

The Proposed Iraq War Resolution
A Town Hall Meeting with Congressman John Dingell
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I suspect all of us in this room recognize that we are in an era of historic transformation. The events of September 11, 2001 were unprecedented in their innovative violence and in the impact they had upon the way Americans think and act. The whole world has been affected by those wicked deeds.

We are now on the verge of what appears to be another historic event, one of our own making. The President and his key advisors are speaking of a US invasion of Iraq that would produce what they call "regime change." While our actions are still being debated, it could well be that by next semester there will be 200,000 American soldiers in Iraq. There is a Happy Face Scenario coming from the administration about this prospect--that the violence will be minimal, that the regime will fall and that the Iraqi people will rise up to create a stable, peaceful democracy happily integrated into the world system. How wonderful that would be. But thoughtful people are also speaking of a Downside Scenario that involves street-to-street fighting, disintegration, entanglement, and an escalation that could spiral out of control. There is no reason to speculate on which of these outcomes is more probable, but I have been impressed by the concerns of that unexpected collection of skeptics that includes key officials from the first Bush administration and numerous retired military leaders. Their arguments seem more cautiously reasoned and conservative than those of the War Hawks.

Sometimes when we are confused about an event it is good to look to those who went before us for wisdom (or lack thereof). I was reflecting this weekend upon four historic events that happened during my lifetime. Perhaps in combination these might help us understand what is happening today. Let me outline those for you.

The first has to do with the early years of the Cold War. By 1948 it was obvious to everyone that Joseph Stalin was a brutal dictator who had killed millions of his own people and was pushing his army into Eastern Europe. Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary had fallen

behind the Iron Curtain and more states were on the verge of collapse. America was caught off guard by this situation since Russia had been our staunch ally in the war against Nazism just a few years before. There was a school of thought in Washington that said we should confront that regime with military force. The Hawks were advocating a policy called **Rollback**. At the minimum this involved military action to push the Soviet Army out of Eastern Europe. At the maximum it involved regime change in Moscow. Its advocates argued that we should strike before the Russians acquired nuclear weapons, as they soon did in 1949. But there was a man in the State Department named George Kennan who had a different approach. He had no illusions about Joseph Stalin or the threat he presented, but he thought that a war would be a disaster. Kennan developed a doctrine that came to be called **Containment**. He said we should block future Soviet expansion and wait for the Soviet system to change from within. It took forty--five years for us to see the results, but in the end Containment worked, and a second nuclear war, following the one in 1945, was avoided.

The second example has to do with the **Bay of Pigs Invasion of 1961**. When John Kennedy became President he inherited a very serious situation, a Communist dictator on our shore. We were unsure whether Fidel Castro would endanger our security but there were many who saw him in the most threatening way, especially when he began to cozy up to the Soviet Union. In 1961 the President authorized a **Covert Invasion** of Cuba using US-backed Cuban forces. I was an undergraduate at the time and remember well the time before that invasion. We were told that Castro's support was very weak and that at the first sign of an invasion, there would be mass uprisings that would remove him. At the worst, the invading forces would have to establish a beach head and wait for Cuban military units to rebel. It would be a matter of weeks at the most, we were told, and Cuba would be free. In fact, it was a disaster. The invading forces never got off the beaches. The few who escaped into the hills were hunted down and killed or captured. We had to pay big ransoms to get the survivors out, and the blow to our credibility and prestige was considerable. The advocates of the invasion had an easy explanation for the defeat, that US combat forces were not directly involved. A bitter President Kennedy was convinced that it was a fiasco from the beginning, with or without US forces.

The third incident also involves Cuba and another nuclear war that did not happen. In 1962 the Russians set off on a dangerous adventure. They decided to introduce offensive nuclear-capable missiles into Cuba. No President of any party or ideology could have tolerated such a thing so there were only two outcomes, they pull out or we destroy the missile sites. What Kennedy knew was that if we hit the Russian positions, they could well retaliate with their nuclear weapons. (Only later, by the way, did we learn that the Russian commander in Cuba had authorization to use nuclear weapons in the event of an attack). The superb film *Thirteen Days*, which is based on memoirs and official records, describes decision making during that terrifying time when the world was on the brink of nuclear war. At a certain point, Kennedy was in the Oval Office with his advisors. He was very tense, knowing that he might well have to order strikes that would set off a war. He mentioned that he recently read Barbara Tuchman's book, *The Guns of August*, about the beginning of World War I. In distress and anger, he said to his advisors, "That war did not have to happen. It occurred because the leaders of the day were not smart enough to figure out how to avoid it. And **we** are about to get into a war if **we** are not smart enough to figure out how to avoid it." Kennedy--who had seen combat up close and knew it was not the clean and simple heroism of the movies--was prepared to go to war, but he saw war as the last, and least desirable, option.

Let me make a personal comment: I would feel so much more comfortable if I thought our president was saying such things to his advisors, or if I even thought he had read the book.

Finally, I have an anecdote from the Gulf War. I once had a conversation with the intelligence official who did an analysis of Iraqi troop movements and warned the White House that Iraq was going to invade Kuwait. This man became famous when Bob Woodward identified him by name in his book, *The Commanders*. When I met him, I asked why he thought the government didn't act on his intelligence. His answer was very interesting: Policy decisions are seldom based on intelligence. There is always contradictory evidence so policy

makers accept the intelligence they want and discredit or ignore that which does not support their position.¹

I thought of this as our President said recently that he favors a full debate on these issues but that he has intelligence the rest of the country does not have and he will make the final decision. I can't help but note that many of those who are pushing for this invasion, and cite intelligence data as the reason we can't wait, were in favor of these positions *before* they were in office and had access to that data. The current rhetoric is so similar to that of 1961, and the intelligence cited is so questionable, that I wonder exactly what our leaders are thinking.

Seizing the opportunity to remove that brutal and dangerous leader known as The Stalin of the Middle East is tempting, but the downside is very serious. The prospect of a military fiasco, of the destabilization of allied regimes, of the intervention of Israel, Turkey, or Iran, or of an explosion of violence against our citizens around the world are frightening. In 1990 the Pentagon estimated that American casualties in a full invasion of Iraq, including Baghdad, could be 30,000, of which 5,000-7,000 would be fatalities. So far, we have not heard a single estimate of how many American lives would be lost. And our leaders have not yet answered the three essential questions that they absolutely must address if they order our soldiers into combat: What is the mission? How do we define victory? And how do we get out?

Stalin was "contained" by firm but cautious policies. Is that a way out of this dilemma, a way that views war as the *last* option rather than the first?

¹Walter "Pat" Lang was the Defense Intelligence Agency official who correctly predicted that the 30,000 Iraqi soldiers massed on the Kuwaiti border in July, 1990 would invade. The common explanation was that they were there to intimidate the Kuwaitis. (I remember saying at the time that Saddam had just become the dominant power in OPEC without firing a shot). Lang analyzed the type of units moving south and noted that many of them were artillery and tank units, not the type used for intimidation. He sent a memorandum to the White House saying that Saddam had his forces in position for an invasion and was going to use them. He sent a follow up message two days later, 48 hours before the attack, with a blunt statement that an invasion was imminent. It is a historical curiosity that in his book, which was published in 1991, Woodward felt compelled to explain to his fairly-literate audience that the second message was sent by Electronic mail or E-mail, which allows instantaneous communication with large numbers of people at once.