

Published on Tuesday, September 28, 2004 by CommonDreams.org

Why We Must Not Re-elect President Bush

by George Soros

Prepared text of speech delivered September 28, 2004

National Press Club

Washington, DC,

This is the most important election of my lifetime. I have never been heavily involved in partisan politics but these are not normal times. President Bush is endangering our safety, hurting our vital interests and undermining American values. That is why I am sending you this message. I have been demonized by the Bush campaign but I hope you will give me a hearing.

President Bush ran on the platform of a "humble" foreign policy in 2000. If we re-elect him now, we endorse the Bush doctrine of preemptive action and the invasion of Iraq, and we will have to live with the consequences. As I shall try to show, we are facing a vicious circle of escalating violence with no end in sight. But if we repudiate the Bush policies at the polls, we shall have a better chance to regain the respect and support of the world and to break the vicious circle.

I grew up in Hungary, lived through fascism and the Holocaust, and then had a foretaste of communism. I learned at an early age how important it is what kind of government prevails. I chose America as my home because I value freedom and democracy, civil liberties and an open society.

When I had made more money than I needed for myself and my family, I set up a foundation to promote the values and principles of a free and open society. I started in South Africa in 1979 and established a foundation in my native country, Hungary, in 1984 when it was still under communist rule. China, Poland and the Soviet Union followed in 1987. After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, I established foundations in practically all the countries of the former Soviet empire and later in other parts of the world and in the United States. These foundations today spend about 450 million dollars a year to promote democracy and open society around the world.

When George W. Bush was elected president, and particularly after September 11, I saw that the values and principles of open society needed to be defended at home. September 11 led to a suspension of the critical process so essential to a democracy - a full and fair discussion of the issues. President Bush silenced all criticism by calling it unpatriotic. When he said that "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists," I heard alarm bells ringing. I am afraid that he is leading us in a very dangerous direction. We are losing the values that have made America great.

The destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center was such a horrendous event that it required a strong response. But the President committed a fundamental error in thinking: the fact that the terrorists are manifestly evil does not make whatever counter-actions we take automatically good. What we do to combat terrorism may also be wrong. Recognizing that we may be wrong is the foundation of an open society. President Bush admits no doubt and does not base his decisions on a careful weighing of reality. For 18 months after 9/11 he managed to suppress all dissent. That is how he could lead the nation so far in the wrong direction.

President Bush inadvertently played right into the hands of bin Laden. The invasion of Afghanistan was justified: that was where bin Laden lived and al Qaeda had its training camps. The invasion of Iraq was not similarly justified. It was President Bush's unintended gift to bin Laden.

War and occupation create innocent victims. We count the body bags of American soldiers; there have been more than 1000 in Iraq. The rest of the world also looks at the Iraqis who get killed daily. There have been 20 times more. Some were trying to kill our soldiers; far too many were totally innocent, including many women and children. Every innocent death helps the terrorists' cause by stirring anger against America and bringing them potential recruits.

Immediately after 9/11 there was a spontaneous outpouring of sympathy for us worldwide. It has given way to an equally widespread resentment. There are many more people willing to risk their lives to kill Americans than there were on September 11 and our security, far from improving as President Bush claims, is deteriorating. I am afraid that we have entered a vicious circle of escalating violence where our fears and their rage feed on each other. It is not a process that is likely to end any time soon. If we re-elect President Bush we are telling the world that we approve his policies - and we shall be at war for a long time to come.

I realize that what I am saying is bound to be unpopular. We are in the grip of a collective misconception induced by the trauma of 9/11, and fostered by the Bush administration. No politician could say it and hope to get elected. That is why I feel obliged to speak out. There is a widespread belief that President Bush is making us safe. The opposite is true. President Bush failed to finish off bin Laden when he was cornered in

Afghanistan because he was gearing up to attack Iraq. And the invasion of Iraq bred more people willing to risk their lives against Americans than we are able to kill - generating the vicious circle I am talking about.

President Bush likes to insist that the terrorists hate us for what we are - a freedom loving people - not what we do. Well, he is wrong on that. He also claims that the torture scenes at Abu Graib prison were the work of a few bad apples. He is wrong on that too. **They were part of a system of dealing with detainees put in place by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and our troops in Iraq are paying the price.**

How could President Bush convince people that he is good for our security, better than John Kerry? By building on the fears generated by the collapse of the twin towers and fostering a sense of danger. At a time of peril, people rally around the flag and President Bush has exploited this. **His campaign is based on the assumption that people do not really care about the truth and they will believe practically anything if it is repeated often enough, particularly by a President at a time of war.** There must be something wrong with us if we fall for it. For instance, some **40%** of the people still believe that Saddam Hussein was connected with 9/11 - although it is now definitely established by the 9/11 Commission, *set up by the President and chaired by a Republican*, that **there was no connection**. I want to shout from the roof tops: "Wake up America. Don't you realize that we are being misled?"

President Bush has used 9/11 to further his own agenda which has very little to do with fighting terrorism. There was an influential group within the Bush administration led by Vice President Dick Cheney that was itching to invade Iraq long before 9/11. The terrorist attack gave them their chance. If you need a tangible proof why President Bush does not deserve to be re-elected, consider Iraq.

