

Town Meeting Debate on Iraq, November 13, 2002

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Background: the Road to Unilateralism

Before September 11, when the world was different, this administration was hard at work developing a radically unilateral posture in the world. Dismissing the need for allies, we pulled out of one international treaty after another: the Kyoto climate protection treaty, the International Criminal Tribunal, the United Nations Convention Against Torture, and The 1972 antiballistic Missile Treaty to name some.

In the September 10, 2001 edition of Time, the cover story about Secretary of State Colin Powell, entitled, "Odd Man Out," posited that Powell's "internationalist" camp was out of favor, and that the unilateralists were in charge: Cheney, Rumsfeld, Perls, and Wolfowitz among others. Step by step, this administration has made it clear that the United States is beyond and above international law.

This new view represents a radical reversal in American foreign policy, from long-held bipartisan support for multi-lateral cooperation and respect for international institutions. The rationale that allows for attacking Iraq establishes dangerous precedents that trade off immediate gains for long-term isolation and weakening of America.

The Post 9/11 World

After the horrors of September 11, enormous worldwide sympathy for America's plight gave us and the administration the benefit of the doubt as we pursued terrorists by military means in Afghanistan. President Bush proclaimed that he had found his mission as president: the War on Terrorism.

The Focus Changes

But in his State of the Union speech given on January 29, 2002, George Bush took a bizarre turn. Mystifying both friends and opponents, he declared an Axis of Evil, composed of North Korea, Iran and Iraq. Since then there has been an escalating and unremitting drumbeat for war. The president has managed to shift the national focus from Afghanistan to Iraq. Some would say he has cynically exploited, and even nurtured, the

climate of fear which has been with us since the September 11 attacks.

In the meantime, the sympathy and good will which most of the world extended us in the wake of September 11 has evaporated. Despite the lone supportive voice of Tony Blair, public opinion in virtually all of Europe--where the prevailing thought is that the Bush administration is in it for the oil--has turned decisively against the Bush war plan. Here at home, while President Bush continues to enjoy high polling numbers personally, the numbers in support of war with Iraq have been dropping steadily.

The Counter-Argument

I think we all agree that Saddam Hussein is a brutal dictator, who has used poison gas on enemy troops and likewise on his own people. Iraq, the Middle East, and the world will undoubtedly be better off when he is gone. That is not the question. The real issue at hand is what America will become. Shall we use our preeminence to lead the world to a new era of peace and justice, or shall we become a rogue nation?

An American invasion of Iraq would be wrong on many levels.

It would set a precedent for preventive war, one nation invading another without any immediate threat or provocation. In the past we have never gone to war without the existence of some casus belli, even when we have had to manufacture one, such as the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

An invasion would further America's unilateralist posture.

It would affirm a might-makes-right justification for international behavior.

It will promote anti-American backlash, and resentment from friend and foe alike.

It could destabilize the Middle East.

It will encourage retaliation against the U.S. and Israel.

It will deflect resources from real antiterrorism efforts.

It will have a serious negative impact on the economy.

War must always be seen as a last resort by any civilized people. War is failure. War is not some video game, despite the images we receive from CNN. Real people die, homes are destroyed, the land despoiled, and land mines left behind for future innocent victims. Smart bombs are not so smart. In virtually every war civilians receive the most harm, and every soldier who dies or is maimed will have been someone's son or daughter, American

or Iraqi.

I ask myself, has the president made such a compelling case for war that I would be willing to send my daughter to Iraq, to kill or be killed? For me the answer is an unequivocal No. And if I would not send my own, I would not send anyone else's child. I feel it is my patriotic duty to voice my opposition to this military adventurism as forcefully as possible, to tell this administration, "Not in my name!"

The Role of Dissent

Let us not underestimate the power of dissent. Over the course of the last several months, President Bush's bellicosity has been tempered only by cautionary and dissenting voices here at home. These voices have included members of the president's own party, former high ranking members of the military, former weapons inspectors, and members of President Bush senior's administration, and even the president's own church. I quote Jim Winkler, head of social policy for United Methodists, Oct. 20, 2002 :
"Methodist scriptural doctrine specifies war as a last resort, primarily a defensive thing. And so far as I know, Saddam Hussein has not mobilized military forces along the borders of the United States, nor along his own border to invade a neighboring country, nor have any of these countries pleaded for our assistance, nor does he have weapons of mass destruction targeted at the United States."

If the Bush administration is able to convince the larger world community that Saddam poses a significant threat, and is willing to work within international institutions, then more power to them. If they can make the world safer and further the development of international law at the same time, they will have my support.

Let us applaud President Bush for his decision to proceed via the United Nations. But let us also realize how reluctant he has been to do so, and how thin is the cord by which this strategy hangs. The military buildup continues at a furious pace.

Let us send a message to the president and commander-in-chief: You have not made a case that there is a serious and imminent threat of aggression by Iraq; nor has the United Nations determined the collective military action against Iraq is necessary. Until you do, we will not support U.S. military action. Not in our name.

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