An Open Letter to the Members of Congress

Soon, you will be asked to vote on a resolution authorizing the United States to overthrow the government of Iraq by military force. Its passage, we read on all sides, is a foregone conclusion, as if what the country now faces is not a decision but the disclosure of a fate. The nation marches as if in a trance to war. In the House, twenty of your number, led by Dennis Kucinich, have announced their opposition to the war. Telephone calls and the mail to your offices run strongly against it. The silence of those of you in the Democratic Party is especially troubling. You are the opposition party, but you do not oppose. Raising the subject of the war, your political advisers tell you, will distract from the domestic issues that favor the party’s chances in the forthcoming Congressional election. In the face of the Administration’s pre-emptive war, your leaders have resorted to pre-emptive surrender. For the sake of staying in power, you are told, you must not exercise the power you have in the matter of the war. What, then, is the purpose of your re-election? If you succeed, you will already have thrown away the power you supposedly have won. You will be members of Congress, but Congress will not be Congress. Even the fortunes of the domestic causes you favor will depend far more on the decision on the war than on the outcome of the election.

On April 4, 1967, as the war in Vietnam was reaching its full fury, Martin Luther King Jr. said, “A time comes when silence is betrayal.” And he said, “Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak.”

Now the time to speak has come again. We urge you to speak—and, when the time comes, to vote—against the war on Iraq.

The case against the war is simple, clear and strong. The Administration calls it a chapter in the war on terror, but Iraq has no demonstrated ties either to the September 11 attack on the United States or to the Al Qaeda network that launched it. The aim of the war is to deprive President Saddam Hussein of weapons of mass destruction, but the extent of his program for building these weapons, if it still exists, is murky. Still less clear is any intention to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak.”

On the other hand, if he does have them, and faces his overthrow
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EDITORIALS

and possible death at the hands of US forces, he might well use them—or, more likely, give them to terrorist groups to use after his fall. He may be doing so even now.

Some observers have likened the resolution under discussion to the Gulf of Tonkin resolution of 1964 authorizing President Johnson to use force in Vietnam. But that was passed only after a report was received of two attacks on US naval forces. (We now know that the first attack was provoked by a prior secret American attack and the second was nonexistent.) The new resolution, which alleges no attack, not even a fictional one, goes a step further. It is a Tonkin Gulf resolution without a Tonkin Gulf incident.

Even if Saddam possesses weapons of mass destruction and wishes to use them, a policy of deterrence would appear perfectly adequate to stop him, just as it was adequate a half-century ago to stop a much more fearsome dictator, Joseph Stalin. It is not true that military force is the only means of preventing the proliferation of these weapons, whether to Iraq or other countries. An alternative path is clearly available. In the short run it passes through the United Nations and its system of inspections, now more promising than before because Iraq, responding to US pressure, has opened itself unconditionally to inspectors. At the very least, this path should be fully explored before military action—the traditional last resort—is even considered. Such a choice in favor of multilateralism, diplomacy and treaty agreements should be part of a much broader policy of nonproliferation and disarmament of the kind that has already enjoyed great success over the past several decades. Under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, for example, 182 nations have agreed to do without nuclear weapons. The larger issue is whether proliferation—not just to Iraq but to many other countries as well—is best addressed by military or political means.

But the decision to go to war has a significance that goes far beyond the war. The war is the product of a broader policy that has been spelled out in the clearest possible terms by the Bush Administration. Two other countries with nuclear programs—Iran and North Korea—have already been identified by the President as potential targets for military attack. The Administration’s recently published “National Security Strategy of the United States” sets forth even larger ambitions. It declares a policy of military supremacy over the entire earth—an objective never before attained by any power. Military programs are meanwhile forbidden to other countries, all of whom are to be prevented from “passing off or equaling” the United States. China is singled out for a warning that by “pursuing advanced military capabilities,” it is following an “outdated path” that “threaten[s] its neighbors.” The new policy reverses a long American tradition of contempt for uncompelled attacks. It gives the United States the unrestricted right to attack nations even when it has not been attacked by them and is not about to be attacked by them. It trades deterrence for pre-emption—in plain English, aggression. This accords the United States the right to attack nations even when it has not been attacked by them and is not about to be attacked by them. It trades deterrence for pre-emption—in plain English, aggression.

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world against nuclear proliferation is military force. It is an imperial policy—more ambitious than ancient Rome’s, which, after all, extended only to the Mediterranean and European world. Nelson Mandela recently said of the Administration, “They think they’re the only power in the world…. One country wants to bully the world.”

