

It's high noon for Sheriff Bush

December 8th, 2002

Gene Collier, Columnist

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The week's intensifying round of weapons inspections in Iraq got predictably mixed reviews, based largely on established precepts.

Colin Powell, whose thinking stands out from the administration's typical mindset -- Dodge City, 1888 -- said things were "off to a good start."

Kofi Annan, whose difficult task of keeping the United Nations relevant in the face of dwindling patience down at Sheriff Bush's office, said that "cooperation [by the Iraqis] has been good."

But the sheriff, just like in the movies, leaned back in his chair with his dusty hat pulled low to his brow, indifferently moved a toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other and said his reading of the situation was "not encouraging."

And so we were to arrive this morning at an historic date, the one on which Saddam Hussein's weapons clerks were to submit documentation detailing his inventory as required by U.N. Resolution 1441, which was carefully and cleverly crafted by the Bush administration to trap the dictator.

If Saddam insists he has none of the weapons that so alarm the sheriff (you know, like the ones we have), Bush is fairly certain he can prove Saddam is lying and Baghdad will likely have bombs and blood by Christmas. If Saddam does list those weapons, he will have effectively admitted ignoring U.N. resolutions over the past decade, and Baghdad will likely have bombs and blood by Christmas.

The sheriff usually gets what he wants, or at least what the right wants for him, and what he wants real bad right now is a conventional television-dominating conflict that reminds the world that the wishes of the United States of America will not go unmet.

A solid winter of stern Pentagon briefings describing "damage," perhaps starting with Hussein's 20 palaces, is far superior politically to the mercurial shadow war with al-Qaida, the progress of which is highly dubious.

Dicktor-in-waiting Cheney, who like the sheriff is amazingly adept at getting exactly what he wants, tried again to explain how the Iraq and al-Qaida priorities are one and the same. "Confronting the threat posed by Iraq is not a distraction from the war on terror," Cheney said in a Monday speech. "It is absolutely crucial to winning the war on terror."

Without getting back into the debate on exactly how large a threat Saddam poses, you can be fairly certain that were it not situated on one of the planet's largest reserves of oil, Iraq couldn't hold Cheney's interest for 10 minutes.

Thus, it appears that even if Powell and Annan can find some other diplomatic pathway, thousands of American families will likely have death for the holidays. On top of the actual retail price of "regime change," the president's pledge to "take every precaution" for our fighting men and women apparently won't be kept. According to a chilling piece by Vernon Loeb of The Washington Post last week, it simply can't be.

Both Democrats and Republicans on key congressional committees told Loeb that the Pentagon could have great difficulty outfitting U.S. troops with "state-of-the-art" protection against chemical and biological weapons. Christopher Shays, the Connecticut Republican and chairman of the National Security Subcommittee, said Pentagon officials recently found problems with gas masks that have the wrong gaskets and might not function properly, and with charcoal-lined protective suits that diminish in effectiveness with age, and the officials said 250,000 defective suits are missing from its inventory.

Loeb said Jan Schakowsky, the Illinois Democrat and a member of Shays' subcommittee, had written Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that testimony before the committee on biological and chemical preparedness was "extremely troubling." The General Accounting Office confirmed all of those difficulties.

So, with the Iraqis playing the shell game with what the CIA says is more than a hundred metric tons of nerve gas, sarin, mustard gas, anthrax and other lethal concoctions, Bush has to know that the human cost of toppling Saddam could be outrageous.

Of course, you'd never know this from the rhetoric. Accompanied by a blistering public scolding of Saddam from the increasingly bellicose Briton Tony Blair, Bush last week flexed his itchy trigger finger. Sounds like he's a-fixin' to use it.