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THE SENATE

IRAQ

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Ridgeway, Sen Aden

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Senator RIDGEWAY (New South Wales) (12.34 pm)—I also rise to respond to the government's motion to commit Australia to a war on Iraq and I join with my colleagues in the Democrats in stating again our opposition to military action against Iraq. First, I want to place on the record my support for the men and women in our nation's Defence Force. They do not deserve criticism and are simply following the orders of the government in the best way that they can. I hope that every one of them returns safely to their families.

In our last debate on this matter, there was one element of the previous statement that I agreed with, but for very different reasons than those outlined on that occasion. It was the issue of the burden of resolving the current crisis, with Iraq not being the responsibility of the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia alone. Indeed, this continues to be my position. I believe that the Australian people have a right to know why the government has changed its position and why the Prime Minister has retreated from a commitment that he 'would not commit our troops in Iraq without UN Security Council approval'. Indeed, many world leaders and many Australians, including church leaders, former military commanders and leaders of the RSL, have put the case against war, like so many other ordinary Australians.

When you look at the government's motion the primary justification for war is the need to disarm Saddam Hussein as a threat to international peace and security, that Iraq has violated 17 UN Security Council resolutions over the past 12 years and that it continues to support international terrorism. I find that none of the arguments that have been put forward to date are impressive or convincing on any of those counts, nor has the United States or the United Kingdom made compelling arguments to go to war. In fact, if you look at the record, the arguments are to the contrary. In 1991, America claimed that it had destroyed 80 per cent of Iraq's military capacity. In 1998, UN weapons inspectors claimed to have discovered and dismantled 90 per cent of Iraq's capacity to develop weapons of mass destruction. Recently, the preliminary assessments by Hans Blix did not offer any credence to American and British intelligence reports, which Australia has relied upon. Even here at home a former senior analyst at the Office of National Assessment Mr Wilkie said that a war against Iraq would be bad policy and that Australia's position was based on incomplete information.

Further, on the question of capacity, the White House put out its own statement saying that Saddam Hussein has less than 40 per cent of the weaponry and manpower that he had at the time of the first Gulf War. The American CIA put out a report saying that Saddam Hussein has been further weakened by years of bombings, economic sanctions and embargoes, that he was weak economically and militarily, and that he was not capable of attacking anyone unless forced into it.

Indeed, Saddam Hussein is evil. He is guilty of being a brutal dictator, of grossly violating the human rights of his own people and of killing 5,000 Kurds in Halabja in 1988. If I am not mistaken, during the first Gulf War, the US led forces were responsible for the direct bombing of Kurdish cities of northern Iraq, which added to the misery they were already suffering at the hands of the Saddam Hussein regime. Despite this, it is probable that Saddam Hussein does have some limited weapons of mass destruction, perhaps even biological and chemical capability, but I think we need to keep in mind that the policy of containment since the first Gulf War has, by and large, been effective. In all probability, UNSCOM, led by former UN Ambassador Richard Butler, effectively dismantled and limited any nuclear capability that was present, and containment over the past 12 years, in my view, has worked.

Yes, Saddam Hussein is guilty of frustrating the UN processes, but over the past 12 years he has not attacked another country, gas warfare has not been used against anyone and he has not launched any terror attacks either separately or in conjunction with known terrorist organisations. If this is not the case, where is the American or British evidence of supporting cooperative relationships between Iraq and known terrorist groups like al-Qaeda? Even the British Prime Minister, Mr Tony Blair, admitted last night in the House of Commons debate that at best a relationship between Iraq and international terrorism is loose. Indeed, the Howard government has not made a compelling case. It cannot give any proper answers to Australians about why the war is necessary and it cannot produce the evidence or even justify the legality of the war. Instead, the Australian people are being asked to

sanction the killing of another country's civilians on the basis of what their ruler might do. I cannot support that position, because it is an indecent proposition and it is morally indefensible.

As the US presidential historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr puts it, basing a declaration of war on fear instead of an overt act of belligerency is not only illegal under international law and convention but also immoral. Indeed, the government's position, to my mind, is reckless and misguided. Saddam is guilty but Saddam is contained. What is the threat to Australia and where is the proof? What are the material breaches of the UN inspections and where have those inspections failed? As Hans Blix stated, there is a vast difference between breaking toothpicks and breaking missiles. Where is the advice that previous resolutions, in particular resolutions 678 and 687, combined with resolution 1441 of the UN Security Council, authorise the use of force? Where in that advice does the international law develop a concept of implied authorisation to go to war? What in those resolutions acts as an implied delegation of authority to allow individual nations or a group of nations—in this case, the coalition of the willing—to use force?

As far as I know, having grown up in this democratic society, the law is the law. Doesn't the UN Charter require express authorisation by the United Nations? How does the government's legal advice, which we have not seen, meet that test? Wasn't resolution 1441 also clear that a further resolution was required if force was to be used? Where do resolutions 678 and 687, again combined with resolution 1441, allow unilateral actions by member states? How can the interpretation for war be legitimate if the mandate of the United Nations under its own charter is for preventing war and promoting peace?

Like my colleagues, I do not believe that the case for war has been made and I do not support the Howard government's decisions to back military action against Iraq. It is an unprecedented and unauthorised pre-emptive use of force. It is indeed an illegal war. It is the use of power without law, blinded to the reality that the consequences of such a decision are a direct attack on international law and the very body charged to prevent war and promote peace—the United Nations. It also isolates Australia in our own region and will do immeasurable and unknown harm to the relationships and alliances we have already formed. It has always been and it continues to be my view that this remains a matter for the entire international community to resolve through diplomacy and other peaceful means. If nothing else, the spin that the UN Security Council failed serves to highlight that it is a harder option to fight for peace than it is to make a decision to go to war. Instead, the Australian government is prepared to compromise the standing and the authority of the very body that the international community established in the wake of the last world war to maintain international peace and security.

As an individual, I am somewhere between the baby boomers and generation X. Like many others of my generation, I am personally concerned about the consequences of the government's decision. Since the end of World War II there have been at least another 50 wars or conflicts, resulting in the deaths of 86 million people. Thirty-five thousand of them were civilians in the first Gulf War, and this government's decision will add to the 24 million Iraqi people who are suffering. They have already suffered through the Gulf War and the last 13 years of crippling sanctions and embargoes. In 1999 UNICEF estimated that over 500,000 Iraqi children had died as a direct consequence of sanctions, yet member states of the United Nations at that time looked on with indifference and inaction at the appalling humanitarian costs of its own inaction in the misguided belief that, somehow, applying pressure to a civilian population would ultimately affect the leadership and perhaps bring about its change. You have to ask: when will all the suffering end?

I note also the government's statement that they are unapologetic about their relationship with the United States. That is what I would have expected. It is no new development but we have to ask questions when we commit our country, not just our forces, to military action in far-off places when there is no direct threat to our security. It is no wonder that the Australian people look at it with some cynicism when talks on a free trade agreement began this week and the President of the United States, Mr George W. Bush, dictates the terms of our engagement. It is hard not to be cynical when almost every country that is supporting the US wants something in return. Turkey is demanding \$32 billion; Israel wants up to \$15 billion in additional aid; and Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia want an additional unspecified amount. The reconstruction costs for Bosnia-Herzegovina were about \$2.6 billion in the first few years, and Afghanistan will cost \$3.3 billion over four years. They also are now asking for more money. The American *Atlantic Monthly* magazine has also said, 'The US is spending so much money on Iraq that we might as well make it the 51st state.' Most conservatives in that country would rather that money were spent on America rather than on a country 7,000 miles away.

Debate interrupted.