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The American Prospect

November 4, 2002

SECTION: FEATURES; Pg. 25

LENGTH: 2493 words

HEADLINE: Neither Consent nor Dissent;
Bush's uncontested war

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BODY:

AS PRESIDENT BUSH RUSHES HEADLONG INTO WAR with **Iraq**, there are endless reasons for concern; but the one that is most disturbing has been least remarked on. The president can be faulted for waiting so long to consult Congress, the United Nations, America's allies and the Middle Eastern nations likely to be affected (Jordan, Turkey, Iran). And he certainly can be faulted for rashness, impetuosity, arrogance and an impressive indifference to the rule of law -- even if, in the end, he is compelled to play by the UN rules that, ironically, he himself invoked. But accountability is a two-way street, and Americans should be equally concerned with their -- make that *our* -- dramatic failure to register in politically relevant terms the unease (if polls are to be believed) that we putatively feel about an **Iraq** invasion.

A few passionate Democrats -- Russ Feingold, Dennis Kucinich, Paul Wellstone and John Kerry, and (finally!) Al Gore and Ted Kennedy -- along with a handful of Republicans including Chuck Hagel and Dick Armey (!) have been audibly remonstrating with the administration. But the Democratic Party leadership has been working more to *change* the subject rather than to join the debate. More significantly, though there have been a few petitions and full-page ads, none of the national interest groups and social movements that might have an interest in slowing the rush to war has been heard from. Where is the women's movement? Sitting out the debate because certain varieties of fundamentalist Islamics belittle women? And the unions? Angry with free-trade liberals and third-world sympathizers who disparage textile and steel subsidies and refuse to feel their pain at jobs hemorrhaging abroad? What about the civil-liberties lobby? More interested in protecting those rounded up without warrant in the war on terrorism than protecting us from an unwarranted war? And the Greens? Oblivious to the connection between the oil lobby and the war lobby? And, again, where is the leadership of the Democratic Party? Playing the same election politics it accuses George W. Bush of playing by mortgaging its civic conscience to a desperate gamble that if it can give Bush his war it can get Americans to focus on the economy again?

WHAT'S GOING ON HERE IS AN UNHAPPY CONVERGENCE of trends that predate both the war fever and the Bush administration. First, there is a certain lassitude that appears to have resulted from the well-publicized erosion of social capital that Robert Putnam spent the last decade regretting. Putnam's chief worry was the impact on Democratic activism by citizens, and these worries now seem well-founded. The bridges and connections that link people locally are no longer as effective as they once were. Folks who neither eat nor pay nor learn nor pray together are not easily mobilized around national political debates.

Lassitude is also a consequence of several decades of privatization ideology that has made

government programs and public philosophy suspect even to liberals. If you can't trust government and you can't trust politics, then why bother to try to act? If markets are more efficacious than government institutions and consumers more powerful than citizens, there is no point in trying to change public policy. At best, we can boycott a war we don't approve of, but we can't stop it.

Political cynicism has been building for decades on the liberal left. It peaked with that toxic combination of policy compromises and personal scandals that engulfed the Clinton administration. Why does Jason Mark of the activist group Global Exchange seem so down on political action? Why does Andy Burns of the 180/Movement for Democracy and Education insist that "no one sees any real change coming out of Congress," leaving himself without a political strategy? (Both were quoted in *The American Prospect's* Oct. 7 issue.)

Cynicism is not only dispiriting, it is demobilizing. People who think their votes don't count -- or, as in Florida, don't even get counted -- are not prospects for political action. The liberal left seems particularly vulnerable on this score, in danger of simply collapsing under the weight of too much rapid change, too many counterintuitive issues, too much business-friendly Democratic Leadership Council centrism and too few electoral victories that, when they have come at all, have come at too high a price. Like the neoliberals it reviles, the left often appears to have given up on government, and on democracy itself.

