

Sorry, Hitchens, this time it should be 'no' to war

By Steven Lukes,
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Christopher Hitchens [1]’ wake-up call to opponents of the coming war in Iraq is presumably intended to convince those of us who are its targets. But convince us of what? Hitchens’ ever-vigorous prose tells us the time has come to take sides. At home and abroad, it seems, there is only one war and it is *already* taking place: it the war between the US and what he calls ‘the forces of reaction’.

Those of us who don’t join him in this analysis are, it would appear, ‘peaceniks’, ‘smart-ass critics and cynics’, who lack ‘self-criticism’, make ‘doom-laden predictions’ and exhibit ‘self-satisfied isolationism’. Our ‘past form’ is, apparently, one of opposing interventions in the Gulf, Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan.

This arousing war talk is disturbing. Why does Hitchens persist in identifying the growing anti-war movement [2] with the small sectarian left? The obvious truth is that most of those opposing the present war supported some or all of the previous interventions (I, for one, supported them all – and the Falklands war too, for that matter).

Such polemics are just what we don’t need at the present time. Broad-brush attacks on the character, motives and record of those you disagree with are strictly irrelevant to the matter at hand, which is to be clear about the disasters and dangers that we face and how best they are to be confronted. Just as irrelevant as pointing to other disasters and dangers or to their ‘American starting point’.

What are those disasters and dangers? Here too, I fear, talk of ‘the forces of reaction’ is just polemic that blocks thought. No one can seriously dispute the litany of repression and atrocities perpetrated by ‘the Muslim fundamentalists’ – specifically, the Taliban and al-Qaida. But the link between these and Saddam is even less than ‘oblique’ (Hitchens’ revealingly defensive word), and it isn’t rendered more convincing by enunciating the general truth that ‘reactionaries have a tendency to stick together’.

Despite relentless US administration attempts to redirect the emotional response aroused by 11 September 2001 on to Saddam Hussein, there is no credible evidence linking him with al-Qaida. Nor is it likely. It is palpable that world-roaming *Wahhabi* fanatics and the murderous, predatory dictatorship of Iraq have very different world views, purposes and interests. The former attract converts, self-sacrifice and admiration, while the latter survives through extremely brutal repression, surveillance and fear. Each mistrusts and despises the other.

Doubtless they might in principle cooperate in attacking common enemies. But impolitic US action could force a connection even sooner – for attacking and overthrowing the Saddam regime carries with it the serious danger of inflaming the former.

All of this is obscured by compendious talk of the 'forces of reaction', Muslim fundamentalists seeking to restore the Caliphate and 'Islamic fascism' (a doubly inaccurate phrase Hitchens often uses, since the *Wahhabi* fanatics are not fascist in any specific sense and the *Ba'athist* Saddam's Islamic credentials are both recent and merely strategic). It may generally be true that reactionaries tend to stick together but that doesn't mean we should lump them together when they pose different threats, on which we should focus. It is reaction that thrives on being indiscriminate.

Most obviously, Saddam's regime has been a catastrophe. Out of a once-modernising and relatively prosperous society, it has created a cruel and impoverished republic of fear [3] – a wasteland, where, since the Gulf War, a humanitarian disaster has taken place in which hundreds of thousands have died, for which the regime's manipulation of and reaction to the sanctions is largely responsible. The threat at home is simply that the regime continues. Its victims – especially the *Shi'ites* and above all the Marsh Arabs – can only welcome 'regime change'. The Kurds [4], despite their bitter history with Saddam, are rightly more apprehensive, fearing another US betrayal and the loss of their protected status.

The true case for war is pre-emption

But the case for war is not humanitarian intervention, so opposing it is not, as Hitchens suggests, to display indifference to human rights or to the cause of the Kurds.

The case for war is that we must pre-empt danger, to the region and the rest of us, and that invading Iraq now is the only option left. The argument has been made most powerfully and rigorously in Kenneth Pollack's *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* [5].

For Pollack [6], 'Saddam's pursuit of nuclear weapons is the real reason for invading' (he gives rather little importance to chemical and biological weapons). Saddam is 'a mass murderer, a repeat aggressor, and a serial miscalculator,' and all the evidence gives 'little reason to believe that he can be deterred once he acquires nuclear weapons.' Because 'his dominance of the Gulf region and its oil supplies would constitute a dire threat to US national security, and because the United States is the only country with the capability to block him from achieving those goals...the choice is fight Saddam and to remove him from power soon, before he has acquired nuclear weapons, or else fight him later once he has acquired nuclear weapons, when even the costs of victory could be devastating.' Moreover, the sooner the better: 'Saddam is working to reconstitute his weapons of mass destruction programs, and the more time he has, the more lethal the arsenal will become.'

Now *this* is a powerful case, properly made and to be taken seriously by opponents of the war. Pollack [7] considers and dismisses the alternative options: containment has failed, deterrence won't work, covert action and the Afghan approach (of local ground forces fighting with US air cover) are unfeasible. But it is not, in the end, persuasive – and certainly not as a case for a unilateral US–British invasion without United Nations backing. Pollack himself insists on the need for international legitimacy and for allies, not least for rebuilding Iraq afterwards.

The case is not persuasive because the danger is not imminent and the alternatives have not been exhausted: sanctions and inspections have been highly effective in the past. But, above all, the dangers of this pre-emptive war are imminent, extreme and ramifying if it is undertaken unilaterally. Victory in Iraq may be certain, but the flames of war can spread far and wide, spreading terrorism and insecurity and worldwide hostility to what will be seen as a US takeover of a region that contains more than half of the world's oil resources. Not to mention the dangers of the newly minted doctrine of pre-emption itself, which can quickly be learned by states across the globe that will be only too ready to reverse the faltering progress of international law.

So yes, Hitchens, we should all be awake. But we are awake. So please stop resorting to rhetoric whose alarm clock effect rings increasingly hollow, and rejoin the ranks of the thinking, where your wonderful intelligence has been so invigorating in the past.

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