

The time for talking is over

We must oppose this war as we have never opposed one before

The rest of Europe must be wondering whether Britain has gone into hibernation. At the end of this month our Prime Minister is likely to announce the decision he made months ago, that Britain will follow the US into Iraq. If so, then two or three weeks later, the war will begin. Unless the UN inspectors find something before January 27, this will be a war without even the flimsiest of pretexts: an unprovoked attack whose purpose is to enhance the wealth and power of an American kleptocracy. Far from promoting peace, it could be the first in a series of imperial wars. The gravest global crisis since the end of the Cold War is three weeks away, and most of us seem to be asking why someone else doesn't do something about it.

It is not often that the people of these islands have an opportunity to change the course of world events. Bush knows that the Americans' approval of his war depends, in part, upon its credibility overseas: opinion polls have shown that many of those who would support an international attack would withdraw that support if they perceived that the US was acting alone. An international attack, in this case, means an attack supported by Britain. If Blair pulled out, Bush could be forced to think again. Blair will pull out only if he perceives that the political cost of sticking with Bush is greater than the cost of deserting him. Bush's war, in other words, depends upon our indifference. As Gramsci remarked, "what comes to pass does so not so much because a few people want it to happen, as because the mass of citizens abdicate their responsibility and let things be".

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There are several reasons why most British people do not seem prepared to act. New military technology has removed the need for a draft, so the otherwise unengaged young men who might have become the core of the resistance movement are left to blast imaginary enemies on their Gameboys. The economy is still growing, so underlying resentment towards the government is muted; yet we perceive our jobs and prospects to be insecure, so we are reluctant to expose ourselves to trouble.

It also seems that many people who might have contested this war simply can't believe it's happening. If, paradoxically, we were facing a real threat from a real enemy, the debate would have seemed more urgent. But if Blair had told us that we had to go to war to stop Saruman of Isengard from sending his orcs against the good people of Rohan, it would scarcely seem less plausible than the threat of Saddam of Iraq dropping bombs on America.

These factors may explain our feebleness. They don't excuse it. It is true that our chances of stopping this war are slight: both men appear determined to proceed, with or without evidence or cause. But to imagine that protest is useless if it doesn't lead to an immediate cessation is to misunderstand its purpose and power. Even if we cannot stop the attack upon Iraq, we must ensure that it becomes so politically costly that there will never be another like it. And this means that the usual demos will no longer suffice.

There have, so far, been many well-organised and determined protests, and several more are planned over the next six weeks. On January 18, demonstrators will seek to blockade the armed forces' joint headquarters at Northwood, in North London. Three days later, there'll be a mass lobby of parliament; at 6pm on the day the war is announced, protesters will gather in almost every town centre in Britain. On February 15, there'll be a massive rally in London. These actions are critically important, as they'll demonstrate the level of public opposition. But they're unlikely, by themselves, to provoke one of Blair's famous sweats. We must raise the temperature.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament has already tried one bold and unprecedented measure: seeking to persuade the courts to rule that attacking Iraq without a new UN resolution would be illegal. But on December 17th, the judges decided that they do not have the power to interpret the existing resolution. It seems that we now have few options but to launch a massive, though non-violent, campaign of disruption.

CND and the Stop the War Coalition have suggested an hour's stoppage on the day after the war begins. Many activists are now talking about building on this, and seeking to provoke wider strike action, or even a general strike.

This is, of course, difficult and dangerous. Some general strikes have been effective,

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forcing the tsar to agree to a constitution and a legislative assembly in 1905, for example, reversing the Kapp Putsch in Berlin in 1920, and overthrowing the Khuri regime in Lebanon in 1952. Others have been counter-productive, in some cases disastrous. When the French general strike was broken in 1920, the labour movement all but collapsed. Mussolini used the announcement of a general strike in 1922 to represent himself as the only man capable of restoring order; he seized power, with the king's blessing, after the fascists had routed the strikers and burnt down the Socialist Party headquarters. If we call for a strike and almost everyone goes to work, Blair will see this as a sign that he can do as he pleases.

But this is the scale on which we should be thinking. If we cannot mobilise the workforce, there are still plenty of means of concentrating politicians' minds. We could, for example, consider blocking the roads down which Blair and his key ministers must travel to meet their appointments, disrupting the speeches they make and blockading the most important public buildings. Hundreds of us are likely to be arrested, but that, as the Vietnam protesters found, serves only to generate public interest. Non-violence, however, is critical: nothing did more harm to the anti-war movement in the late 1960s than the Days of Rage organised in Chicago by the Weathermen.

But peaceful, well-focused and widespread nuisance, even if it irritates other members of the public, forces the issue to the front of people's minds, and ensures that no one can contemplate the war without also contemplating the opposition to the war. We must oblige people to recognise that something unprecedented in recent times is taking place, that Bush, assisted by Blair's moral slipstreaming, is seeking to summon a war from a largely peaceful world. We will fail unless we stage a political drama commensurate with the scale of the threat.

All this will, of course, be costly. But there comes a point at which political commitment is meaningless unless you are prepared to act on it. According to the latest opinion poll, some 42% of British people – against the 38% who support it – want to stop this war. But if our action is confined to shaking our heads at the television set, Blair might as well have a universal mandate. Are you out there? Or are you waiting for someone else to act on your behalf? #