AS THINGS STAND, IF THE PRESIDENT GOES TO WAR, then he is likely to go without eliciting either the consent or the dissent, the support or the opposition, of the storied American majority, more silent today than ever before at a moment when the raucous contestation of democratic deliberation is desperately needed. Progressives will blame the president and his Cold War veterans and his corporate honchos, but this won't wash.

We have to admit our own democratic complicity in the outcomes that our choices -- or our disengagement -- produce. The term-limits movement, for example, suggested a deep distrust by voters not of politicians or of the system but of voters themselves. Like an alcoholic hiding the bottle from himself, the American voter pleading for term limits seemed to be saying: "I don't trust myself! Don't let me do it -- unless I'm legislatively blocked, I may just go off the wagon and vote for the same stupid SOB I voted for the last three times!" In fact, we already have "term limits" -- they are called elections. But we no longer trust ourselves to discharge our civic responsibilities prudently or effectively. It's the same with the preoccupation with a constitutional limit on spending; the constitutionally authorized limit is Congress itself. Except we don't trust it to do what we want, or -- more to the point -- we don't trust ourselves to want what we supposedly should want.

This profoundly disturbing democratic distrust of democracy, this self-loathing tendency not to trust ourselves to act aright or even know what's right, is a form of moral disarmament -- and one that further empowers a president beset by no such doubts (and willing to enact his convictions at the drop of a hat). When the popular sovereign hesitates and falters, "the sovereign representative" is empowered to act as it will.

Our reticence to jump into the fray amounts to a full-scale retreat from politics. Nothing could be more dangerous -- not even the war itself. For the president to strike preemptively against a nation, however detestable its government, that has not attacked America is certainly an affront to the rule of law and a radical shift in American principles. But for those who know better and who oppose preemption to look on in truculent silence is an affront to democracy and a radical shift in our tradition of popular dissent. A people that abjures its own responsibility to judge those it elects, that alienates its own right to oversee and, where necessary, blocks imprudent acts by its representatives, is a people that has yielded its sovereignty.

The people of **Iraq** are not to blame for the despicable deeds of Saddam Hussein (one reason for not making war on them to remove him). He rules by brute force and intimidation, which is precisely our complaint about him. But we the people of the United States are fully responsible for George W. Bush and his deeds; that's what it means to live in a democracy, Florida and the Supreme Court notwithstanding. (That's another liberal cop-out; closely contested elections are also part of our system.) When the Iraqis and other enemies of America say, "We have nothing against the people of the United States, we are hostile only to its government," they project their own powerlessness on us, misjudging our culpability by reflecting on their own lack of responsibility. There is a world of difference, however. In a democracy, we are responsible for what our government perpetrates in our name, and we can and should be regarded as culpable for the consequences. Otherwise, there is no accountability, hence any democracy (which is more or less what the cynics are saying). But unless we are willing to join the America-bashing zanies who see no difference between the United States and **Iraq**, who insist America, too, is a "terrorist" state, we must acknowledge the president's preemptive unilateralism as our own.

President Harry Truman hung a sign in the oval office declaring, "The buck stops here." He had it half right. Finally, it is the sovereign American people who need to insist, "No, Mr. President, the buck stops with us."

LET'S BE CLEAR: I AM NOT APPEALING HERE TO FALSE consciousness, trying to suggest that while Americans appear to support the war they really don't or shouldn't.

Despite President Bush's ongoing general popularity (hovering in the high 60s), and despite months of an all-out media campaign by the administration to make its case for intervention, a CBS poll in late September reported that four out of every 10 Americans thought Congress had not asked enough questions about the president's **Iraq** policy. Moreover, slight but real majorities continued to want the United States to follow the recommendations of the United Nations, preferring that a vote in Congress come only *after* UN approval has been secured.

