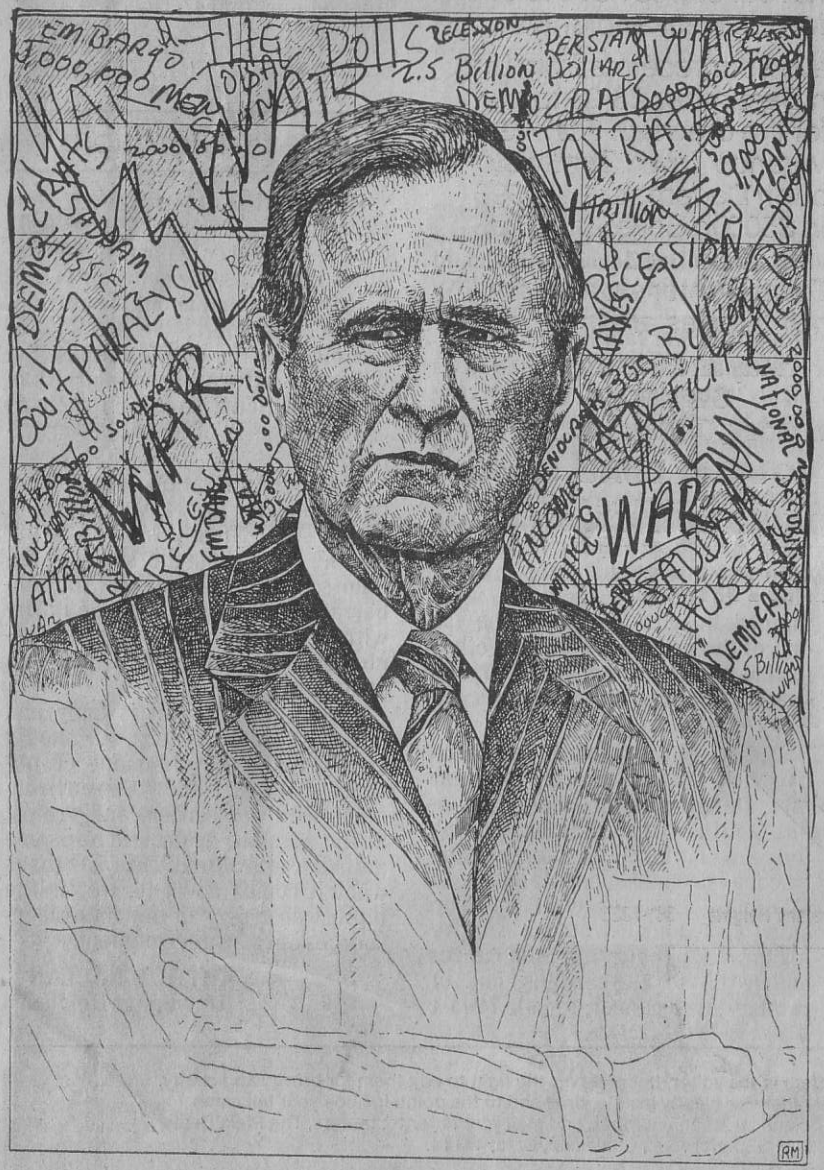
Political aims will stay Bush's hand



By DAVID SHENK

Unless Saddam Hussein really wants a war for some reason I can't think of, there won't be one. President Bush and his men can push this threat of military action as far as they want to up through the middle of next month. Congress, not in the mood to raise much of a fuss, will stand quietly on the sidelines watching Bush clip a few sections out of his pocket version of the Constitution. We may approach what looks like the brink of war, but when push comes to shove, both sides will settle it with a handshake.

How can I be so sure? I can't, really. But I can see that there is nothing even close to a consensus in this country for fighting Saddam this early, tossing 10, 20, 30 thousand lives into the scrap bucket to give an emirate back to an emir and for a vague notion called New World Order. Oh yes, and to eliminate Saddam's nuclear capacity: a major land war for weapons that don't yet exist, are several years off if at all, and will require all of one or two Stealth raids to take care of, if need be.

Come on, folks, this isn't about nuclear weapons. The New Republic and some White Housers may think so, but then again, I doubt if they have any friends, relatives or neighbors in Saudi Arabia that they have to explain that to.

This is about bluff, a bluff that in the hands of one constitutionally misguided president could actually become a war only if he loses his temper at some sort of gross provocation. Bush is correct about one thing: The final showdown will come down to how much Saddam believes Bush's threat to attack. But that will only determine who gets the better of whom in negotiations, or how long the sanctions last.

The hidden truth: Bush won't go to war, and not because he's afraid to spill the blood. He has something more powerful than a conscience to keep him from going all out — political ambition. He wants that second term and knows that the electoral votes will be few if he goes to war over jobs or oil or the NWO or shadow nukes. Regardless of what the polls say on Jan. 15, a war with all the trimmings will ultimately prove very unpopular in this country.

The administration has a rather complicated charade going in its strategy to make this threat real, so Baker, Bush and Cheney can't even begin to acknowledge these truths right now. But they'd have to be blind not to see that even the guaranteed minimum of economic, social and political costs of war are prohibitive. On top of the lives, we are talking about upwards of $100 billion for the actual fighting, which would shred any hope of whittling the deficit down through marginal economic growth. Also:

- Did someone say economic *growth*? An instant rise in oil prices to $50, $70, maybe even $100 a barrel would make that more of a concept than a reality for quite some time.
- An overwhelming attack on Iraq would likely prompt a desperate Saddam to drag Israel into the fray, raising the real prospects of chemical-for-nuclear exchange and an instant fault line in the allied coalition.
- Americans killing Arabs on even a modest scale would undoubtedly inspire a new antipathy across the entire region that would make Ayatollah Khomeini look like Maggie Thatcher in comparison. Long-term oil interests secure? Yeah, right.
- Even a short war and total victory for the United States would mean long-term troop deployments. Years and years and years. I haven't seen a poll in this country or Saudi Arabia that shows much enthusiasm for this.

Of course, Saddam's reasons for avoiding conflict are more elementary. Death.

Irrational wars are launched only by intemperate leaders in times of extreme volatility. This situation is far too contemplative to lead to such a war. The Constitution may not have fared so well, but the democratic principle of leaders having to answer often for their deeds will have proven reliable and critical. Thank heavens for Bush's political ambition. Without it, he might convince himself that war is the right thing to do.

As far as the settlement goes, we might just get everything we want from Saddam and maybe even a budge toward an Arab-Israeli settlement to boot. Which will mean that, overall, perhaps Bush's snubbing the Constitution will have saved the day. Still, I can't quite thank him for it, nor forgive Congress for letting him get away with it.

Shenk is a writer in Washington, D.C.