

2/18 = 21st letter

Dear Mikhail:

Thank you very much for your report on your meeting with Tariq Aziz. I appreciate the full briefing and the effort you are making.

I agree with your emphasis on unconditional withdrawal, the importance of no linkage of Iraqi withdrawal to any other issue, and the urgency of an Iraqi response to you. While I very much want to see the war end, I am also wary of Saddam's effort to get something for agreeing to withdrawal, which the international community called for over 6 months ago.

In that regard, I worry about your proposal from several standpoints. First, there seems to be room for Iraq to negotiate the timeframe for withdrawal. For our part, we are not willing to negotiate the period for Iraq's getting out of Kuwait. UNSC Resolution 660 says it must be "immediate." It took Iraqi forces only a very short time to get in, and we will not accept any period for withdrawal that exceeds ninety-six hours. Anything longer than ninety-six hours wouldn't meet the test of immediacy.

Second, all of us have said many times that all of the Security Council resolutions that we collectively adopted should be fully implemented. Your proposal, as I read it, does not appear to refer to the implementation of any Security Council resolution that deals with issues other than withdrawal.

Third, while you mentioned in your letter on the Primakov visit that POW's were raised with the Iraqis, there is no mention in your proposal of the exchange of POW's -- or of the release of third-country nationals being held against their will (like the CBS camera crew).

Mikhail, let me say more generally that I remain strongly convinced that we must create the conditions for a very different kind of Middle East -- one whose peace and security depend on reconciliation, arms reductions, and the elimination of weapons of mass destruction. That will not be possible if Saddam can retain disproportionate military power and go back to business-as-usual. Our task is to ensure that the outcome of this war sets the stage for a more peaceful and secure future in the Middle East.

I know that is a future we both desire. Both the outcome of this war and its aftermath will determine if we get there. We will want to consult closely together on the substance and the process of moving toward that goal. From my standpoint, I believe we have to be careful not to embrace a process or format for discussions that creates an impediment to progress, not a catalyst. While the U.N. certainly has a role to play, we should think carefully before embracing the U.N. as the sole or immediate forum for discussions of the broad complex of Middle East issues.

With respect to your suggestion about military action, I must repeat that our military strategy will be shaped by concerns for the well-being of the coalition's military forces.

I will be interested to hear from you regarding Iraq's response. Let me say again that I appreciate your efforts.

Sincerely,

George Bush

His Excellency

Mikhail Gorbachev,

President of the Union of

Soviet Socialist Republics,

MOSCOW.

(insert) However, I do not intend to engage in any negotiations of the principles of the UN resolutions and any response, therefore, must fully address the concerns I have mentioned above if it is to be satisfactory to the United States.