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House of Representatives

AUTHORIZATION FOR USE OF MILITARY FORCE AGAINST IRAQ RESOLUTION OF 2002

HON. XAVIER BECERRA (CA — 30)

Mr. Speaker, any nation engaged in a program of building weapons of mass destruction presents a danger to international peace and stability. Any leader who flouts the rule of law is a menace to liberty and democracy.

Over the past couple of months the President has attempted to lay out the case for aggression against Iraq. I agree with the President that the actions of Saddam Hussein in his defiance and deception of the international community reveal a “history of aggression.”

In my mind, the President has made a strong case that Iraq must disarm, pursuant to the United Nations resolutions enacted following the close of the Persian Gulf War. But the President did not convince me that we should go to war and go it alone. Nor has he made the case that we should change our longstanding policy and defy international law and commit to a first strike.

The threat posed by Iraq is a threat which confronts the entire world, not just America. The voice of the community of civilized nations and the legitimacy to act on their collective word reside in the United Nations. It is through U.N. resolutions, crafted in substantial measure by the U.S., that we have the license to compel Iraq’s compliance. And it should be through the U.N. that we should seek to enforce such compliance.

This resolution before us gives the President authorization to send American troops into Iraq to strike unilaterally and, indeed, to strike first when he deems it appropriate. Congress has never before granted this extraordinary power to any previous President. We can address the threat posed by Saddam Hussein without expanding Presidential authority beyond constitutional standards.

The Framers of our Constitution wisely assigned the power to commit America to war not to the President but to the people’s democratic representatives in Congress. Our Founding Fathers knew from experience and we should remember today that a declaration of war is the ultimate act of humankind. It presumes to endow the declarant with the right to kill. In many instances, it amounts to a sentence of death, not just for the guilty but for the innocent as well, whether civilian or soldier.

The President should approach Congress and ask for a declaration of war when and only when he determines that war is unavoidable. The resolution before us leaves the question of war open-ended by both expressing support for diplomacy and authorizing the President to use force when he feels it is the correct course of action. Yet, in his own words, President Bush indicated that war is not unavoidable. So why, then, is he insisting on being given now, today, the power to go to war?

We are the lone superpower economically and militarily in the world. Our words have meaning, our actions have consequences beyond what we can see. The implications of a unilateral first strike authorization for war are chilling. A unilateral attack could lead the world into

another dangerous era of polarization and create worldwide instability. It would also set a dangerous precedent that could have a devastating impact on international norms.

Consider India and Pakistan, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia and Chechnya, Cyprus, Taiwan, Colombia, Northern Ireland, Central Africa. How might the people or the government in any of these countries which are engaged in or at the brink of hostilities interpret this resolution today? Why should not other countries adopt the President’s unilateral and first strike policy to address conflicts or threats?

Would not a unilateral attack galvanize other potential enemies around the globe to strike at the United States and our interests? In our efforts to focus on what the President described as a “grave and gathering danger” ten thousand miles away in Iraq, let us not lose sight of the dangers which are grave and present, not gathering but present, here at home: the al Qaeda plots targeting our airports, our water treatment facilities, our nuclear power plants, our agricultural crops.

Just this Tuesday, CIA Director George Tenet told Congress that Saddam Hussein, if provoked by fears that an attack by the United States was imminent, might help Islamic extremists launch an attack on the United States with weapons of mass destruction. We must consider how our actions may impact on the safety of the American people. The answer may not always be what we expect.

We must also ask: will the death and destruction it takes to eliminate a sovereign, albeit rogue, government (what the President has labeled “regime change”) lead to goodwill by the Iraqi people toward America and Americans?

Well, let us look at the record. During the Persian Gulf War of 1991, we dropped some 250,000 bombs, many of them “smart” bombs, over a 6-week period on Iraqi forces. That is close to 6,000 bombs per day. We deployed over 500,000 troops. The war cost over \$80 billion. None of that money was spent on reconstruction in Kuwait, and certainly not in Iraq. And all of this is what it took simply to expel Saddam Hussein from tiny Kuwait, which has one-tenth the population and one twenty-fourth the landmass of Iraq.

Today we are told that it would cost the U.S. \$200 billion or more if we were to go to war with Iraq. That does not include any costs for reconstruction of post-war Iraq. No matter how “smart” or “surgical,” bombs will kill civilian non-combatants—children, mothers, the elderly. Two billion dollars in bombs, death and destruction does not sound like the wisest prescription for engendering Iraqi goodwill.

I am eerily reminded of the infamous quote by an American military officer in the Vietnam War that “we had to destroy the village to save it.” Are we contending today that we need to destroy Iraq to save it?

And what is our, and for that matter the world’s, recent record on supporting postwar reconstruction? Ask the people of Bosnia and of Kosovo, and now ask the Afghans.

Certainly there are situations where the United States must prepare or be prepared to act alone. I voted in September 2001 to give the President that power to punish those who attacked this nation on 9/11. But the question is, are we at the point on the question of Iraq to go to war without international support? Because that is precisely what the resolution before Congress would authorize the President to do.

Mr. Speaker, the President was clear in his speech to the nation on October 7. There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein is leading Iraq down a dangerous course. That is why the world should come together to confront this destabilizing situation and the United States should do all it can to encourage that effort. It is time for us to recognize that if we do this, we do it together.

The President raised an additional point in his remarks of October 7, and that is that confronting the threat of Iraq is crucial to winning the war on terror. Indeed disarming Iraq and neutralizing Saddam Hussein’s ability to share weapons of mass destruction with those who would do us harm is critical. However, should the President take us to war against Iraq, we will find ourselves fighting battles on three fronts: in Iraq, in Afghanistan and other terrorist “hot spots” where elements of al Qaeda and evidence related to 9/11 leads us, and finally, here at home. Do we have the resources to carry such a heavy commitment? Does Iraq divert us from winning the fight against terrorism and securing for the American people the safety they seek at home?

Today, as we speak, in the neighborhoods immediately surrounding our nation’s Capitol, parents are deciding whether to send their children to school. A calculating, cold-blooded murderer who has already killed 9 people and wounded 2 others in 2 weeks is roaming the streets. One of his victims, a 13-year-old boy, lies in critical condition from a bullet which savaged his abdomen. We must be equally committed to act to safeguard Americans from threats within our borders as we are from threats beyond our borders.

Mr. Speaker, there are few votes as solemn and challenging to each of us and our democracy as a vote to declare war against another people. Can I look at my Maker, my family and the good people who elected me to speak for them and say: this is the cause for which I will cast my vote to sacrifice American lives? . . . the lives of innocent non-combatants? Is this truly the time to ask for the ultimate sacrifice from our men and women in uniform? In Bosnia and Kosovo, I could answer yes. Genocide was being committed as we breathed. On September 11, 2001, and indeed on December 7, 1941, America suffered premeditated, cold-blooded attacks which took thousands of mothers, sons, brothers and sisters from us. We needed to search for justice. But Mr. Speaker, I cannot with clear conscience answer the same way in regards to this resolution. That is why I cast a “no” vote. I urge my President and my country to move deliberately and in concert with our partners in the community of nations as we address the threat that is Iraq.