

COMING TO TERMS WITH CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS ON IRAQ

Mark E. Madsen
April 2004

mark@mmadsen.org
<http://blog.mmadsen.org>

Introduction

In February of this year, I spent a day in San Francisco, walking and talking with a long-time friend. We'd not seen each other in the flesh in several years, so the conversation roamed widely between the upcoming election, economics, business, and – *of course* – the situation in Iraq. As we discussed the war and subsequent occupation, we kept circling back to a question: “*what’s up with Christopher Hitchens?*” My friend had introduced me to Hitchens’ work some years ago, and we both deeply respect his iconoclastic yet principled stances on a variety of issues.

But neither of us seemed to understand why Hitchens was publicly supporting the war in Iraq, and more to the point, was acting like a booster for the Bush Administration. Frankly, it seemed out of character. Hitchens – longtime opponent to hypocrisy and the other seductions of power – is writing *Fighting Words* – a column on *Slate* chronicling his support for the war. My friend and I felt confused, and possibly even a little betrayed, by someone who (we thought) should have been on the front lines helping demolish the web of lies surrounding the war.

Over the last month, I’ve been engaged in a personal journey to understand Hitchens’ position on the Iraq war, purely from published writings. I began by attempting to understand Hitchens’ position, but his work quickly became a lens through which I was able to better see and test my own preconceptions.

My Prior Position on the War in Iraq

At the outset it is appropriate to ask why Hitchens’ support for the Iraq War was so disturbing. Starting out, my position on Iraq mirrored that of many progressives. Iraq, I believed, was an unnecessary war begun because of the ideological and economic commitments of the Bush Administration. Attacking Iraq was, I believed, a distraction from our efforts to track and shut down al-Qaeda. It seemed like containment had already worked with Iraq and that given no real evidence of WMD, regime change (which I recognized as a good thing) might be brought about without an invasion. Furthermore, I believed that the American people, not to mention the rest of the world, had been lied to by the administration in an effort to justify the war without discussing their “real” strategy or motivations. And finally, I believed that invading Iraq was a dangerous move if our goal was to slow the spread of anti-American jihadist sentiment worldwide.

These views are, by now, not exceptional. If anything, they are the core of a developing “orthodoxy” about the war on the part of opponents of the Bush Administration. These views, however, were – and are – pretty far from those espoused by Hitchens, who has worked long and hard to debunk nearly every aspect of the position I outlined above.

Hitchens on Iraq

Hitchens has never made a secret of his support for “regime change” in Iraq, and has written a regular column in *Slate* to “test short-term analyses against longer-term ones, while

simultaneously subjecting long-term positions or convictions to shorter-term challenges.”¹ In a series of essays written before, during, and after military operations in Iraq, Hitchens attempted to record how well his views would hold up:

“I decided some time ago that I was, brain and heart, on the side of the ‘regime change’ position. So I am setting this down, without any throat-clearing or on-the-side wagering, to see how it holds up a few weeks from now. I really am making the attempt to argue in the future, as well as about the future.”²

What one discovers in reading Hitchens’ essays in Slate is that he is entirely free of the usual arguments for (or against) the war that one reads in the U.S. media. To Hitchens, intervention in Iraq isn’t necessarily connected to the nebulous “war on terror” – although he does continue to believe that Hussein provided more support for terrorist groups than the current liberal orthodoxy does. Intervention in Iraq, for Hitchens, is nothing more or less than the keeping of a promise. In an interview with Tony Jones on ABC Australia, Hitchens comments on Iraq and the notion of “pre-emptive” war:³

Hitchens: Well, pre-emption is a word that gets me terribly excited, I have to admit.

Jones: Why is that?

Hitchens: No, I mean I certainly thought – have thought for a long time – that Saddam Hussein should have been removed at the end of the Gulf War in 1992. A sort of promise was made to the Iraqi people to that effect at that time and not kept and as a result a very large number of good people are dead who should be alive and for an extra 10 years a lot of very bad people carried on being alive who ought to have been dead. Iraq was just saved from itself as a complete meltdown of a state and a society, which would have been too much of a risk to take for the rest of the world given its military strength and its enormous oil resources. As it is, it is quite a job getting a pulse back into what’s left of a society and economy run for so long by a psychopathic crime family.

