

State of the Union

By Conn Hallinan

There were no surprises in President Bush's address to Congress, except maybe the firm statement that within a month our country will be at war. The State of the Union is less a blueprint for the future than a series of metaphors and symbols, be they words like "resolve" or the empty chair in the President's box representing the dead of September 11, 2001.

Sitting in that box was a firefighter hero from the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon, as well as an Afghanistan veteran. But absence can be a powerful symbol as well, and there were numerous metaphorical blank spots in the tier of seats that surrounded the President's family.

There were not many allies in that box: no France, no Germany, no Canada, no Russia, no China.

There were no representatives of the 160,000 veterans suffering from Gulf War Syndrome.

There were none of the 13 million Iraqi children that, according to Eric Hoskins, leader of the Independent Study Team, "are at a grave risk of starvation, disease, death and psychological trauma." The Team is in Iraq examining the possible impact of war.

There were no governors, whose states are going bankrupt while the White House cuts domestic spending, jacks up the deficit to \$315 billion, and gets ready to spend \$100 billion plus on a new war.

There was no one representing the 42 million Americans without health care, or college students, whose average educational debt is now \$27,600. Some would have showed up if they could have.

Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi might have made it, but not many Italians. Most of them are deeply opposed to the upcoming war. Tony Blair would have been there, but not the 68%

of the British who take exception to his war policy. Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar would have made a solo appearance: The Spanish church, nongovernmental organizations, and the opposition issued a blistering "no to war" statement January 26.

Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's "new Europe" would have had seats—Poland, Rumania, Hungary, and Bulgaria—but given that their combined Gross Domestic Product couldn't spring for a single B-2 bomber, it's hard to imagine how they will be of much help.

The oil companies could have had their own section, although they didn't really need it. They *are* the administration, including the President (Arbusto Energy and Harkin Oil); Vice President Dick Cheney (Halliburton Oil); Army Secretary Thomas White (Enron); Commerce Secretary Don Evans (Tom Brown Inc., an oil exploration company); and National Security Adviser, Condoleezza Rice (Chevron).

Lest anyone dismiss the oil connection as "cynical," keep the following in mind: According to Cheney's National Energy Policy Development Group, U.S. domestic oil production will decline 12% over the next 20 years, while oil consumption will increase by one-third, two-thirds of which must be imported. Since the Middle East has 65% of the world's oil reserves, and Iraq might just have as much as—or more than—Saudi Arabia, is it "cynical" to suggest that oil is a big part of this? As one unnamed U.S. diplomat told the *Sunday Herald* (Scotland), "the impending U.S. regime change in Baghdad is a strategic necessity."

Also notably missing from the box were the majority of economists who think the administration's \$674 billion tax cut for the wealthy is seriously loopy and will have virtually no effect on stimulating the economy.

While growth is up slightly (just over 2%) so is joblessness, and if unemployment doesn't start coming down from its present 6%, consumers may stop using their plastic. Watch out then. "The American consumer has been the last gasp for the U.S. economy," says Stephen Roach, chief economist for Morgan Stanley, "If the consumer weakens further, there is not a whole lot left."

If the war goes wrong (and with war, one can never tell), the Center for Strategic and International Studies projects that the jobless rate could jump to 7.5% and the price of gaso-

line to \$3 a gallon. That would tank the economy.

As the \$10 trillion American economy goes, so goes most the world.

Europe's financial situation is delicate; Japan is recession-bound; Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore are in trouble; and Latin America is still on life support. "This is not a good time for the world to be able to absorb the cost of war," says Brian Fabbri, an economist with the French bank BNP Paribas.

And yet we go to war regardless of the domestic and international conse-

quences and without even a dim idea of what of lies at the other end. "War destroys any conception of goals, including any conception of the goals of war," the writer/philosopher Simone Weil once noted, "It even destroys the idea of putting an end to war."

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