Waiting for Saddam to change is what got us into this mess in the first place.

By Christopher Hitchens

The following is a dense paragraph of apparent prescience that was first published in 1998:

Trying to eliminate Saddam, extending the ground war into an occupation of Iraq, would have violated our guideline about not changing objectives in midstream, engaging in "mission creep," and incurred incalculable human and political costs. Apprehending him was probably impossible. We had been unable to find Noriega in Panama, which we knew intimately. We would have been forced to occupy Baghdad and, in effect, rule Iraq. The coalition would instantly have collapsed, the Arabs deserting it in anger and other allies pulling out as well. Under these circumstances, there was no viable "exit strategy" we could see, violating another of our principles. Furthermore, we had been self-consciously trying to set a pattern for handling aggression in the post-Cold War world. Going in and occupying Iraq, thus unilaterally exceeding the United Nations's mandate, would have destroyed the precedent of international response to aggression that we hoped to establish. Had we gone the invasion route, the United States could conceivably still be an occupying power in a bitterly hostile land.

This is taken from Chapter 19 of *A World Transformed*, by President Bush senior and Gen. Brent Scowcroft. With allowance made for a few differences of emphasis (and of confusion, possibly willful, about the historical record—Manuel Noriega was in fact fairly easily apprehended), it is now the pattern for an emerging conventional wisdom. Like its more recent emulators, extending from many Democratic candidates to an increasing number of commentators, it represents the anti-Saddam war, or the "regime change" campaign, as something elective and voluntary rather than as something inescapable. (It is also, you may notice, the same logic that was used by Bush, Scowcroft, and others to justify staying out of Bosnia.)

I have noticed lately a distressing tendency on the part of those who support the intervention in Iraq to rest their case largely on underreported good news. Now, it is certainly true, as I have said myself, that there is much to celebrate in the new Iraq. The restoration of the ecology of the southern marshes, the freedom to follow the majority Shiite religion, the
explosion of new print and electronic media, the emancipation of the schools and universities, and the consolidation of Kurdish autonomy are all magnificent things. But those who want to take credit for them must also axiomatically accept the blame for the failure to anticipate huge lacunae in the provision of power, water, and security.

More to the point, one has to be prepared to support a campaign—or a cause—that is going badly. The president has been widely lampooned by many a glib columnist for saying that increased violence is not necessarily a cause for despair and may even be evidence of traction. He is, in fact, quite right to take this view, which was first expressed, to my knowledge, by Gen. John Abizaid. Those who murder the officials of the United Nations and the Red Cross, set fire to oil pipelines and blow up water mains, and shoot down respected clerics outside places of worship are indeed making our point for us. There is no justifiable way that a country as populous and important as Iraq can be left at the mercy of such people. And—here is my crux—there never was.

The counsel of prudence offered above by Bush and Scowcroft was all very well as far as it went. But it did leave Saddam Hussein in power, and it did (as its authors elsewhere concede) involve the United States in watching from the sidelines as Iraqis were massacred for rebelling on its side and in its name. It left the Baathist regime free to continue work on weapons of mass destruction, which we know for certain it was doing on a grand scale until at the very least 1995. And it left Saddam free to continue to threaten his neighbors and to give support and encouragement to jihad forces around the world. (The man most wanted in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, Abdul Rahman Yasin, fled straight from New Jersey to Baghdad, though there are still those in our "intelligence" services who prefer to grant Saddam the presumption of innocence in this and many other matters.) It also left Saddam Hussein free to try and assassinate former President Bush on his postwar visit to Kuwait—an act of such transparent lunacy that it far transcends any sneers about George W. wanting to avenge his daddy. (It also demonstrates, by the way, Saddam Hussein's urgent personal need for a revenge for 1991—a consideration that deserves more attention than it has received.)

This already lousy status quo was volatile and unstable. Saddam Hussein's speeches and policies were becoming ever more demented and extreme and ever more Islamist in tone. The flag of Iraq was amended to include a verse from the Quran, and gigantic mosques began to be built in Saddam's own name. Even if, as seems remotely possible, he was largely bluffing about weapons of mass destruction, this conclusion would destroy the view maintained by many liberals that, for all his crimes, Saddam understood the basic logic of deterrence and self-preservation. (That he was "in his box," as the saying went.) Not only was he able to defy the United Nations, but with French and Russian collusion, he was also increasingly able to circumvent sanctions. The "box" was falling apart, and its supposed captive was becoming more toxic. As he became older and madder, there emerged the real
prospect of a succession passing to either Odai or Qusai Hussein, or to both of them. Who could view that prospect with equanimity? (Qusai Hussein was at the heart of the concealment program, for centrifuges and other devices, that has recently been partly exposed by David Kay's report.)

Meanwhile, the no-fly zones managed to protect the Kurds and Shiites from a repeat performance of the mass murders of 1991 and earlier but did not prevent, for example, the planned destruction of the largest wetlands in the Middle East, home to the 5,000-year-old civilization of the Marsh Arabs. The smoke from this drain-and-burn atrocity was visible from the space shuttle. I shall leave open the question of whether "we" had any responsibility to prevent this and other mutilations and tortures of Iraqi society, except to say that the meltdown and trauma of that society, now so visible to all, were always inescapably in our future and would in any case have had consequences beyond themselves for the wider region. The continuation of this regime was indeed an imminent threat, at least in the sense that it was a permanent threat.

The question then, becomes this: Should the date or timing of this unpostponable confrontation have been left to Saddam Hussein to pick? The two chief justifications offered by the Bush administration (which did mention human rights and genocide at its first presentation to the United Nations, an appeal that fell on cold as well as deaf ears) were WMDs and terrorism. Here, it is simply astonishing how many people remain willing to give Saddam Hussein the benefit of the doubt. The late Dr. David Kelley, whose suicide has so embarrassed the Blair government, put it very plainly in an article he wrote just before the war. Seriousness about "inspections" required a regime change in Iraq—no credible inspection could be conducted on any other terms. This point has since been amply vindicated by the Kay inquiry, still in its early stages, which has already unearthed compelling evidence of a complex concealment program, of the designing of missiles well beyond the permitted legal range, of the intimidation of scientists and witnesses, and of the incubation (in some cases hidden in scientists' homes) of deadly biological toxins. Some of the other leads have turned out to be false, or at any rate not proved, and no major stockpiles have yet been found. Nonetheless, the Baathists declared a very impressive stockpile as late as 1999 and never cared to inform the U.N. inspectorate what they had done with it. (If they destroyed it themselves, it deserves to be pointed out, they were in gross and open breach of the relevant resolutions, which anticipated this tactic and specified that all weapons were to be turned over, listed, classified, and only then neutralized in the presence of certified witnesses.)

Before the war, it was a staple of anti-interventionist argument that Saddam was too well-armed to be attacked and would unleash weapons of mass destruction in a horrific manner. (Chancellor Gerhard Schröder of Germany opposed the war despite being—possibly wrongly— informed by his intelligence services that Saddam was no more than three years away from acquiring a nuclear bomb.) Any failures of prediction on this point can thus be
shared equally, but there is no moral equivalence between them. Thanks to the intervention, Saddam Hussein has been verifiably disarmed, and a full accounting of his concealment and acquisition programs is being conducted. Where is the objection to that? Why so much surliness and resentment?