The war in Iraq was misconceived from start to finish -- if it has a finish. It is a war of choice, not necessity, in spite of what President Bush says. The arms inspections and sanctions were working. In response to American pressure, the United Nations had finally agreed on a strong stand. As long as the inspectors were on the ground, Saddam Hussein could not possibly pose a threat to our security. We could have declared victory but President Bush insisted on going to war.

We went to war on false pretences. The real reasons for going into Iraq have not been revealed to this day. The weapons of mass destruction could not be found, and the connection with al Qaeda could not be established. President Bush then claimed that we went to war to liberate the people of Iraq. All my experience in fostering democracy and open society has taught me that **democracy cannot be imposed by military means**. And, Iraq would be the last place I would chose for an experiment in introducing democracy - as the current chaos demonstrates.

Of course, Saddam was a tyrant, and of course Iraqis - and the rest of the world - can rejoice to be rid of him. **But Iraqis now hate the American occupation.** We stood idly by while Baghdad was ransacked. As the occupying power, we had an obligation to maintain law and order, but we failed to live up to it. If we had cared about the people of Iraq we should have had more troops available for the occupation than we needed for the invasion. We should have provided protection not only for the oil ministry but also the other ministries, museums and hospitals. Baghdad and the country's other cities were destroyed after we occupied them. When we encountered resistance, we employed methods that alienated and humiliated the population. The way we invaded homes, and the way we treated prisoners generated resentment and rage. **Public opinion condemns us worldwide.**

The number of flipflops and missteps committed by the Bush administration in Iraq far exceeds anything John Kerry can be accused of. First we dissolved the Iraqi army, then we tried to reconstitute it. First we tried to eliminate the Baathists, then we turned to them for help. First we installed General Jay Garner to run the country, then we gave it to Paul Bremer and when the insurgency became intractable, we installed an Iraqi government. The man we chose was a protégé of the CIA with the reputation of a strong man - a far cry from democracy. First we attacked Falluja *over the objections of the Marine commander on the ground*, then pulled them out when the assault was half-way through, *again over his objections*. "Once you commit, you got to stay committed," he said publicly. More recently, we started bombing Falluja again.

The Bush campaign is trying to put a favorable spin on it, but the situation in Iraq is dire. Much of the Western part of the country has been ceded to the insurgents. Even the so-called Green Zone (a small enclave in the center of Baghdad where Americans live and work) is subject to mortar attacks. The prospects of holding free and fair elections in January are fast receding and civil war looms. **President Bush received a somber intelligence evaluation in July but he has kept it under wraps and failed to level with the electorate.**

Bush's war in Iraq has done untold damage to the United States. It has impaired our military power and undermined the morale of our armed forces. **Before the invasion of Iraq, we could project overwhelming power in any part of the world. We cannot do so any more because we are bogged down in Iraq.** Afghanistan is slipping from our control. North Korea, Iran, Pakistan and other countries are pursuing nuclear programs with renewed vigor and many other problems remain unattended.

By invading Iraq without a second UN resolution, **we violated international law**. By mistreating and even torturing prisoners, we violated the Geneva conventions. President Bush has boasted that we do not need a permission slip from the international community, but our actions have endangered our security - particularly the security of our troops.

Our troops were trained to project overwhelming power. **They were not trained for occupation duties**. Having to fight an insurgency saps their morale. Many of our troops return from Iraq with severe trauma and other psychological disorders. Sadly, many are also physically injured. After Iraq, it will be difficult to recruit people for the armed forces and **we may have to resort to conscription**.

There are many other policies for which the Bush administration can be criticized but none are as important as Iraq. Iraq has cost us nearly 200 billion dollars -- an enormous sum. It could have been used much better elsewhere. The costs are going to mount because it was much easier to get into Iraq than it will be to get out of there. President Bush has been taunting John Kerry to explain how he would do things differently in Iraq. John Kerry has responded that he would have done everything differently and he would be in a better position to extricate us than the man who got us in there. But it won't be easy for him either, because we are caught in a quagmire.

It is a quagmire that many predicted. I predicted it in my book, [The Bubble of American Supremacy](#). I was not alone: **top military and diplomatic experts desperately warned the President not to invade Iraq. But he ignored their experienced advice**. He suppressed the critical process. The discussion about Iraq remains stilted even during this presidential campaign because of the notion that any criticism of our Commander-in-Chief puts our troops at risk. But this is Bush's war, and he ought to be held responsible for it. It's the wrong war, fought the wrong way. Step back for a moment from the cacophony of the election campaign and reflect: who got us into this mess? In spite of his Texas swagger, George W. Bush does not qualify to serve as our Commander-in-Chief.

There is a lot more to be said on the subject and I have said it in my book, [The Bubble of American Supremacy](#), now available in paperback. I hope you will read it. You can download the chapter on the Iraqi quagmire free from www.georgesoros.com

If you find my arguments worth considering, please share this message with your friends.

I would welcome your comments at [georgesoros.com](http://www.georgesoros.com) . I am eager to engage in a critical discussion because the stakes are so high.

###