



## The Search for Osama Hussein

October 14, 2002

It appears that war is imminent. Congress has given President George W. Bush authorization to commit United States troops to combat in Iraq contingent upon confirmation that the Middle East nation has access to weapons of mass destruction. In spite of reassurances by the White House that the United Nations will play a pivotal role in assessing the threat posed by Iraq, the Bush administration has given every indication that it is prepared to engage in a protracted battle to topple the Iraqi government. The president has defended his position as "regime change," in keeping with U.S. foreign policy.

We disagree.

Should the United States invade Iraq, unprovoked and without solid evidence of a real and viable threat to our national security, our standing in the international community will be severely diminished. Already many of our traditional allies have expressed unease at the seeming determination of the president to engage in war. Citizens, and many members of Parliament, of our strongest ally, the United Kingdom, have been vocal in their opposition to war despite Prime Minister Tony Blair's strong support of President Bush. The president has also come under strong criticism from former South African President Nelson Mandela who has raised substantive questions regarding Mr. Bush's motivations.

Following the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 there was a general consensus that our nation had no choice but to resort to force in Afghanistan. The destruction of the World Trade Center, attack upon the Pentagon and downing of an aircraft in Pennsylvania were ample evidence that Al Qaeda posed a significant threat to our nation. There was little disagreement with the president's contention that our only recourse was to respond with force, to dismantle the terrorist network and bring those responsible for the destruction on 9-11 to justice.

Somewhere along the way Mr. Bush made a turn toward Iraq. It is still not clear why, but it quickly became evident that more than Al Qaeda was driving the president to action. For months Mr. Bush began to assert that Iraq posed an imminent threat despite disagreement over the extent of the threat within his administration. Soon he began to infer that the terrorists and Iraq shared more than just hatred toward the United States. In time the president morphed the "enemy" and created Osama Hussein, the symbolic object of our anger, paranoia, and bewilderment toward a region, culture, and religion that we habitually misread and underestimate.

We are now thoroughly confused. What appeared to be a rationale and well-conceived strategy to ferret out the terrorist threat has been taken as a license by Mr. Bush to wage war. Our nation, long held as the bastion of democratic rule, is on the verge of betraying the very principles that set us apart from most of the world. In his rush to secure our nation, Mr. Bush may well set off a series of unintended events that will leave us less secure and unify a disjointed network of extremists against the United States and its allies.

Whatever the threat was, it is now heightened by the rhetoric of war that has engulfed the White House

in recent months.

We are troubled by the basis of Mr. Bush's actions and its timing. Our president has yet to present credible evidence that the government of Iraq has, or is capable of producing, weapons of mass destruction. Knowledgeable experts within the CIA, and former chief UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, have been insistent that Sadaam Hussein is presently not a threat. Moreover, it has appeared at times that Mr. Bush's motivation behind his pursuit of Hussein is wrapped up in paternal allegiance. This, despite the fact that seasoned veterans from the elder Bush's administration have been vocal in their opposition to military intervention in Iraq.

The timing of this campaign is also suspect. While there has been no smoking gun to suggest a "Wag the Dog" conspiracy, a faltering economy needs a diversion and a pending competitive election requires an issue to motivate voters. It is our hope that such political calculations did not come into play in the Oval Office.

Mr. Bush did not bring us to the brink of war by himself. Congress has to shoulder a considerable amount of the responsibility. For months, following the events of September 11, a wave of nationalism swept our lawmakers and tempered debate, silenced dissent, and put Congress in the background as the president took center stage. Members from both parties surrendered their constitutional roles, Republicans choosing to follow their leader and Democrats not wanting to appear unpatriotic. As Capitol Hill wrapped itself in the flag, civil liberties at home were threatened and our campaign in Afghanistan became less certain.

When voices of dissent finally did arise, the president had already managed, albeit awkwardly, to frame the debate. The not so subtle protestations of Secretary of State Colin Powell would soon be drowned by the Cheney-Rumsfeld-Rice tripartite. Powell's efforts to use the United Nations to force a diplomatic solution fell on deaf ears in an administration that has little regard for the international body. President Bush has marginalized the UN to the point where it will have no impact on his decision to commit our troops to battle.

So now what? Osama Hussein is either in a cave or making weapons of mass destruction, or both. Whatever his location or true identity, any campaign against him, without the equivalent of the Cuban missile crisis surveillance photos, is wrought with landmines. We can only hope that our allies will exert some influence and slow the U.S. war machinery before it kicks into high gear. Citizens of the United States and people throughout the world opposed to military action in Iraq must also continue to make their voices heard.

That is our duty.