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Ex-U.N. president sees potential in arms race

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Caption: Jan Kavan (Kristopher Skinner/Staff)

With diagrams, satellite photos and testimony from Iraqi dissidents, Colin Powell sat in the United Nations and argued that Saddam Hussein made war inevitable.

Among those listening to him that day in March 2003 was Jan Kavan, then president of the U.N. General Assembly.

The Czech diplomat wasn't convinced.

"The world is better off without Saddam Hussein. I want to make that clear," said Kavan, who will give a talk in Alameda on Saturday. "On the other hand, I am not convinced that the only way to have gotten rid of Saddam Hussein was through a U.S. invasion. And the reasons they offered — such as weapons of mass destruction — have burst like a bubble."

The 61-year-old Kavan is again casting a cold eye on claims by the Bush administration.

This time, it's the U.S. effort to establish a missile defense shield in the Czech Republic and Poland as a way to put Iran on notice that this nation will oppose its nuclear program.

Another cold war?

Iranian officials say the program is vital for their country's energy needs. But American officials maintain it's simply a ruse to beef up the military and dominate the region.

Last month, Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, compared the U.S. plans to install the shield to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, which historians say brought the world to the edge of nuclear war. Putin quickly back-pedaled from his comments.

But Kavan said Putin's remarks struck a chord with many in the Czech Republic, who believe that their opinions are being shoved aside in a power-play on the global stage.

On Tuesday, Kavan said he's not sure that the shield is even needed.

"I have not seen the hard evidence that there is such a threat," he said.

The decision whether to install the shield should be resolved within NATO, Kavan said. "It should be a European-wide decision, where the reasons for having it can be explained and justified," he said.

What the diplomat fears is that the U.S. will go forward with the defense shield despite local opposition, and that Russia will consider it a threat, prompting an arms race in the region.

Kavan is expected to touch on the dispute during his talk at the Alameda Free Library on Oak Street. The **Alameda Public Affairs Forum** is helping organize it.

American ideals

Kavan was born in London to an English school teacher and a Czech diplomat. Communists jailed his father for four years due to his political beliefs, which Kavan said contributed to the man's early death at age 46.

Communist authorities also targeted Kavan: In 1969, they forced him into exile in the United Kingdom, where his human rights activities later led the same authorities to strip him of his citizenship.

Kavan returned to Prague in November 1989 and — following the so-called "Velvet Revolution" — was elected to the Federal Assembly in June 1990.

He served as the country's foreign affairs minister from 1998 to 2002, when he then became president of the U.N.'s General Assembly.

Today, he continues his activism, giving talks and writing articles on Eastern European politics.

Most Americans have a cynical view of the United Nations, Kavan admitted.

Along with ignoring the good work the U.N. does — such as removing landmines — Americans tend to forget that the U.N. sets a standard for how nations and governments should interact with each other, he said.

He noted that when Powell made his pitch in the run-up to the Iraq war, the former secretary of state was inherently seeking "moral legitimacy" for the U.S. war effort.

What's especially ironic — given the frequent American opposition to the U.N. — is that its charter reflects American ideals, Kavan said. It was signed in the wake of World War II.

"It reflects America and what America stands for," Kavan said. "It's a product of the time of Roosevelt. People forget that."

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If you go

Jan Kavan will speak at 7:30 p.m., Saturday, at the Alameda Free Library, 1550 Oak St.. A reception will begin at 6 p.m. The title of his talk is "Global Citizenship vs. a New Arms Race: Can Peace Trump Hegemony?" For information, call 510-814-