A vote for the war in Iraq is a vote for this policy. The most important of the questions raised by the war, however, is larger still. It is what sort of country the United States wants to be in the twenty-first century. The genius of the American form of government was the creation of a system of institutions to check and balance government power and so render it accountable to the people. Today that system is threatened by a monster of unbalanced and unaccountable power—a new Leviathan—that is taking shape among us in the executive branch of the government. This Leviathan—concealed in an ever-deepening, self-created secrecy and fed by streams of money from corporations that, as scandal after scandal has shown, have themselves broken free of elementary accountability—menaces civil liberties even as it threatens endless, unprovoked war. As disrespectful of the Constitution as it is of the UN Charter, the Administration has turned away from law in all its manifestations and placed its reliance on overwhelming force to achieve its ends.

In pursuit of empire abroad, it endangers the Republic at home. The bully of the world threatens to become the bully of Americans, too. Already, the Justice Department claims the right to jail American citizens indefinitely on the sole ground that a bureaucrat in the Pentagon has labeled them something called an “enemy combatant.” Even the domestic electoral system has been compromised by the debacle in Florida. Nor has the shadow cast on democracy by that election yet been lifted. Election reform has not occurred. Modest campaign reform designed to slow the flood of corporate cash into politics, even after passage in Congress, is being eviscerated by executive decisions. More important, this year’s Congressional campaign, by shunning debate on the fundamental issue of war and peace, has signaled to the public that even in the most important matters facing the country neither it nor its representatives decide; only the executive does.

Members of Congress! Be faithful to your oaths of office and to the traditions of your branch of government. Think of the country, not of your re-election. Assert your power. Stand up for the prerogatives of Congress. Defend the Constitution. Reject the arrogance—and the ignorance—of power. Show respect for your constituents—they require your honest judgment, not capitulation to the executive. Say no to empire. Affirm the Republic. Preserve the peace. Vote against war in Iraq.

CONCERNING HITCHENS

We note with keen regret that this week marks the final appearance of Christopher Hitchens’s column, “Minority Report.” We have been publishing Christopher for more than twenty years, and the relationship with him has been a rewarding one for this magazine and for our readers. That is testimony to the fact that Christopher has always been completely free to express his views, and he has honorably ventilated differences he has had with the editors. We will miss his eloquent and passionate voice and his elegantly crafted prose.

Warring Democrats

Before vice-president Al Gore recently weighed in against President Bush’s rush to war in Iraq (for posing “the potential to seriously damage our ability to win the war against terrorism and to weaken our ability to lead the world”), one of the leading antivat voices in the Democratic Party was Hank Perritt. Hank Perritt? He’s a law school dean running for Congress against a first-term Republican in Illinois. A Washington Post Op-Ed Perritt penned in mid-September, headlined “My Party Must Say No to War,” was one of the more prominent Democratic denunciations of the coming war, and it won Perritt appearances in cable news land.

True, a small band of liberal House Democrats have been agitating against the war (more on that below). But almost all the so-called national Democrats (which means the guys pondering a presidential run in 2004, including Senate majority leader Tom Daschle and House minority leader Richard Gephardt) have either been cheerleading the “regime change” war or raising process-oriented questions, as opposed to policy-based objections. Gephardt and Senators Joseph Lieberman and John Edwards are Bush Democrats on the war. And Senators Daschle, Joe Biden and John Kerry are questioners, raising concerns about, say, US unilateralism and the anything-goes language of the resolution Bush sent Congress. Biden’s queries suggest he’d like to be persuaded by Bush; Kerry’s are more challenging. He’s proposed a Congressional measure calling on the United Nations to enforce its resolutions on Iraq, but he hasn’t said he’ll vote against a war. (Daschle has attacked Bush for politicizing the Iraq debate, but notes that Bush’s tactics are unlikely to change his vote on whatever final resolution emerges.) Vermont Governor Howard Dean, a long-odds 2004 Democratic contender, has decried the war, but his statements don’t carry any clout.

Several prominent Democratic senators have tried to slow Bush’s dash to war. Carl Levin, who chairs the Armed Services Committee, urges unfettered inspections before war. And after Bush presented his resolution, crusty Robert Byrd huffed, “This is the worst of election-year politics…. The resolution is a direct insult and affront to the powers given on matters of war under the Constitution.” But despite reports that Congress members are getting more antiwar than prowar calls and letters from constituents, Democrats in both houses aren’t even close to blocking (or wanting to block) Bush’s war.

In the House, about twenty Democrats—10 percent of the caucus—have been trying to pull together an opposition. But it’s
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