

Let's Keep Our Eyes on the Prize

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Vanity Fair columnist Christopher Hitchens is right when he denounces former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark. Although he and I disagree strongly about the wisdom of the U.S. government's war on Iraq – he favors it and I've opposed it from the get-go – Hitchens is one of the sharpest pundits in the punditry business. Principled opponents of the Iraq war should applaud Hitchens for his criticism of Ramsey Clark.

Clark recently went to Iraq to defend Saddam Hussein. While I recognize that reasonable people can have differences on this score, I find Clark's actions objectionable, more objectionable, in fact, than Hitchens does. Where Hitchens and I agree strongly, though, is that Ramsey Clark went too far – not just defending Hussein, but also defending his actions. Hitchens writes about a recent BBC interview of Clark in which Clark claimed that Hussein had been justified in torturing and murdering 148 boys and men. How so? Because, Clark told the BBC, "he [Saddam] had this huge war going on, and you have to act firmly when you have an assassination attempt." As if Saddam didn't have something to do with "this huge war going on." So, then, in Clark's view, when someone tries to assassinate a politician, the dictator is justified in murdering people who may or may not be connected with the assassination attempt. Especially, it seems, if the dictator was in the midst of a war. Recall that Clark is no fringe figure – or at least he didn't used to be. Rather, he was the attorney general of the United States under President Lyndon B. Johnson. In other words, Clark was the chief law enforcement officer of the United States government. Recall also that LBJ was making war on North Vietnam. Given Clark's views on justifiable homicide, thank goodness there was not a serious attempt on LBJ's life when Clark was attorney general. One can only imagine whom he might have rounded up and shot. And certainly Clark was quite willing, as LBJ's attorney general, to prosecute Dr. Benjamin Spock, Marcus Raskin, and other outspoken opponents of the Vietnam war.

How does this relate to the antiwar movement? Here's how. Many people with the best intentions start off being against the war. That's a good thing.

It's only natural, then, to focus our venom on those who got us into the war. Of course, the chief decision maker in the Iraq war is George W. Bush, and so it's only natural to go after Bush. But then comes another step that's also natural – and wrong. That is to argue that Bush is the most evil person in the whole picture. I say it's natural because I see it all the time in people of all ages. It goes as follows: someone did something wrong and I really object to what he did; therefore, everything he did must be wrong and any people he targets must be innocent or, at least, less evil than he. But this is the reasoning of a young child or of a government (but I repeat myself.) It is not the reasoning of a rational person – in other words, not reasoning at all. I fully accept that George W. Bush is evil for starting a war against a nation that was no threat to us. But it doesn't follow that the government leader he made a war against is less evil than he. Indeed, if only a tiny fraction of the charges against Saddam Hussein is true, then Saddam is an order of magnitude more evil than Bush. If the result of the current trial of Saddam Hussein is anything less than a guilty verdict and capital punishment, I will be sorely disappointed. To say that is not to say that the war was worthwhile. There are many people around the world arguably as evil as Saddam – try Fidel Castro, for starters – but neither I, nor George W. Bush, for that matter, advocates going to war with them. The simple fact is that there can be all kinds of unjustified actions in the world and that out of those actions can come some good results. One such result, I hope, will be the death of Saddam Hussein. To state that simple fact is not to gainsay the idea that the war that led to his trial was a horrible idea.

If the above were the only point of this article, then it would still be worth stating. But there are three larger points here. The first is that we in the antiwar movement need to admit basic facts that are pointed out to us, even if the people pointing them are not generally truth-seekers themselves and even if we suspect their motives. If we in the antiwar movement attack everything Hitchens says, or even if we are silent when he says something worthwhile, then we make slimmer an already-slim chance to persuade Hitchens or others who agree with him and are more open-minded than he. Discussions go much better when both sides explicitly state their agreement about things they agree on. In fact, without such statements it's almost impossible for one side to persuade the other.

The second larger point is this. If you're a fellow American member of the antiwar movement and have been advocating that viewpoint for more than, say, a month, the odds are high that you've been attacked for being anti-American, for being an appeaser (one of my economist mentors at UCLA, the late Jack Hirshleifer, called me an appeaser because I opposed the war on Iraq), or far worse. I don't know you, but I suspect that a large percentage of you are none of the above. But when we face those accusations, we should ask ourselves why. Sometimes it's just the other person's distress speaking. But sometimes it's because we have been insufficiently outspoken in denouncing tyranny, not just in the United States, but in much more tyrannical countries. There's some low-hanging fruit here; we should pick it.

And if I'm allowed a third large point, it is this. In our current book, *Making Great Decisions in Business and Life*, my co-author, Charles L. Hooper, and I point out that one of the basic mistakes people make is not to remember what they are trying to achieve. We in the antiwar movement, at least those of us who write for *Antiwar.com*, want a more peaceful world and a freer United States. I didn't sign on to the antiwar movement, and I bet few of you did either, to focus my hatred on the U.S. president or to apologize for Saddam's Hussein's horrendous murders or for the war he started, which killed two orders of magnitude more people than Bush's war, but to try to reduce the role of war in the world. Let's keep our eyes on the prize.