As an additional argument for regime change, Hitchens notes the improvements that have already been made in Kurdistan under the protection of “no-fly” zones since 1992:

And before our eyes we have the example of the northern sixth of Iraq, redeemed for over a decade from Saddam’s depraved rule. Here we find the beginnings of a

¹ Hitchens, *A Long Short War: The Postponed Liberation of Iraq*, p. v. (hereafter referred to as ALSW)

² Hitchens, *ALSW*, p. 5

³ Tony Jones, ABC Australia, February 26, 2004

multi-party system, with elections, twenty-one newspapers, four female judges, and oil revenues spent on civil reconstruction and not the upkeep of a sadistic junta. This is not Utopia, but neither is it Utopian to say that in Kurdistan...regime change has been demonstrated in practice....A maimed and traumatized Iraq is in our future no matter what we do: It would be the height of callousness to just let it melt down and see what happened.⁴

The overall impression one gets is that Hitchens understands the situation on the ground in Iraq and Kurdistan from personal experience, and that experience is a haunting one. He has little patience for those whose arguments against US action in Iraq revolve around abstractions or domestic political agendas (such as general opposition to Bush):

...the opponents of the policy have done no better than act as if Iraq had nothing to do with them and maintain that things were all right as they were, or at any rate could only be made worse by an intervention. The idea that Iraq's state and society were headed for confrontation and implosion anyway just doesn't occur to such minds.⁵

Nor does he have much patience or sympathy for liberal critiques of the war which stem from a philosophical commitment to pacifism:

“As Frederick Douglass once phrased it, those who want liberty without a fight are asking for the beauty of the ocean without the roar of the storm.”⁶

In this, Hitchens shows himself to be more closely allied with an older, more militant version of the Left than the post-1960's peace movement. He clearly believes that liberty and freedom from oppression are worth fighting for:

“A confrontation with such regimes, in which the citizen is the property of the state and in which only cruelty and cunning are official virtues, seemed unpostponeable. Nonetheless, it was postponed as long as possible. There was a general phenomenon of underreaction. Saddam Hussein, ever after his crazy aggression of 1990, and even after his defeat in Kuwait, was allowed to remain in control of his republic of fear. Slobodan Milosevic burned and looted and slaughtered his way across Bosnia and Kosovo before finally exhausting the patience of the international

⁴ Hitchens, *ALSW*, p.11

⁵ Hitchens, “The Literal Left,” *Slate*, Dec 4. 2003.

⁶ Hitchens, *ALSW*, p. 101

community. North Korea was exacting bribes in the form of food aid and even nuclear reactors until detected red-handed in the fraud.”⁷

In short, Hitchens’ views on the war stem from a deep-seated humanitarian impulse, as well as the desire to defend and extend what he sees as the virtues of liberal democracy (in its original sense) and secular government (as opposed to theocracy). His views are more complex than is often apparent in the short *Fighting Words* essays, however, as readers of his books will appreciate.

Hitchens on the Bush Administration’s Handling of Iraq

Turning to from Iraq proper to the Bush Administration itself, Hitchens is well aware that the Bush administration has manipulated evidence and given contradictory justifications for the war. In discussing Iraqi sovereignty with Tony Jones, Hitchens clearly notes the artificial, political nature of the handover date:

In principle, it’s a very good thing for the U.S. to have an early date for the transfer of sovereignty. After all, that’s what everybody wants. The country is Iraqi. It should be governed by Iraqis. There’s nothing to quarrel with in setting an early date, but there are people more and more who are calling it the Karl Rove deadline, a reference to the President’s extremely intelligent and rather imaginative political campaign chief of staff. Since everything else has been, what shall we say, at hazard, everything else has been open for negotiation it is a bit suspicious that only one thing seems to be absolutely written in stone and that’s the handover date.⁸

Nor does Hitchens appear to buy the administration’s arguments about an “intelligence failure”:

...nobody really believes that it was just an intelligence failure. I mean, obviously, there must be a suspicion that there was a political conditioning of it. And that in theory can’t be found for or against by the inquiry.⁹

Although he recognizes the administration’s behavior, Hitchens nevertheless fails to put any effort into a critique. Instead, he seems to be following their lead in attacking Bush administration critics such as Richard Clarke:

To listen to Clarke now, you could almost imagine that the invasion of Afghanistan and eviction of the Taliban—the actual first response of the administration to Sept.

