

A FINAL APPEAL

DON'T FALL FOR THE POLITICS OF FEAR

A PERSONAL MESSAGE FROM GEORGE SOROS

The nation is deeply divided and the two camps seem to be talking past each other. John Kerry won all three debates, but President Bush invokes his faith and that inspires his followers. In the end, it boils down to a philosophical difference over how to deal with an often confusing and threatening reality.



An open society such as ours is based on the recognition that our understanding of reality is inherently imperfect. Nobody is in possession of the ultimate truth. As the philosopher Karl Popper has shown, the ultimate truth is not attainable even in science. All theories are subject to testing and the process of replacing old theories with better ones never ends.

Faith plays an important role in an open society. Exactly because our understanding is imperfect, we cannot base our decisions on knowledge alone. We need to rely on beliefs, religious or otherwise, to help us make decisions. But we must remain open to the possibility that we may be wrong, so that we can correct our mistakes. Otherwise, we are *bound to be* wrong.

President Bush has shown that he is incapable of recognizing his mistakes. He insists on making reality conform to his beliefs, even at the cost of deceiving himself or deliberately deceiving the public. There is something appealing in the strength of his faith, especially in our troubled time. But the cost is too high.

By putting our faith in a president who cannot admit his mistakes we commit ourselves to the wrong policies. We are the most powerful nation on earth. No external power, no terrorist organization can defeat us. But we can defeat ourselves by getting caught in a quagmire.

Open societies suffer from an innate weakness: uncertainty. Leaders who claim to be in possession of the ultimate truth offer an escape from uncertainty. But that is a snare, because those leaders are *bound to be* wrong.

Under the influence of globalization we have been exposed to more than a normal dose of uncertainty. That is why the kind of faith that guides President Bush is so appealing. The traumatic events of 9/11 have reinforced that appeal. President Bush rose to the occasion and he carried the nation behind him. But he has led us in the wrong direction. He used the war on terror as an excuse for invading Iraq. If we re-elect President Bush we are endorsing his policies and we shall have to live with the consequences. We are facing a vicious circle of escalating violence with no end in sight. If we reject him at the polls we shall have a better chance to regain the respect and support of the world and break the vicious circle. That is why I consider this the most important election of my lifetime, and that is why I have taken such an active role in it.

For 18 months after 9/11, President Bush suppressed all dissent by calling it unpatriotic. That is how he could lead the nation *so far* in the wrong direction.

The invasion of Afghanistan was justified: that was where Osama bin Laden lived and al Qaeda had its training camps. The invasion of Iraq was not similarly justified.

The war in Iraq was misconceived from start to finish – if it has a finish. It is a war of choice, not necessity, in spite of what President Bush says. It goes without saying that Saddam was a tyrant, and it is good to be rid of him. But in invading Iraq as we did, without a second UN resolution, we violated international law. By mistreating and even torturing prisoners, we violated the Geneva conventions. President Bush has boasted that we do not need a permission slip from the international community, but our disregard for international law has endangered our security, particularly the security of our troops.

The arms inspections and sanctions were working. In response to American pressure, the United Nations had finally agreed on a strong stand. As long as the inspectors were on the ground, Saddam Hussein could not possibly pose a threat to our security. We could have

persisted with the inspections but President Bush insisted on going to war.

By now we know that we went to war on false pretenses. The weapons of mass destruction could not be found, and the connection with al Qaeda could not be established. What has not yet sunk in is that President Bush, Vice President Cheney and Condoleezza Rice *knew* that Saddam had no nuclear capacity long before we invaded Iraq. The intelligence experts in the Energy Department told them in 2002 that the famous aluminum tubes, which were presented as the most concrete evidence that Saddam had a nuclear program, could not possibly be used for enriching uranium. Yet President Bush spoke of incontrovertible evidence and said the smoking gun might take the shape of a mushroom cloud.

More recently, President Bush claimed that we went to war to liberate the people of Iraq. I find that claim unacceptable. If we had cared about the people of Iraq we should have had more troops available to protect them. We should not have used methods that alienated and humiliated them.

All my experience in fostering democracy and open society has taught me that democracy cannot be imposed by military means. And the way we went about it in Iraq will make it more difficult to promote democracy in the future. Through my foundation network devoted to promoting democracy and open society worldwide, I feel this personally. Under President Bush, America has lost its credibility as a champion of open society.

