

Statement of Congressman Sanders on 9/6/2002 regarding the growing tensions between the United States and Iraq

There is no doubt that the world community must deal seriously with the vicious Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. He is an aggressive dictator who is interested in acquiring weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. The world and the people of Iraq would be much better off without him.

President Bush is pushing for Congress to grant him unconditional authority to wage war on Iraq with or without international support. Giving any President a blank check to wage war is a dangerous policy that undermines the Constitutional checks and balances that the Founders of this nation wisely established. That being said, let me offer four substantive reasons why the President's approach is misguided and, in the long run, is likely to do a lot more harm than good.

First, watching fictionalized accounts of war in movies, we sometimes forget just how horrible and full of suffering war really is. We should remember that in the 1991 Persian Gulf war, in which we won an overwhelming military victory, 146 Americans died and close to 100,000 today are suffering from Gulf War Illness, including some of our fellow Vermonters. In Iraq it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of women and children died, either directly or indirectly, as a consequence of that war. As a caring nation, we should do everything we can to prevent the horrible suffering of war. War must be the last recourse in international relations, not the first.

Second, if the United States believes that it has the right to launch a "preemptive attack" without the support of the United Nations, then any country in the world can do the same thing. If China wants to invade Taiwan for 'security reasons,' how would we have any moral authority to stop them? Already, President Putin of Russia is using almost the same language as Bush to justify a possible Russian invasion of Georgia. At a time when at least eight nations have nuclear weapons, the United States should be doing all that it can to prevent war, rather than providing a precedent for other countries to go to war.

Third, the United States is now involved in an extremely difficult and unprecedented effort against international terrorism, in part to bring to justice those who committed the atrocious deed of September 11. We should heed the warning of Brent Scowcroft, former National Security Advisor for Republican President George Bush, Sr.: "An attack on Iraq at this time would seriously jeopardize, if not destroy, the global counter-terrorist campaign we have undertaken."

The simple truth is that a rash military campaign against Iraq threatens to fracture the coalition we have built against terrorism. Many of these nations vigorously oppose a U.S. invasion of Iraq. President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt recently said, "Striking Iraq is something that could have repercussions and post-strike developments. We fear chaos happening in the region." A first-strike war on Iraq would likely create massive anti-American feeling among Muslims throughout the world - and many others as well. Ironically, such a war could result in a significant increase in recruits for Osama bin Laden. And there may be other serious, 'unintended consequences,' such as a major escalation of the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

Fourth, at a time when this country has a \$6 trillion national debt and is not meeting the needs of its elderly, its veterans and its young, we should be clear that a war and a long-term American occupation of Iraq could be an extremely expensive proposition. Unlike the cost of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, which was shared among the international community, the U.S. will have to pick up the entire cost, which will undoubtedly be in the tens or even hundreds of billions of dollars. Are we prepared to forgo a strong Medicare prescription drug benefit, adequate funding of education and veterans' needs, affordable housing, environmental protection and many other needs, before we have exhausted every means of avoiding this war?

There is a better approach than the one sought by the President. Iraq says that it will let weapons inspectors in. Some say that Saddam Hussein is not serious about this offer. I say, let's call his bluff. In my view, the U.S. must work with the United Nations to make certain, within clearly defined time-lines, that the U.N. inspectors are allowed to undertake an unfettered search for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and to destroy them when found. If Iraq resists inspection and elimination of stockpiled weapons, the United Nations should authorize international military intervention to force compliance. This will accomplish our goal of disarming Saddam Hussein without a massive military invasion and large-scale occupation.