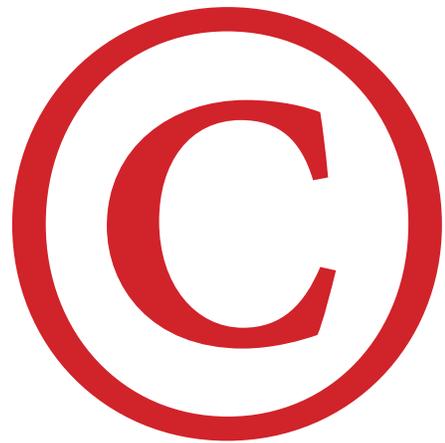


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Deseret News, Tuesday, December 31, 2002

Reasons for Iraq war lack weight

By David Keller

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, anything short of jingoism has been perceived as "unpatriotic." Unfortunately, dissent is suppressed by the fear of appearing unpatriotic, as Democratic leaders have illustrated in their reticence to criticize the Bush administration's proposal to invade Iraq.

If patriotism is defined as wishing the country one cherishes to flourish, then engaging in risky military action might not necessarily be "patriotic."

A close scrutiny of Bush's plan to attack Iraq reveals the argument to be incoherent at best and self-defeating at worst. And this is not even taking into account the cost of war or regional instability that an attack may precipitate. That Saddam Hussein is a cruel and despicable dictator is in itself not sufficient grounds for invasion.

A central reason given for attacking Iraq is that Saddam has systematically violated U.N. resolutions. Yet respect for international law has hardly been a defining feature of Bush's presidency. Bush has rebuffed the anti-ballistic missile treaty, undermined the new International Criminal Court and argued that American citizens are immune from its provisions, failed to sign the Kyoto Protocol to reduce global warming and resolutions securing women's and children's rights and avoided honoring the Geneva Conventions regarding the treatment of prisoners of war. Bush has made it clear, moreover, that if the United Nations does not act to his liking, the United States will act unilaterally.

It does not help Bush's case that U.S. allies willfully disregard U.N. resolutions: Morocco illegally occupies the Western Sahara, and Turkey portions of Cyprus.

Another reason stated for invading Iraq is Saddam's development of weapons of mass destruction. But there is no talk of "regime change" in North Korea, which has admitted to a nuclear program. If disarming "axis of evil" countries is a priority, invading a country that is known to have weapons should take precedence over invading a country that likely has weapons. Bush also claims that Iraq harbors al-Qaida operatives, although no evidence has been provided. This claim, however, is exceedingly dubious, since al-Qaida reviles secular regimes in Muslim countries just like Saddam's. Deposing Saddam and installing an Islamic theocracy is more consistent with al-Qaida objectives than forming alliances with him.

Al-Qaida, in fact, is a much more imminent menace to U.S. interests than Saddam. Attacking Iraq might weaken our ability to dismantle the terror network, inadvertently strengthening al-Qaida by inflaming Muslims around the world. Arabs and Muslims see an attack on Iraq less as a favor

to rid Iraqis of a brutal tyrant than a manifestation of anti-Arab, anti-Muslim prejudice in U.S. foreign policy. Attacking Iraq in the current political climate is about as prudent as smashing a hornets' nest.

Taken together, the case for attacking Iraq reflects Bush's radical new doctrine of "pre-emption": The United States is justified in taking military action to counter potential, not merely actual, aggression. Yet this is a horribly dangerous precedent to set: Unless the United States is hypocritical, we would have to endorse the actions of other nations in similar circumstances. Or the doctrine could be turned against us, justifying attacks against the United States if we were to be perceived as a threat to other nations' interests. Plainly, the United States should never initiate war without specific provocation.

It is particularly worrisome that if Saddam's weapons program is as advanced as the Bush administration claims, American casualties are certain to be high. Before marching our mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, sisters and brothers off to war, we want to be assured there are strong reasons for doing so. Bush has not provided them.

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