

Bush caught in his own trap

President George Bush has warned the world that Saddam Hussein is "another Hitler."

It's now beginning to dawn on Bush that if he doesn't soon act decisively, the world may very well end up calling him a second Neville Chamberlain, the British leader who backed down to Hitler at Munich. The president's trademark golf club could be replaced by an umbrella.

I've just spent 10 days in New York talking to ambassadors at the UN, to some senior U.S. senators, a number of key media opinion-makers and major financial backers of both parties. What I found was a growing mood that the president and his small band of close advisers, who know little about the Mideast, may get the U.S. into a disastrous war in the Persian Gulf.

A French diplomat neatly summed up the problem. "A nation should not go to war," he said, "until it knows what kind of peace it wants when the fighting ends." So far, the Bush administration not only has failed to come up with an answer to this vital question, it can't even adequately explain to the American public, Congress or to the troops in Saudi Arabia why the U.S. is heading for a big war with Iraq.

The Pentagon now estimates that kicking the Iraqis out of Kuwait could cause 30,000 U.S. casualties. Up to a million U.S. troops may be needed, say Pentagon sources, to fight a full-scale war against Iraq. Fully half of the active units of the U.S. Army are now in Arabia or scheduled to go there. By the end of December, nearly 400,000 U.S. troops will be in the Mideast.

Opposition to a full-scale war is growing rapidly in Congress. Democrats are demanding that no military decision be taken without the consent of Congress. The politicians have put their noses to the air and scented rising opposition among the American public to what increasingly appears to many as a potentially bloody, inconclusive and pointless war.

Even the U.S. Mideast theatre commander, Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, recently urged caution, correctly noting that major military action could produce not only a long, debilitating conflict but also the disintegration of Iraq into a sort of second Lebanon on a massive scale.

Arab diplomats whose nations are closely allied to the U.S. told me in private that if the Americans go to war with Iraq, their nations will turn on the U.S.

"American interests and Americans will be attacked everywhere, from Morocco to Iran," one diplomat predicted.

Meanwhile, the Soviets are quietly insisting, with strong French backing, that the sanctions are in fact working. Iraq will be forced to withdraw from Kuwait, they predict, after another year or so — provided Sad-

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dam can be given a face-saving way out of the crisis.

The Americans reject this view. Pentagon techno-astrologers have consulted their computers and now claim the best window of opportunity for war will be from Jan. 15 to the end of March. This means after the Christmas holidays, during dark moon phases ideal for night fighting, and before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. After that, intense heat and the Muslim pilgrimage season to Saudi Arabia's holy places may preclude a major offensive.

If the U.S. misses this window, it could be another six months before combat is possible.

But President Bush can't wait six or ten more months. The cost of the Gulf operation has now doubled from original estimates. Americans, ever impatient, are growing restless and worried. The financially squeezed U.S. TV networks, who are spending millions keeping small armies of reporters and technicians in Arabia, are pressing for a quick solution.

Bush has now been caught in the deadly trap of hysteria over Iraq and Kuwait that he created. Having challenged Saddam to mortal combat, Bush will have a hard time backing down. Anything short of Saddam's head on a platter may well appear like a calamitous defeat for U.S. prestige and power, not to mention the kiss of death to Bush's political career.

To some UN diplomats, Bush is looking even more dangerous and unpredictable than Saddam Hussein. There is no doubt U.S. forces in the Gulf can retake Kuwait. But Iraq will probably continue to wage a hit and run war against the U.S. garrison there. To end such a bloody war of attrition, U.S. forces would have to march on Baghdad and overthrow Saddam. This is something even the most hawkish generals in the Pentagon don't want. US public opinion wouldn't stand for it.

Wise heads are urging patience and calm. Let the embargo run its course, they say, and then allow the Arabs to settle their feuds in the time-honored Mideast manner — by haggling and camel-trading. Kuwait is not worth a drop of anyone's blood.

But Bush, horrified at the thought of being called another Chamberlain, a second Jimmy Carter, or, worst of all, the Wimp of Arabia, isn't listening.