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What is missing in Bush's push for war

By Joan Vennoch, 2/20/2003

BUSH AT WAR should take another look at "Bush At War."

The recent combination of inclement weather and nothing on TV but news reports on inclement weather led to a long-delayed encounter with a Christmas present – Bob Woodward's book "Bush At War."

One of the most interesting aspects of this behind-the-scenes account of how George W. Bush and his top national security advisers responded after the Sept. 11 attacks is how focused the president was on the need to define and limit the goals of war.

With the terrorist attacks at their freshest and most shocking, Bush understood the importance of communicating an easy-to-grasp strategy for war. He also understood the perils of miscommunication.

It is precisely what is missing now in the Bush push for war with Iraq.

On Sept. 15, 2001, four days after the attacks, Bush and his advisers met at Camp David for a first major sit-down to discuss the country's response. Numbed US citizens were still just learning the names "Osama bin Laden" and "Al Qaeda," and discovering their link to Afghanistan and the Taliban.

But the country's top national security leaders were already looking way beyond that. At that very first Camp David strategy session, Woodward reports, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld asked, "Is this the time to attack Iraq?"

According to the book, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell objected, telling the group the coalition partners "will go away if you hit Iraq. If you get something pinning September 11 on Iraq, great – let's put it out and kick them at the right time. But let's get Afghanistan now. If we do that, we will have increased our ability to go after Iraq – if we can prove Iraq had a role."

The president also had strong reservations about attacking Iraq, which he explained later to Woodward. "My theory is you've got to do something and do it well and that ... if we could prove that we could be successful in (the Afghanistan) theater, then the rest of the task would be easier. If we tried to do too many things ... the lack of focus would have been a huge risk."

He also told Woodward that, realizing that the advisers around the table were with his father during the first Gulf War deliberations, "... one of the things I wasn't going to allow to happen is, that we weren't going to let their previous experience in this theater dictate a rational course for the new war."

At a Sept. 17, meeting, Bush said, "I believe Iraq was involved, but I'm not going to strike them now. I don't have the evidence at this point." Discussing the push for war with Iraq made during a Sept. 25 meeting, Bush told Woodward, "Obviously there were some who discussed Iraq. That's out of the question at this point."

As presented in this book, the president's first instincts were sharp and finely drawn – define the enemy and the terms of victory, link the specific terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 to the general war against terrorism, keep the battle plan simple and execute it crisply.

Over time, the hawks in the room ultimately convinced the president to take on Saddam Hussein without the clear link to Sept. 11 he initially seemed to believe was essential.

Last October, before any strong anti-war sentiment jelled in the country, the House and Senate voted to give Bush the go-ahead to attack Iraq unilaterally. The secretary of state is now the administration's chief spokesman for war with Iraq – the price of loyalty, or perhaps an investment in the future? A Bush-Powell ticket could be a powerful antidote to anything the Democrats could offer up.

Today, Bush gives no sign of looking back, only forward, to what seems like inevitable war with Iraq. This week he said he is undeterred by some 6 million antiwar demonstrators, whom he deemed unrepresentative of world opinion. He now defines leadership as a willingness to decide and stick to a policy based upon "the security of the people." That means war with Iraq.

He is setting this country upon a course that he initially seemed to question. He was pushed, prodded, convinced, molded and shaped, to get to the point in his thinking where he is today. But he has not done as good a job on the country – and the world – as his advisers did with him.

Time will tell if the first instincts of Bush at war were his best.

Joan Vennoch's e-mail address is vennoch@globe.com.

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