

The following was written seven years ago on the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. My comments are fairly banal, as my trepidations about Bush's drum-beating were similar to those of many other people everywhere. (We did not protest forcefully enough to stop him and his clique of pseudopatriotic warmongers.) I would say that the parts that warn of the possible consequences seem prescient, except that they were even then too obvious to deserve such a characterization. Look where we are now.

Open Letter to President George W. Bush, Jan. 27, 2003

Dear President Bush,

A simple message: don't make a move against Iraq without the UN and NATO. To ignore this warning would be a grave mistake; it would only imperil the United States' interests in many ways, in the long term as well as the short.

To claim to have proof of Iraqi support for terrorism without presenting your evidence (if not publicly, then discreetly among the governments of our allies and the UN Security Council) only makes you look ridiculous. Likewise to claim to know better about Iraq's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction than the UN inspection teams (and the others who have been occupied with the issue for quite some time, like John Ritter). To go on from there and ask for international support for a war against Iraq, and then say in the next breath that the US will go it alone if need be, displays an arrogance towards the rest of the world to which one strains to find a comparison.

For a long time I thought that maybe you were playing a really shrewd game – doubly shrewd, because practically no one thinks you could ever be shrewd – that is, rattling the rockets, threatening to go to war, putting the heavy heat on Saddam (who admittedly won't give a single millimeter without being put up against the wall) – but all without really intending to attack, all really just to focus international attention on a dangerous situation, and to force Saddam Hussein to accept inspections – both of which, to your credit, you have succeeded in doing. (The whole thing seemed a bit like the plot of an Uncle Remus story, with Brer Fox (you) and Brer Rabbit (Tony Blair) outsmarting Brer Wolf (Saddam) to make all the other Brers gang up on Brer Wolf and have all his nasty sharp teeth pulled out, all with just a lot of big talk, without making a *really* big mess, so that there'd be peace in the "holler" again.)

The odd thing is that the international community did not get involved in this issue just because they're worried about Saddam – with all your bellicose talk, they're worried just as much about you, perhaps more. It is to be expected that such talk should cause grave concern when it comes from a US president with lots of experience at the international level (your father, say, or President Nixon) or one with exceptional qualities of leadership (I won't bother to mention any names). When it comes from someone like yourself, being in charge as you are of the most formidable arsenal that has ever existed, it's truly frightening. I sincerely hate to be offensive, but you lack the experience and judgement to deal with issues

of this magnitude. You are seen to be more likely than the average head of state to do something really ill-considered or even crazy. You, making strange company with Saddam and a few others, have become a loose cannon – and not just any loose cannon, but the *biggest* loose cannon on the planet. (In declaring yourself indifferent to world opinion, you are “aligning” the US with the “rogue states” of the world, something I don’t believe was your intention.) In all this you have a special ability, however ironic the origin, to make the world pay attention.

But now it appears that there was never any such shrewd game. You and your administration seem intent on attacking Iraq regardless of the outcome of the inspections, regardless of the consent of the world community (or most of it, or at least of our allies). Your rationale about the dangers presented by terrorism and Saddam’s weapons (or the moral obligation, when it happens to get mentioned, to free the Kurds from Saddam’s genocidal oppression) seems more and more the flimsiest and most transparent of excuses. (It seems you would make of these things your Tonkin Gulf incident - beware, that war was Johnson’s fatal mistake, and a national tragedy.)

It is ever clearer that the primary objective is to assure a reliable supply of oil from the Middle East. This is an important and legitimate policy goal, a fact which we (naturally) are loathe to openly acknowledge. But if we can admit it, can we not also admit that a major war should be our absolutely last resort to achieve that goal, or to achieve even the stated goals? (I will skip entirely the point that in the US it would be very helpful to reduce oil consumption and to develop other sources of energy; inform yourself, for example, about Denmark, which generates a great proportion of its electricity from windmills.) It was the goal of the first Gulf War (I’m sure your father can confirm this), which, I will readily agree, we had no choice but to undertake for strategic reasons quite apart from defending the little guy; never mind all the talk about defending a sovereign nation (Kuwait) from unprovoked aggression, and never mind the fact that for years before we were allies of Saddam and provided him with loads of weapons. But hardly anyone believed the rhetoric then, and they don’t now. So it would behoove you to cool the rhetoric; people will take you more seriously as a leader. As TR said famously, “Talk softly, but carry a big stick.”

You have simply to evaluate the risks. From a strategic point of view, it seems your policy takes no account of the deterrent capabilities of the US armed forces, speaking just of conventional forces (to speak of nuclear is scarier still). It should be made clear to Saddam (and anyone else who retains weapons of mass destruction) that the US will retaliate decisively if they are ever used. The strategy of deterrence worked well for many years against the Soviet Union, even though it was not a happy situation; it can work against a state like Iraq which, although “rogue” in many ways, has a lot to lose in a war and a lot to gain in peace.

It is *just conceivable* that a war against Iraq could work out - as wars go. But there is little likelihood of things going according to plan. For sure there will be

plenty of bloodshed and wanton destruction, of which no one can predict the scope. For sure it will cost the US (and others) *tons* of money that could be better used for practically anything. There will likely be terrorist reprisals (against which our military power is a poor deterrent) provoked by this attack on an Arab nation. (Surely Al Qaeda will overlook the fact that Saddam is not a devout Muslim.) The world economy is already in a mess, as is the US economy and the financial markets, partly as a result of this uncertainty. I would be a pacifist if we lived in another sort of world; sometimes war is unavoidable. But we should exhaust all other possibilities before resorting to war.

If war should prove unavoidable, the US has practically no choice but to wage it with the support of its allies and the “blessings” of the UN. Without their approval, the US risks alienating its traditional friends and allies and the international community to a degree unprecedented in history. Trust in the good faith of the US on the part of other nations is crucial if we are to pursue our goals. We need their cooperation more than ever in confronting the world’s most urgent problems. Your administration has already demonstrated a shocking disinclination to work with the rest of the world on anything but US terms. (Strategic arms control, the World Court, and the environment are just the most obvious examples.)

I am no isolationist - I believe the US should take a pro-active, interventionist role as would befit a great nation among nations, and to defend liberty and justice whenever possible. I’m comfortable with the idea of the US as some sort of world policeman, but a policeman is an agent of the law, and must obey the law. I regret to say that your vision of the role of the US is more that of the bully of the town than of the cop. If the US goes to war with Iraq without the consent and participation of the UN and NATO, it will be one of the foulest, most dishonorable, and most damaging episodes in our history.

I am no letter-writer, and would apologize for my verbosity and other errors of style in this hastily-composed letter. (I would even apologize for my rudeness.) I can not make these arguments as comprehensively or persuasively as a real policy expert (my life being involved in other things), but the urgency of the situation demands that people let their voices be heard, so as to avoid, hopefully, a grave error.

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(US citizen, formerly of New York City)
Torino, Italy, Jan. 2003

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