CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

Taking Sides

I suppose I can just about bear to watch the "inspections" pantomime a second time. But what I cannot bear is the sight of French and Russian diplomats posing and smirking with Naji Sabry, Iraq's foreign minister, or with Tariq Aziz. I used to know Naji and I know that two of his brothers, Mohammed and Shukri, were imprisoned and tortured by Saddam Hussein—in Mohammed's case, tortured to death. The son of Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz was sentenced to twenty-two years of imprisonment last year; he has since been released and rearrested and released again, partly no doubt to show who is in charge. Another former friend of mine, Mazen Zahawi, was Saddam Hussein's interpreter until shortly after the Gulf War, when he was foully murdered and then denounced as a homosexual. I have known many regimes where stories of murder and disappearance are the common talk among the opposition; the Iraqi despotism is salient in that such horrors are also routine among its functionaries. Saddam Hussein likes to use as envoys the men he has morally destroyed; men who are sick with fear and humiliation, and whose families are hostages.

I don't particularly care, even in a small way, to be a hostage of Saddam Hussein myself. There is not the least doubt that he has acquired some of the means of genocide and hopes to collect some more; there is also not the least doubt that he is a sadistic megalomaniac. Some believe that he is a rational and self-interested actor who understands "containment," but I think that is distinctly debatable: Given a green light by Washington on two occasions—once for the assault on Iran and once for the annexation of Kuwait—he went crazy both times and, knowing that it meant disaster for Iraq and for its neighbors, tried to steal much more than he had been offered.

On the matter of his support for international nihilism, I have already written my memoir of Abu Nidal, the murderous saboteur of the Palestinian cause ["Minority Report," September 16]. I have also interviewed the senior Czech official who investigated the case of Mohamed Atta's visit to Prague. This same official had served a deportation order on Ahmed Al-Ani, the Iraqi secret policeman who, working under diplomatic cover, was caught red-handed in a plan to blow up Radio Free Iraq, which transmits from Czech soil. It was, I was told (and this by someone very skeptical of Plan Bush), "70 percent likely" that Atta came to Prague to meet Al-Ani. Seventy percent is not conclusive, but nor is it really tolerable. Meanwhile, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan holds several prisoners from the Ansar al-Islam gang, who for some reason have been trying to destroy the autonomous Kurdish regime in northern Iraq. These people have suggestive links both to Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. It will perhaps surprise nobody that despite Kurdish offers of cooperation, our intrepid CIA has shown no interest in questioning these prisoners. (Incidentally, when is anyone at the CIA or the FBI going to be *fired*?) People keep bleating that Saddam Hussein is not a fundamentalist. But he did rejoice in the attacks on New York and Washington and Pennsylvania, and he does believe that every little bit helps.

I am much more decided in my mind about two further points. I am on the side of the Iraqi and Kurdish opponents of this filthy menace. And they are on the side of civil society in a wider conflict, which is the civil war now burning across the Muslim world from Indonesia to Nigeria. The theocratic and absolutist side in this war hopes to win it by exporting it here, which in turn means that we have no expectation of staying out of the war, and no right to be neutral in it. But there are honorable allies to be made as well, and from now on all of our cultural and political intelligence will be required in order to earn their friendship and help isolate and destroy their enemies, who are now ours—or perhaps I should say mine.

Only a fool would trust the Bush Administration to see all of this. I am appalled that by this late date no proclamation has been issued to the people of Iraq, announcing the aims and principles of the coming intervention. Nor has any indictment of Saddam Hussein for crimes against humanity been readied. Nothing has been done to conciliate Iran, where the mullahs are in decline. The Palestinian plight is being allowed to worsen (though the Palestinians do seem to be pressing ahead hearteningly with a "regime change" of their own). These misgivings are obviously not peripheral. But please don't try to tell me that if Florida had gone the other way we would be in better hands, or would be taking the huge and honorable risk of "destabilizing" our former Saudi puppets.

Moreover, it's obvious to me that the "antiwar" side would not be convinced even if all the allegations made against Saddam Hussein were proven, and even if the true views of the Iraqi people could be expressed. All evidence pointed overwhelmingly to the Taliban and Al Qaeda last fall, and now all the proof is in; but I am sent petitions on Iraq by the same people (some of them not so naïve) who still organize protests against the simultaneous cleanup and rescue of Afghanistan, and continue to circulate falsifications about it. The Senate adopted the Iraq Liberation Act without dissent under Clinton; the relevant UN resolutions are old and numerous. I don't find the saner, Richard Falk–ish view of yet more consultation to be very persuasive, either.

This is something more than a disagreement of emphasis or tactics. When I began work for *The Nation* over two decades ago, Victor Navasky described the magazine as a debating ground between liberals and radicals, which was, I thought, well judged. In the past few weeks, though, I have come to realize that the magazine itself takes a side in this argument, and is becoming the voice and the echo chamber of those who truly believe that John Ashcroft is a greater menace than Osama bin Laden. (I too am resolutely opposed to secret imprisonment and terror-hysteria, but not in the same way as I am opposed to those who initiated the aggression, and who are planning future ones.) In these circumstances it seems to me false to continue the association, which is why I have decided to make this "Minority Report" my last one. ■