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Does the U.S. Need U.N. Approval to Protect Its National Security?

“The U.N. Security Council, in Resolution 1441, demanded that Saddam Hussein disarm, to prove his disarmament to the world, or face serious consequences. The choice was up to the dictator. He chose poorly. **I acted because I was not about to leave the security of the American people in the hands of a madman. I was not about to stand by and wait and trust in the sanity and restraint of Saddam Hussein** (emphasis added).”

—President George W. Bush, speaking in Manchester, N.H., October 9, 2003.

Biden Raises Important Question

Senator Joseph Biden (D-DE) made comments on NBC’s *Meet the Press* (aired October 12) that questioned America’s ability to undertake military action when U.S. security is threatened without first having secured U.N. approval. Sen. Biden’s comments were directed at Vice President Dick Cheney’s remarks at the Heritage Foundation on October 9 where he stated that America does, in fact, reserve the right to protect itself without a U.N. mandate:

“Another criticism we hear is that the United States, when its security is threatened, may not act without unanimous international consent. Under this view, even in the face of a specific stated agreed-upon danger, the mere objection of even one foreign government would be sufficient to prevent us from acting. . . . In practice, it would prevent our own country from acting with friends and allies, even in the most urgent circumstance. . . . So often, and so conveniently, it amounts to a policy of doing exactly nothing.”

—Vice President Dick Cheney, speaking at the Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., October 10, 2003.

In his conversation with *Meet the Press* host Tim Russert, Sen. Biden had stated:

BIDEN: “**No one ever said we cannot act unless there’s absolute unanimity** (emphasis added). We never said that. No serious person ever said that.”

TIM RUSSERT: “But one country could veto a security resolution.”

BIDEN: “. . . Up to now, what we said as a nation is anytime there’s a credible threat and seems to be imminent, we reserve the right to act in our own defense. **But this is a straw man** (emphasis added). This is ideological rhetoric and I think it is totally, totally counterproductive.” NBC’s *Meet The Press*, 10/12/03)

Sen. Biden's comment, claiming that this is a "straw man," echoes fellow Democrats who demanded U.N. approval for military action—and, thus, opening the possibility that U.S. national security could be jeopardized by one veto-wielding nation.

Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA): "I am not against the use of force per se," said Ms. Pelosi . . . "It is just a timing question. And if the case had been made so conclusively that a unanimous vote of the U.N. supported it, I think that that would be very compelling." —Carl Hulse, "Top Democrats Say A War Against Iraq Is Premature," *The New York Times*, March 7, 2003.

Former Gov. Howard Dean: "I believe that Iraq does have chemical and biological weapons, and they are a threat to many nations in the region, but not to the United States. Therefore in my view, the United States ought not to attack unilaterally. The United Nations should disarm Saddam, and we should be a part of that effort." —PBS' *The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer*," February 25, 2003.

Retired Gen. Wesley Clark: "[Iraq] was never an imminent threat. It was a problem. I fully supported taking the problem to the United Nations and dealing with it through the United Nations." —CNN's Democrat Candidate Debate, Phoenix, AZ, October 9, 2003.

Rep. Richard Gephardt (D-MO): "I said to [President Bush] . . . that if you wanted to deal with Iraq, you've got to get help and you've got to go to the U.N." —Congressional Black Caucus Democrat Candidate Debate, Baltimore, MD, September 9, 2003.

Powell Tried to Secure Second U.N. Resolution—But Votes Weren't There

In the months leading up to the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Administration made numerous efforts to secure a second U.N. Security Council Resolution. On February 5, Secretary of State Colin Powell made an hour-long presentation to the Security Council providing evidence of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's continued violation of U.N. resolutions, demanding that he allow U.N. inspectors into Iraq to document his weapons arsenal. However, despite U.S. efforts, French President Jacques Chirac stated that "no matter what the circumstances," France would vote against a subsequent U.S.-backed resolution that would give Hussein a March 17 deadline to disarm or face possible military consequences.

During the debate over whether a second U.N. resolution was necessary, the 15-member U.N. Security Council was comprised of nations—including two veto-wielding permanent members (France and Russia) and at least three rotating members, including Syria, Mexico, and Chile—that were opposed to any U.S. military action in Iraq. Other Security Council members included the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, China, Pakistan, Guinea, Angola, Bulgaria, and Cameroon.

While it may be desirable to have unanimous, multilateral "support" for U.S. military operations, the United States must always retain the right to protect itself, either preemptively or reactively. Moreover, serious long-term negative implications would result from seeking international agreement as a *condition* to taking necessary action.