Instead of admitting his mistakes, President Bush now tells us that offense is the best defense and we are safer at home because we are fighting the terrorists abroad. The argument resonates strongly with an electorate fearful of terrorism – but it is a Siren's song.

The war on terror is an abstraction. But the terrorists are real people and they are not all alike. Most of the people attacking our soldiers in Iraq originally had nothing to do with Al Qaeda. They have been generated by the policies of the Bush administration. We have been spared a terrorist attack at home but it is quite a stretch to attribute that to the invasion of Iraq. The insurrection in Iraq, however, is a somber reality. Our security, far from improving as President Bush claims, is deteriorating.

Bush's war in Iraq has done untold damage to the United States. It has impaired our military power and undermined the morale of our armed forces. Our troops were trained to project overwhelming power. They were not trained for occupation duties. Having to fight an insurgency saps their morale. After Iraq, it has become more difficult to recruit people for the armed forces and we may have to resort to conscription.

Before the invasion of Iraq, we could project overwhelming power in any part of the world. We cannot do so any more because we are bogged down in Iraq. Iran and North Korea are moving ahead with their nuclear programs at full speed and our hand in dealing with them has been greatly weakened.

There are many other policies for which the Bush administration can be criticized but none are as important as Iraq. Iraq is the proof that we cannot put our faith in the President.

It is hard to believe that all the accusations I have leveled against President Bush are actually true. I wish they weren't because then we wouldn't be in the predicament in which we find ourselves. There is only one way out: to change leadership and direction. Fortunately we have a credible – and attractive – alternative. I have known John Kerry personally for

many years. He will make an excellent president.

I have heard many doubts about John Kerry. Why can't he project the same certainty as President Bush? Admittedly he won the debates, but does that qualify him to be our commander in chief? Will he be as single-minded in pursuing the war on terror as George W. Bush?

John Kerry has presented a cogent and coherent case but the Bush campaign managed to define him before he could define himself. They made fun of his explanation of the various votes he cast on the \$87 billion appropriation for Iraq, although it made perfect sense. He was practically not heard, except in snippets, until the debates.

But the trouble goes deeper. The war on terror as defined by President Bush is a one-dimensional presentation of reality. We cannot fight terrorism by military means alone. We can use military force only when we have a known target; but it is the habit of terrorists to keep their whereabouts hidden. To track them down we need the support of the populations amongst whom they hide. Offense is not necessarily the best defense if it offends those whose allegiance we need. Senator Kerry is aware of this other dimension. That is why he cannot be as single-minded as George W. Bush.

John Kerry is nuanced because reality is complicated. This has been turned into a character flaw by the Bush campaign. Yet, that is exactly the character we need in our commander in chief.

Senator Kerry is prepared to defend the country as he showed in Vietnam; but he has learned firsthand the devastation that war can bring and will use military force only as a last resort.

By contrast George W. Bush revels in being a war president. His campaign is shamelessly exploiting the fears generated by 9/11. Vice President Cheney is conjuring mushroom clouds over our cities.

But fear is a bad counselor; we must resist it wherever it comes from. President Roosevelt had the right idea when he said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." If we re-elect President Bush the war on terror will never end. The terrorists are invisible, therefore they can never disappear. It is our civil liberties that may disappear instead.

An open society is always in danger. It must constantly reaffirm its principles in order to survive. We are being sorely tested, first by 9/11 and now by President Bush's response. To pass the test we must face reality instead of finding solace in false certainties. This election transcends party loyalties. Our future as an open society depends on resisting the Siren's song.

George Soros is a financier and philanthropist. He was born in Budapest in 1930. He survived the Nazi occupation and then fled communist Hungary. He settled in the United States and became a citizen in 1961. He has been active as a philanthropist since 1979, when he began providing funds to help black students attend Capetown University in apartheid South Africa. He has established and today funds a network of charitable organizations active in more than 50 countries around the world, with a total annual budget of \$450 million. These organizations promote the values of democracy and open society through programs in education, human rights, public health and legal reform.

Mr. Soros is the author of eight books including, most recently, The Bubble of American Supremacy: The Costs of Bush's War in Iraq. Copies are available at your local bookstore, as well as at www.GeorgeSoros.com and at www.publicaffairsbooks.com.