⁷ Hitchens, *ALSW*, p. 4

⁸ Tony Jones, ABC Australia, 2/26/04

⁹ Tony Jones, ABC Australia, 2/26/04

11—had not taken place. To listen to Clarke, also, you would suppose that any Iraqi connection to terrorism was sucked straight out of Rumsfeld's or Wolfowitz's thumb....But in my experience, dud theories die only to be replaced by new and even dumber ones. The current reigning favorite is that fighting al-Qaeda in Iraq is a distraction from the fight against al-Qaeda.¹⁰

This is disappointing stuff, coming as it does from one of the best-informed, honest, and well-read journalists of our time. Readers of Clarke's book will perceive Hitchens' remark in the first sentence quoted above as so much hyperbole¹¹. Clarke's book (and others, such as Steve Coll's *Ghost Wars*) amply documents two decades of activity leading up to the invasion of Afghanistan in the autumn of 2001. Far from arguing against it or minimizing its importance, Clarke repeatedly chafed against the limitations of U.S. policy. It is simply disingenuous to point at Clarke and argue otherwise.

Hitchens' second argument in the quotation above is less inflammatory but just as clearly incorrect. The war and reconstruction effort in Iraq is *demonstrably* using resources which could be used elsewhere to combat al-Qaeda or shore up homeland security. Highly trained Special Forces, fluent in Farsi, Pushtun, and other key languages, were pulled from Afghanistan prior to the Iraqi invasion and replaced by units with no applicable language skills. Underestimates of required troop strength for Iraq has meant that units have been drained from elsewhere, leaving other areas of the globe (including Afghanistan) under staffed. And domestically, the massive expenditures in Iraq take priority over proper funding for IRS inspectors to trace terrorist funding, port authority funding to search incoming cargo, and Border Patrol funding to tighten our border security. These are just a sample of the anti-terrorism initiatives which are adversely affected by our Iraqi commitments.¹²

Hitchens claims that Iraq isn't a distraction from fighting al-Qaeda, it's an integral part of that battle. His column on Clarke attempts, yet again, to shore up the argument that fighting Saddam is part and parcel of fighting al-Qaeda. The evidence he cites, however, is peripheral at best, indicating long-standing "mercenary" sales of technology and expertise by Saddam's Iraq to extremist groups. Hitchens also returns to Hussein's harboring of Abu Abbas and the Abu Nidal connection. These connections are undeniable, and Hitchens is correct to debunk the idea that there is "no connection" between Hussein's government and terrorist

¹⁰ Hitchens, "Clarke's Progress," *Slate*, March 29, 2004. <http://slate.msn.com/id/2097901/>

¹¹ It's unclear whether Hitchens had read Clarke's book when writing his 3/29/04 column, since the essay only mentions his testimony and discussion of a previous book by Benjamin and Simon

¹² Ample documentation of the underfunded nature of homeland security is available in the Feb 2004 report of the House Select Committee on Homeland Security:
http://www.house.gov/hsc/democrats/issues_am_at_risk.shtml

groups, but that's a very different thing than saying that rounding up and stopping al-Qaeda is best accomplished by toppling Saddam, given that connections seem to be indirect and opportunistic. No doubt the fighting in Iraq will give us a chance to target al-Qaeda operatives, but that's hardly the same thing as saying that Iraq is the main front in a campaign against al-Qaeda.

There's *plenty* of evidence linking al-Qaeda with state sponsorship – if you replace every instance of “Iraq” with “Iran” or “Saudi Arabia” in Hitchens' discussions of the subject, you would be fairly close to the picture that is available elsewhere. Connections with Saudi Arabia are well-known and require no repetition here. Iranian support for al-Qaeda has been less well documented, but is substantial nonetheless. Hezbollah, traditionally based and focused in southern Lebanon but funded by Iran, has worked with al-Qaeda on a number of occasions.¹³ Iran has also semi-officially harbored al-Qaeda members and leaders fleeing Afghanistan over their shared border. Iran has pursued arrests, but only after considerable pressure from the United States.

