 75 aircraft for their likely life span would be around \$84 billion. That easily qualifies the B-2 as the second most expensive weapon in American history (first place: the Trident ballistic missile submarine). CIA director William Webster once said that developing the B-2's stealth technology "cost this country over \$1 million an hour."

Originally the nuclear-armed B-2 was supposed to