

While Criticizing Implementation, Kerry Endorses Bush's Unilateralist Agenda

By Stephen Zunes | October 5, 2004

Democratic nominee John Kerry's foreign policy speech at New York University has been widely hailed as a long-overdue effort to place some daylight between himself and President Bush regarding Iraq. In his September 20 address, the Massachusetts senator appropriately took the president to task for launching the war prematurely, mishandling the occupation, misleading the American public regarding the deteriorating situation on the ground, and pursuing policies that have weakened America's security interests.

However, the speech also contained a number of disturbing elements regarding how Kerry would handle Iraq as president and why he voted to authorize the invasion in the first place. More disturbingly, Kerry's speech appears to endorse the Bush administration's efforts to undermine the United Nations and international law and its penchant for unilaterally imposing American military force in contravention of international norms.

Despite Kerry's belated acknowledgement that the war was a mistake, he insists that now "we must do everything in our power to complete the mission...[and] get the job done." This sounds disturbingly familiar to the line we heard during the late 1960s and early 1970s by supposed "moderates" who argued that, while we should never have become embroiled in the Vietnam conflict, "now that we're there, we need to stay and finish the job."

The nearest thing Kerry seems to offer in terms of a withdrawal strategy is the Iraqi equivalent of "Vietnamization," encouraging the government that Washington installed in Baghdad to train more Iraqis to kill Iraqis so as to minimize the number of American casualties. Kerry says it could take about four years to complete the process, which is the same amount of time between Richard Nixon's inauguration as president in January 1969 and the Paris Peace Agreement in January 1973, among the bloodiest years of the Vietnam War. Kerry, then, is essentially proposing four more years of war. One can only think of John Kerry as a young veteran in 1971 testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, asking "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"

Kerry has long emphasized that he could bring in allies to help the United States fight this bloody urban insurgency, citing the Bush administration's arrogant and dismissive treatment of allies regarding U.S. policy toward Iraq. Kerry, however, has shown the same kind of arrogance: when the newly elected government of Spain

announced last spring that it would fulfill its longstanding promise to withdraw its forces from Iraq unless the mission was placed under the United Nations, Kerry responded by saying, "I call on Prime Minister Zapatero to reconsider his decision and to send a message that terrorists cannot win by their act of terror." To Kerry, apparently, if a government insists that there be a UN mandate in place before they participate in the occupation of a foreign country, they are sending the wrong message to terrorists.

While a President Kerry would indeed probably have greater respect among most foreign leaders than President Bush, the main problem in getting help in Iraq at this point is not a matter of personal style or diplomatic acumen, but the failure of the policy itself.

In bowing to growing demands that he come out against war, Kerry has begun to rewrite history to justify his earlier pro-war stance: For example, Kerry claims that under the circumstances present in October 2002, when he and his congressional colleagues made the fateful decision to grant President Bush unprecedented war-making authority, "any president would have needed the threat of force to act effectively." Kerry went on to say that, "The idea was simple: We would get the weapons inspectors back in to verify whether or not Iraq had weapons of mass destruction."

This is an extraordinarily misleading statement, however. Saddam Hussein had finally agreed to unconditional unfettered United Nations inspections as demanded by the UN Security Council on September 16, nearly four weeks prior to Kerry's vote authorizing the U.S. invasion.

Similarly, Kerry claims that, had he been president, he would not have invaded Iraq. Yet when President Bush launched the invasion in March 2003, Kerry supported him, even backing a Republican-sponsored resolution which declared that the U.S. Senate "commends and supports the effects and leadership of the president... in the conflict with Iraq."

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Dismissing the UN

In any case, the fact remains that he joined the majority of his Senate colleagues in granting President Bush the right to invade Iraq at whatever time and under whatever circumstance he so chose, a decision he defends to this day. Despite the disastrous consequences of that vote, Kerry insisted during his NYU speech that “Congress was right to give the president the authority to use force to hold Saddam Hussein accountable.”

Why, though, was it up to the president of the United States to “hold Saddam Hussein accountable?” The dispute regarding the destruction of Iraq’s proscribed weapons, delivery systems, and weapons programs and the ability of UN inspectors to verify these actions was never between Iraq and the United States; it was between Iraq and the United Nations. It was therefore up to the UN Security Council, not any individual member state, to hold the Iraqi regime accountable. Kerry, however, arrogantly insists—the UN Charter notwithstanding—that the U.S. government alone has the right to decide how and under what circumstances regimes being challenged by the United Nations should be dealt with.

In fact, Kerry joined the Republicans in voting down a substitute amendment proposed by Michigan Democrat Carl Levin that would have authorized the use of force against Iraq if it was sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council. It was the UN Security Council that had imposed these demands on the Iraqi regime in the first place and threatened Iraq with serious consequences if continued in non-compliance. However, Kerry joined the Republicans in insisting instead that President Bush should be able to launch an invasion on his own without Security Council authorization.

Ironically, when U.S. allies have defied UN Security Council resolutions, Kerry has defended them. For example, he has supported Israel’s annexation of occupied East Jerusalem, which Israeli forces seized in June 1967, despite a series of UN Security Council resolutions demanding that Israel rescind its annexation (such as resolutions 262 and 267). He has also endorsed the rightist Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon’s efforts to colonize large sections of the West Bank, despite a series of resolutions calling on Israel to withdraw from these illegal settlements (such as resolutions 446, 452, 465, and 471).

Thus, in John Kerry’s world, the United States alone can decide which United Nations Security Council resolutions to enforce and how they are enforced. No less than President Bush, Kerry seeks to effectively overturn the post-World War II international system based upon the rule of law and collective security in order to forcibly impose a Pax Americana.

Despite the ways Kerry and his supporters might want to spin it, the Democratic nominee—like President Bush—is a militarist and a unilateralist quite willing to undermine the authority of the United Nations in order to assert American hegemony in that oil-rich region.

Indeed, the only thing more dangerous than electing John Kerry president of the United States would be to re-elect George W. Bush.

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