Prior to 9/11, however, support from Iraq to al-Qaeda is either non-existent or at least extremely well-hidden¹⁴. It is clear that an al-Qaeda-related group (Ansar al-Islam) flourished in the northern region *outside Saddam's control* rather than in the Sunni Triangle. Only *following* the ouster of Hussein, however, have al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups poured into Iraq, in a clear failure of U.S. ability to secure the newly liberated country. Obviously, this is a problem requiring vigilance and firm action, *but it's not the reason we invaded Iraq*.

The impression one gets throughout the Slate essays is that Hitchens isn't particularly concerned whether the Administration's arguments for war were based on facts or not, based on open justification or hidden agendas. The Administration's invasion of Iraq to force regime change corresponds to Hitchens' desire for regime change, and thus he doesn't seem to care too much about the rationales with which the war was sold to Congress or the American people. Hitchens is simply not applying his usual skepticism and rigor to analyzing the Bush Administration and its justifications for war. And ultimately, I find that disturbing – lesser hypocrisy on the part of the Clinton administration resulted in Hitchens deploying all of his rhetorical talents to pillory them in numerous essays, and ultimately a book entitled “*No One Left to Lie To: The Values of the Worst Family*.” Where is that rhetorical talent now?

Nor has Hitchens addressed the web of misdirection that surrounds Bush family business dealings throughout the Middle East, including the bin Laden family itself. Of course, he

¹³ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A2324-2002Jun29¬Found=true>

¹⁴ Instances of *contact* have been documented, but evidence of collaborative support is simply lacking.

recognizes that our leadership has long been involved in creating, supporting, and profiting from “client states” in the region – including Saddam Hussein himself. But based on the principle that being wrong in the past doesn’t mean you should keep on making bad decisions, Hitchens believes an aggressive approach to this history is the best approach:

These root causes lay in the political slum that the United States has been running in the region, and in the rotten nexus of client states from Riyadh to Islamabad. Such causes cannot be publicly admitted, nor can they be addressed all at once. But a slum-clearance program is beginning to form in the political mind.¹⁵

Certainly it’s hard to disagree on the key point: addressing the current difficulties in the region will definitely require the U.S. to re-evaluate our policy of supporting repressive and corrupt regimes purely in pursuit of our own interests. Nevertheless, Hitchens seems wholly uninterested in pursuing a critique of how the combined efforts of Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and several generations of Bush family politicians have created the client states with which we now must deal.¹⁶ Is this history really so tangential to Hitchens’ own goals of fostering regime change and liberalization in the region? Wouldn’t a firm critique of the entanglement between foreign policy and private profits be an essential part of ensuring that we don’t create future situations like the one we face in Iraq? And why can the causes of the current situation not be “publicly admitted”? Doesn’t that fly in the face of the democratic ideals Hitchens wishes to defend?

A double standard is clearly at work here, based on Hitchens’ long-standing commitment to Iraqi and Kurdish liberation. Stepping outside the realm of documentary evidence and into opinion, I am coming to believe that Hitchens’ support of the Bush Administration is tactical – he is deeply committed to regime change and believes that Bush and his team will get the job done, and will continue to do so better than John Kerry if elected. Thus, Hitchens is quiet on issues of hypocrisy and perfidy within the Administration that normally he’d be leading the charge to attack. If I am wrong about this, I see little evidence of it within a two-year compendium of his published essays.

Separating the Issues

As I tried to evaluate how my own position changed as a result of analyzing Hitchens’ work, the specifics of anti-war arguments seemed to fall into four “positions.” In this way, I was

¹⁵ Hitchens, *ALSW*, p. 19.

