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The I-Can't-Believe-I'm-a-Hawk Club

By Bill Keller

(Columnist at that time)

If the United States storms into Iraq, as now seems almost inevitable, it will have been airlifted to war with a tailwind from some unlikely sources.

For starters, three men who have little in common with President Bush have articulated the case for war better than the administration itself -- at least up until its recent crescendo of case-making. Tony Blair, who so resembles the American predecessor Mr. Bush despises, has been an eloquent and indispensable ally in the face of grave political risk. Hans Blix, the Swedish diplomat who embodies the patient, lawyerly internationalism some Bush partisans cannot abide, has managed without endorsing war to demonstrate Iraq's refusal to be contained. Kenneth Pollack, the Clinton National Security Council expert whose argument for invading Iraq is surely the most influential book of this season, has provided intellectual cover for every liberal who finds himself inclining toward war but uneasy about Mr. Bush.

The president will take us to war with support -- often, I admit, equivocal and patronizing in tone -- from quite a few members of the East Coast liberal media cabal. The I-Can't-Believe-I'm-a-Hawk Club includes op-ed regulars at this newspaper and The Washington Post, the editors of The New Yorker, The New Republic and Slate, columnists in Time and Newsweek. Many of these wary warmongers are baby-boom liberals whose aversion to the deployment of American power was formed by Vietnam but who had a kind of epiphany along the way -- for most of us, in the vicinity of Bosnia.

The president also has enough prominent Democrats with him -- some from conviction, some from the opposite -- to make this endeavor credibly bipartisan. Four of the six declared Democratic presidential hopefuls support war, with reservations. (Senator John Kerry seemed to come down from the fence last week after Colin Powell's skillful parsing of the evidence.)

We reluctant hawks may disagree among ourselves about the most compelling logic for war -- protecting America, relieving oppressed Iraqis or reforming the Middle East -- but we generally agree that the logic for standing pat does not hold. Much as we might wish the administration had orchestrated events so the inspectors had a year instead of three months, much as we deplore the arrogance and binary moralism, much as we worry about all the things that could go wrong, we are hard pressed to see an alternative that is not built on wishful thinking.

Thanks to all these grudging allies, Mr. Bush will be able to claim, with justification, that the coming war is a far cry from the rash, unilateral adventure some of his advisers would have settled for.

Does this mean, then, that Mr. Bush is pulling together a new American consensus about how to deal with the dangerous world he inherited?

I don't pretend to speak for the aviary, but almost all of the hesitant hawks go out of their way to disavow Mr. Bush's larger agenda for American power even as they salute his plan to use it in Iraq. This is worth dwelling on a little, because with this war the administration is not just taking on a dictator, it is beginning to define in blood the new American imperium.

What his admirers call the Bush Doctrine is so far a crude edifice built of phrases from speeches and strategy documents, reinforced by a pattern of discarded treaties and military deployment. It consists of a determination to keep America an unchallenged superpower, a willingness to forcibly disarm any country that poses a

gathering threat and an unwillingness to be constrained by treaties or international institutions that don't suit us perfectly.

Let's imagine that the regime of Saddam Hussein begins to crumble under the first torrent of cruise missiles. The tank columns rumbling in from Kuwait are not beset by chemical warheads. There is no civilian carnage to rouse the Arab world against us. In fact, Al Jazeera shows American soldiers being welcomed by Iraqis as liberators. The illicit toxins are unearthed and destroyed. Persecuted Kurds and Shiites suppress the urge for clan vengeance.

If all this goes smoothly -- and even if it goes a little less smoothly -- Mr. Bush will hear a chorus of supporters claiming vindication. I imagine a triumphalist editorial or two in the neoconservative press. Pundits who earlier urged Mr. Bush to ignore Congress and the U.N. will assure him that he can now safely disregard everyone who caviled at the threshold of war, and urge him to get on with the next liberation in the series.

But in fact a victory in Iraq will not resolve the great questions of what we intend to be in the world. It will lay them wide open, and with them deep divisions within both of our political parties.

The first test we will face upon the conquest of Iraq is whether our aim is mainly to promote democracy, or mainly to promote stability. Some, probably including some in Mr. Bush's cabinet, will argue that it was all about disarmament. Once that is done, they will say, once Saddam's Republican Guard is purged, we can turn the country over to a contingent of Sunni generals and bring our troops home in 18 months.

"Some of these guys don't go for nation-building," says Senator Joseph Biden, the senior Foreign Relations Committee Democrat who has ended up supporting war as the least bad option. "They think it's cheaper to just go back and empty the swamp again if you have to."

Iraq would not become a great regional role model, though it would live better than it did under Saddam. The Saudis and probably the Israelis would prefer this to a rickety democracy governed by an unpredictable Shiite majority.

Others, in both parties, see Iraq as the beginning of the next colossal democracy project after the reformation of Eastern Europe. Fouad Ajami, a scholar with no illusions about the Middle East's capacity for heartbreak, has written that a MacArthur-style occupation of Iraq offers us the prospect of an Arab country "free of the poison of anti-Americanism" and offers the region "a break with the false gods of despotism." Nation-building may be vastly more expensive and difficult than swamp-clearing, but Mr. Ajami dares us to try. Mr. Bush has yet to take up that dare.

A second question will be whether, having used force, we continue to rely on force or lean more heavily on diplomacy. The most ardent think-tank interventionists have already mapped out a string of preventive conquests -- Iran, Syria, North Korea, Pakistan if its friendly president is ousted by Islamic militants, perhaps eventually China. They argue for more immense Pentagon budgets to build forces configured for pre-emptive strikes. The reluctant hawks will reply that, having demonstrated our might, we need not be so quick to exercise it again, particularly since (as we seem to have learned in North Korea) not all problems lend themselves to the remedy of airstrikes.

Iraq will also leave us arguing over how fully to enlist international organizations as partners in whatever global renovation we undertake, in Iraq and beyond. Being sole occupiers of an Arab land, as the Israelis have learned to their distress, is not a recipe for good will. Nor is it cheap.

"The more powerful we are, the more we need the United Nations," says Senator Biden -- to amortize the dangers and costs of stewardship. Mr. Bush has kicked some new life into the U.N., and been well repaid; I'd place a small bet that he will even get a second resolution on Iraq. Now we should stop treating it with such petulance and embrace it as a source of support and legitimacy.

So the war in Iraq does not settle the question of American power, but raises it to a new urgency. I think there is a consensus to be built. It is not the ultrahawk view of an America radiating indifference to everyone who gets

in its way, keeping aspiring powers in their place, shunning the clumsy implements of international law and leading with its air force. Nor is it the Vietnam-syndrome reticence about American power that still holds portions of both parties in sway.

Ronald Asmus, a Clinton Europe hand who came to the idea of regime change by way of Slobodan Milosevic, imagines a consensus somewhat like the honorable coalition that grew up during Bosnia and Kosovo. The desire to save the Balkans united humanitarian Democrats who are not squeamish about force with idealistic Republicans who define American interest more broadly than self-defense. For a time, Paul Wolfowitz and Joseph Biden sang from the same hymnal. (The French foreign minister hummed along!)

"The question is, is this about American power, or is it about democracy?" Mr. Asmus asks. "If it's about democracy, we'll have a broader base of support at home and more friends abroad. The great presidents of the last century -- F.D.R., Wilson, Truman -- all tried to articulate America's purpose in a way that other parts of the world could buy into. Bush hasn't done that yet." Before long, we'll find out if he cares to.