Polling is not politics, however. Registering opposition to a policy in private via a poll simply doesn't constitute citizenship. Contestation demands deliberation and information. The president once had to learn the names of foreign leaders and the geography of the foreign capitals from which they came. But how many Americans for or against the war can identify **Iraq's** neighbors or describe the geography and politics of the Kurdish minorities where the frontiers of **Iraq**, Syria and Turkey intersect? Can they tell us whether Saddam Hussein's "evil" lies in his being an Islamacist, a Marxist or a Baathist? Or what the difference is between the three? We tolerate ongoing popular ignorance in the domain of foreign policy more or less forever. When have presidential debates featured foreign policy? When has the evening news contained a quarter of the world events covered regularly by the British Broadcasting Corporation?

The blip of interest after September 11 dissipated in an orgy of White House moralizing in which the need for us to think subtly about the world (Why did this happen? What was the context for terrorism? Are there indirect ways in which the United States contributed to the conditions that made terrorism an option?) was replaced by a simplistic demand that we judge it ("the axis of evil") and fix it (preemptive war).

By conceiving of foreign policy as what America does *to* rather than *with* other nations, the U.S. government and its citizens are relieved of the need to know anything about our enemies (other than that we are superior to them) and anything about our friends (other than what they need to do for us). From the president on down, we have been exempted from the demands of historical complexity, political uncertainty and the gray zones where right and wrong, black and white, are insufficient guides to effective policy. The media

cottoned to this easy (and ratings-friendly) line, reinforcing simplemindedness by turning foreign policy into still another installment of *Crossfire*: "Are you with the president or are you another flabby peacenik who still doesn't get what 9-11 was all about?" more or less defined the debate.

THIS IS NOT THE PLACE TO ARGUE THE MERITS OF going or not going to war -- although along with the realists (who include the former chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, as well as such conservative national security stalwarts as Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski), I am fully convinced that the argument against can be made on prudential and realpolitik grounds no less than on moral and legal ones. But there is also a case for war, even a case for preemption -- yet the debate between the two arguments has not been meaningfully joined in the media or among the general public. What is troubling is the absence of a real debate in the Congress, in the media, in the schools and the universities, and in the streets.

Where are the teach-ins? During the Vietnam War, Americans changed the policies of their government and, in time, changed the government itself through public debate, educational engagement and political action that included mobilization, demonstrations and civil disobedience. It is because no conscript sons and daughters of the middle class are at risk that the thought of a tide of body bags leaves the progressive movement cold? Or is it because smart weapons will do the job of killing without putting too many Americans at risk?

There are myriad core questions that have scarcely been asked by the American public (though some have been gently posed in opinion-elite op-eds and congressional hearings). Around such questions a national debate about the future of American in an interdependent world needs to be kindled.

Policy debates are rooted in reasonable arguments and prudent judgments, not science. There can and will be differences among the goodwilled and fair-minded. But until the hard questions are posed to and debated by the American public and its representatives in the media and the government, until the Bush administration deigns to answer them other than by impugning the patriotism of those who pose them, the country surely cannot afford to enter into a war as risky, potentially costly to ourselves and others, and scarily precedent busting as this one.

On one thing the president is right: We ought to support vibrant democratic states throughout the world. But perhaps we ought to start (as we do with the fight on terrorism) at home. We've got the USA Patriot Act; we need a USA Citizens' Act. We've got a Department of Homeland Security; now we need a Department of Homeland Democracy. In the 19th century, critics of representation worried that electoral democracy opened up an abyss between a people and their delegates. At the moment of election, the people's representatives started to become distanced from them. By calling this the iron law of oligarchy, they suggested that the process was inevitable.

Our response must be to make democracy stronger, more engaged and participatory -- especially when it is under siege. This is merely to recognize that democracy starts not with our leaders and representatives and the quality of their administration but with us, with the quality of our citizenship. For my own part, I intend to wear a lapel button that reads "WTPx2!" It'd be my way of saying, "We the people want to participate!" You don't have to be against war to wear it. You only have to be in favor of debate and deliberation first.

GRAPHIC: Photo 1, **Protest? What protest?**; Photo 2, Real **protest:** May 9, 1970; Photos 1 and 2, AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTO

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