¹⁶ This history has been well-known for years, and references abound. A particularly good account from the perspective of the Bush family and close associates is found in Kevin Phillips’ *American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune, and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush*, Viking 2004. Noam Chomsky has also published extensively on the roots of the conflict in the Gulf; an excellent introduction is his article in *Z Magazine* in January 1991: <http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/articles/z9102-gulf-crisis.html>

able to avoid the multiplicity of minor arguments and semantic disagreements. Arguments against invading Iraq can be grouped into four major categories:

1. US Internal/Political
2. Internal Iraqi/Humanitarian
3. US External Policy
4. Philosophical/Pacifist.

If I'm honest with myself, I have to say that my opposition to the Iraq war has stemmed mainly from the domestic political perspective, combined with worry about our external foreign policy. My focus has been upon the manner in which the Bush Administration has hidden the root causes, manipulated data and lied fairly consistently concerning Iraq. (This is not a matter of conjecture, or even an isolated incident. Rep. Henry Waxman and a team from the House Committee on Government Reform have prepared a database of 237 specific misleading or untrue statements by the top 5 administration officials involved in national security¹⁷).

Interestingly, the internal Iraqi or "humanitarian" argument for the war had been relatively far from my thoughts over the past year. And I think that's not uncommon for many progressives in this country – we've been laser-focused on domestic political issues and Bush Administration perfidy, and have put the Iraqi people themselves in second place as a consideration. Hitchens *has* done us a remarkable service by unflinchingly focusing our attention on this perspective.

After reading Hitchens' *A Long Short War*, I dug out Ramsey Clark's report on the humanitarian effects of the Gulf War in 1991.¹⁸ After re-reading sections of the Ramsey Clark study, I found it impossible to argue with Hitchens – we do indeed have a humanitarian debt to the people of Iraq. And I'm coming to believe that the *long-run* result of the Iraqi invasion can be a good thing for the people on the ground, if we gain ground securing the country before a full-scale civil war erupts.

It's clear that regardless of the short-term chaos, that Iraqis themselves believe that their country is better now than a year ago, and that things may be getting better. A detailed survey by Oxford Research International was just published, and the overall picture is clear.¹⁹ Iraqis are split over whether the invasion was "right" or not, but a majority believe the country is better today, they believe things are improving, and with increased attention to

¹⁷ http://www.house.gov/reform/min/features/iraq_on_the_record/

¹⁸ http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0944624154/qid=1080619568/sr=1-6/ref=sr_1_6/102-5317102-1313764?v=glance&s=books

¹⁹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/15_03_04_iraqsurvey.pdf

securing the country, and they look forward to building a democratically elected government. They believe the U.S. needs to stay until a new government is formed and able to secure the country, but reconstruction and most other tasks are for the Iraqis themselves, not the U.S. or the U.N., to perform.

Thus, even if we went to war for the wrong reasons, and it damages us on the rest of the world stage, and if the Bush team lied consistently, we *do* have to acknowledge that we have the opportunity to create a humanitarian success in Iraq. We have, as Hitchens has said, an opportunity to keep a long-standing promise to the Kurds, Shia, and other peoples of Iraq. Today such a success would be a lucky outcome, as recent events in Falluja demonstrate so graphically, given our inability to bring security to the country.

Hitchens' Root Issue: Defending and Extending Secular Democracy

But let's be optimistic for the moment, and assume that we can accomplish a humanitarian victory in Iraq. It's still a little too soon to let Christopher Hitchens off the hook about his "off-limits" policy regarding the Bush Administration. To be fair, the *Slate* essays did begin as an experiment in long-range analysis, and it's possible that Hitchens is deliberately avoiding what might be "short-term" political battles. And it's also possible that the length of these essays exerts a limiting effect on the complexity of arguments that can be explored.

But I remain firmly of the opinion that long-time readers deserve an explanation from Hitchens as to why his analysis of the administration seems muted at best. Other than the Iraq policy he clearly favors, is he really willing to overlook the many ways in which their ideology and policies stand opposed to so many of his cherished principles?

Hitchens is on record describing himself as a "single-issue person," which he outlines as "the unapologetic defense of civilized societies against the intensifying menace of clerical barbarism." As even a casual reader of Hitchens' work can readily appreciate, he is vehemently opposed to organized religion and its effects on culture and human rights around the globe.²⁰ Leaving aside the more radically anti-religious aspects of this position, I take this to mean a socio-political stance which seeks to further the Enlightenment program of secular humanism and classical liberalism (the corresponding political philosophy). Classical liberalism²¹ stresses individual liberty, along with social and governmental institutions needed for the purposes of protecting and allowing citizens to exercise and extend their liberties:

²⁰ See, for example, chapter 9 of *Letters to a Young Contrarian*.

