

WinkWorld March 2003

Robert Byrd, Democratic senator from West Virginia, delivered this speech February 12, 2003 on the floor of the US Senate.

This is an extract from a the speech made in the US Senate on February 12.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,897768,00.html>

We Stand Passively Mute
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To contemplate war is to think about the most horrible of human experiences. As this nation stands at the brink of battle, every American must be contemplating the horrors of war.

Yet, this chamber is, for the most part, silent - ominously, dreadfully silent. There is no debate, no discussion, no attempt to lay out for the nation the pros and cons of this particular war.

We stand passively mute in the United States Senate, paralyzed by our own uncertainty, seemingly stunned by the sheer turmoil of events. And this is no small conflagration we contemplate. This is no simple attempt to defang a villain. No. This coming battle, if it materializes, represents a turning point in US foreign policy.

This nation is about to embark upon the first test of a revolutionary doctrine applied in an extraordinary way at an unfortunate time. The doctrine of pre-emption - the idea that the United States or any other nation can attack a nation that is not imminently threatening but may be in the future - is a radical new twist on the traditional idea of self-defense. It appears to be in contravention of international law and the UN charter. And it is being tested at a time of worldwide terrorism, making many countries around the globe wonder if they will soon be on our - or some other nation's - hit list. High-level administration figures recently refused to take nuclear weapons off of the table when discussing a possible attack against Iraq. What could be more destabilizing than this type of uncertainty?

There are huge cracks emerging in our alliances, and US intentions are suddenly subject to worldwide speculation. Anti-Americanism based on mistrust, misinformation, suspicion and alarming rhetoric from US leaders is fracturing the once-solid alliance against global terrorism which existed after September 11.

Here at home, people are warned of terrorist attacks with little guidance as to when or where such attacks might occur. Family members are being called to active military duty, with no idea of what horrors they may face. The mood of the nation is grim. The economy is stumbling. Fuel prices are rising.

This administration, now in power for a little over two years, must be judged on its record. This administration has squandered a projected surplus of some \$5.6 trillion. This administration has fostered policies which have slowed economic growth. This administration has ignored urgent matters such as the crisis in health care for our elderly.

This administration has been slow to provide adequate funding for homeland security. This administration has been reluctant to better protect our borders. This administration has failed to find Osama bin Laden. This administration has split traditional alliances, possibly crippling for all time order-keeping entities like the United Nations and Nato. This administration has called into question the traditional worldwide perception of the United States as well-intentioned peacekeeper. This administration has turned the patient art of diplomacy into threats, labeling and name-calling.

We may have massive military might, but we cannot fight a war on terrorism alone. We need the cooperation of our allies as well as the newer friends. Our military will do us little good if we suffer another attack on our homeland which damages our economy. Our military is already stretched thin and we will need the support of those nations who can supply troop strength, not just sign letters cheering us on.

The war in Afghanistan has cost us \$37bn so far, yet there is evidence that terrorism may already be starting to regain its hold in that region. We have not found Bin Laden, and unless we secure the peace in Afghanistan, the dark dens of terrorism may yet again flourish. This administration has not finished the first war against terrorism and yet it is eager to embark on another conflict. Is our attention span that short? Have we not learned that after winning the war one must always secure the peace?

And yet we hear little about the aftermath of war in Iraq. Speculation abroad is rife. Will we seize Iraq's oil fields? To whom do we hand the reigns of power after Saddam Hussein? Will our war result in attacks on Israel? Will Israel retaliate with its own nuclear arsenal? Has our bellicose language and our disregard of the interests of other nations increased the race to join the nuclear club?

This reckless and arrogant administration has initiated policies which may reap disastrous consequences. One can understand the anger and shock of any president after September 11. One can appreciate the frustration of having only an amorphous, fleeting enemy on which it is nearly impossible to exact retribution. But to turn one's frustration and anger into the kind of de-establishing foreign policy debacle that the world is currently witnessing is inexcusable. Many of the pronouncements made by this administration are outrageous. There is no other word.

Yet on what is possibly the eve of horrific infliction of death and destruction on the population of the nation of Iraq - a population of which over 50% is under age 15 - this chamber is silent. On what is possibly only days before we send thousands off to face unimagined horrors of warfare - this chamber is silent. On the eve of what could possibly be a vicious terrorist attack in retaliation for our attack on Iraq, it is business as usual in the Senate. We are truly "sleepwalking through history".

To engage in war is always to pick a wild card. And war must always be a last resort, not a first choice. This war is not necessary at this time. Pressure appears to be having a good result in Iraq. Our mistake was to put ourselves in a corner so quickly. Our challenge is to now find a graceful way out of a box of our own making. Perhaps there is still a way if we allow more time.