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Bush Looks Past War to Peace in Middle East

By PATRICK E. TYLER

WASHINGTON, Feb. 26 — Responding to calls from allies and friends, President Bush tonight embraced the goals that his father pursued when he attacked Saddam Hussein's forces more than a decade ago.

Mr. Bush asserted that removing Mr. Hussein and replacing the dictatorship with democratic institutions would transform a region known for authoritarianism and repression.

In saying he would exploit victory over Baghdad to develop a momentum toward peace in the Middle East, Mr. Bush put himself more firmly in the steps of his father, who told Congress after American forces defeated Iraqi troops in Kuwait: "The time has come to put an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict."

It was also a day for damage control. Mr. Bush's principal ally, Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, suffered a significant defection of Labor Party support over his alliance with Washington on Iraq policy. And Arab leaders gathering in Cairo for a summit meeting seemed to be reflecting the decidedly antiwar sentiments of the region.

Mr. Bush's remarks were doubtless intended to influence skeptics and to provide a further justification for going to war with Iraq. But he did not engage the logic of his critics on the crucial questions of why he is unwilling to give United Nations arms inspectors more time to try disarm Mr. Hussein through peaceful means.

Instead, he said he had "listened carefully" to world leaders and offered them this explanation: "The threat to peace does not come from those who seek to enforce the just demands of the civilized world; the threat to peace comes from those who flout those demands."

The White House today seemed unwilling even to discuss a Canadian compromise proposal that would set a late March deadline for Iraqi compliance as a way to narrow the rift separating the United States and a group of nations led by France, Germany and Russia.

As challenging as bridging that rift will be, building a peace between Arabs and Israelis would require even greater diplomatic efforts. And, Mr. Bush, like his father, provided little in the way of details.

Mr. Bush said Palestinians would have to choose new leaders and build "a reformed and peaceful state that abandons forever the use of terror."

At the same time, he said that after threat of terror was removed and security improved, he expected the new Israeli government to "support the creation of a viable Palestinian state." Most significantly, Mr. Bush dedicated himself more forcefully than ever to the "road map" that the United States and European allies have been working on to accomplish the goal of Palestinian statehood within three years.

The goals are lofty at a time when the Western alliance and most of the rest of the world is deeply divided over the whether there are any constraints on American power.

The political counselor at the American Embassy in Athens has become the first diplomat known to have resigned over Mr. Bush's Iraq policy. In a letter to Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, the diplomat, John Brady Kiesling, said that "our fervent pursuit of war is driving us to squander the international legitimacy" built up since the presidency of Woodrow Wilson.

There were also indications that close associates of the Bush family were expressing private concerns about the fissures that have opened between Washington and its major partners in Europe and Asia.

Delivering his remarks before a tableau of American flags, Mr. Bush seemed calm, confident and almost serene. Those who have spoken to him in recent weeks say he is comfortable with his decision to go to war against Iraq, even though his advisers continue to assert that the final decision has not been made.

But with this address, and others to come, the White House is seeking to project the coming American intervention in compassionate terms, aimed at constructing images of liberation, reconstruction and reconciliation in the region.

"I think right now that anything that comes from President Bush is taken in the Middle East as camouflage or diversion, because the president has a credibility problem, not only in the Middle East, but throughout Europe," said an Arab who advises one of the governments allied with the United States in the region.

Speaking of the American leadership, the official continued, "They have made up their minds to get rid of Saddam Hussein. If they withdraw their armies now, that means that Saddam has won. If you ask me, I would rather that Saddam not win. So I wish Mr. Bush luck, but he has locked himself into a new situation for Iraq, and the new situation is unknown. Anyone who tells you that he knows what will happen is a liar."