²¹ C.B. MacPherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, Oxford University Press, 1977.

“Human beings are only secure from evil at the hands of others, in proportion as they have the power of being, and are, self-protecting.”²²

Secular humanism is a convenient term for the notion that morality and ethics are better based on rational thought and empiricism than mysticism and organized religion – a position Hitchens strongly supports, as even casual readers of his work will appreciate. Hitchens is clear on these positions throughout his writings; indeed, the stout defense of classical liberalism and the Enlightenment program of rational inquiry is one source of his respect for, and similarities with, George Orwell. This similarity and its ultimate root can be brought into even sharper relief by comparing Hitchens’ *Why Orwell Matters* and *Letters to a Young Contrarian*.

Which causes me to reiterate my initial mystification: if Hitchens is a “single-issue person” fighting for the defense of a long-standing tradition of liberty, rationality, and tolerance, then how can he support many of the policies and actions of this President? The “clerical barbarism” to which Hitchens refers is hardly restricted to Islam, as he acknowledges in his recent criticisms of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*.²³ Yet Hitchens has been strangely silent concerning the Administration’s deep connections with religious fundamentalism in the United States – a connection which is unprecedented in its depth and breadth.²⁴ He’s been silent about the obsessive secrecy and “attack” tactics practiced almost daily – traits which are present in most modern presidencies, but as John Dean amply documents in his new book *Worse Than Watergate*, the Bush White House takes to extremes²⁵. And he’s strangely silent about the attacks on civil liberties occurring here at home, under the guise of keeping us safe from terrorism.

Again, it almost seems like Hitchens has declared the Administration “off-limits” for serious criticism of their domestic policies, even those which ordinarily would have aroused the famous Christopher Hitchens invective. At the end of this journey, I feel like I understand – and have been educated by – Hitchens’ position on Iraq. Nevertheless, I cannot shake the notion that if we support Bush for another four years, based purely on his foreign policy, we’ll be underwriting further growth and entrenchment of “clerical barbarism” and loss of liberties here at home.

²² J.S. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, ch. 3, in *Collected Works*. Available in HTML at: <http://www.la.utexas.edu/research/poltheory/mill/repgov/repgov.c03.s02.html>

²³ <http://slate.msn.com/id/2096323>

²⁴ Kevin Phillips, *American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune, and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush*, Viking 2004. See especially chapter 7 (p. 211) for an exhaustive analysis of Bush family connections with religious conservative groups and movements.

²⁵ See also Phillips 2004 on the subject of secrecy and the Bush family.

And ultimately, this is why I feel slightly betrayed when I read Hitchens these days. I, too, believe in the defense of our civilization against those that seek to destroy it, but apparently unlike Hitchens, I believe we're equally threatened by forces of reaction at home, not just in the Middle East. Christianity, manipulated by those who seek power, is just as dangerous to freedom and enlightenment as Islam, manipulated by those who seek power. Crony capitalism, conducted within a veil of secrecy, is just as dangerous to freedom whether it's conducted by corrupt rulers overseas or here in the United States. Attacks on civil liberties at home are just as threatening as attacks on our interests overseas. And attacks on science and rationality are ultimately just as damaging whether they come from attempts to re-establish a 7th century Islamic theocracy, or a domestic reprise of the Scopes trial and the banning of controversial research.

Christopher Hitchens continues to provide an invaluable service by challenging us to re-examine our assumptions. His excellent essays became a lens through which I was able to see beyond my preconceptions, and see valid arguments for helping Iraqis reclaim their country. His is one of our most indispensable, fearless voices, sorely needed as we hold November's referendum on our leadership. But I'm hearing only silence on some of the greatest issues that face us. Thus, I conclude with a plea:

Christopher Hitchens, when will you look beyond Iraq, and expand your field of concern to include the "intensifying menace" of clerical barbarism and hypocrisy here at home?