

Journalist Christopher Hitchens fully embraces the Bush war camp

David Walsh
7 October 2002

In an article posted September 26 on the web site of the *Nation*—the US liberal weekly—journalist Christopher Hitchens announced that he was giving up his column in the magazine after more than two decades. His final piece is entitled “Taking Sides,” and Hitchens makes clear that the “side” he has taken is the camp of war against Iraq spearheaded by the Bush administration.

The British-born Hitchens is a former “left,” who has moved openly and sharply to the right over the past several years. During the impeachment drive of 1998-99, engineered by the extreme right, Hitchens foamed at the mouth about the sins of Bill Clinton. Indeed at one point he actively intervened, playing a small but dirty role, and did his best to pin a perjury charge on a Clinton aide. During the 2000 election hijacking Hitchens made common cause with the extreme right again, denouncing Democrats for “squealing” about the Bush camp’s fraud and thuggery. Following the September 11 terror attacks, the *Nation* columnist became a vocal proponent of a US military attack on Afghanistan, in the name of the fight against “Islamic fascism.”

The essential argument of his filthy swansong in the *Nation* is similar to the one advanced by Bush administration officials: Saddam Hussein is a monster—“a sadistic megalomaniac,” in Hitchens’s terms—who must be removed from power. He writes, “I don’t particularly care, even in a small way, to be a hostage of Saddam myself.” It is noteworthy that Hitchens does not object, “even in a small way,” to being a hostage of US imperialism and its project of world domination.

Hitchens has become something of an expert in the art of cheap and empty moralizing. This was his approach in the Clinton scandals and it is now applied to the problem of Iraq. There is hardly anything more bankrupt than the demonizing of a political figure such as Hussein, considered entirely apart from the history of imperialism in the region, as well as the evolution of the Iraqi nationalist movement. It is impossible to base principled politics on the “bad man” theory of history.

The journalist continues, “There is not the least doubt that he [Hussein] had acquired some of the means of genocide and hopes to collect some more.” Hitchens here employs a method favored by Vice President Dick Cheney in several recent speeches—he uses the phrases “not the least doubt” without providing the “least” amount of evidence.

Hitchens’s attempts to connect Hussein to the Islamic fundamentalists—including reviving the widely debunked claim that alleged suicide hijacker Mohamed Atta met with Iraqi agents in Prague—do not even appear to convince him. He comments defensively, “People keep bleating that Saddam is not a

fundamentalist. But he did rejoice in the attacks on New York and Washington and Pennsylvania, and he does believe that every little bit hurts.” This is simply gibberish: either Hussein was connected to the suicide bombing, of which there is not a shred of evidence and which has no political logic, or he wasn’t. Hitchens’s fishing expedition is no more convincing than the White House campaign of lies.

Hitchens solidarizes himself with the “Iraqi and Kurdish opponents of this filthy menace.” Which opponents? Legitimate popular opposition to Hussein? No, in this article and others, Hitchens makes clear that he means the CIA-financed Iraqi National Congress (INC) and the opportunist nationalists of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), who have lined up in support of a US invasion in hopes of sharing in the Iraqi oil wealth once the present regime is deposed and the country broken up. None of these forces represents a progressive alternative to the Hussein dictatorship. They are merely stooges in waiting.

Concluding his column, Hitchens explains that when he began working at the *Nation*, it had been described to him as “a debating ground between liberals and radicals.” He goes on: “I have come to realize that the magazine itself takes a side in this argument, and is becoming the voice and the echo chamber of those who truly believe that John Ashcroft is a greater menace than Osama bin Laden.” The blithe, arrogant tone with which Hitchens makes this pronouncement reveals something about the privileged and reactionary circles in which he travels. Can there be any doubt that the overwhelming majority of the world’s population lives in far greater fear of the US government and military, which have demonstrated their willingness to bombard and murder anyone who opposes them, than the fugitive and isolated bin Laden and his ragtag forces?

Moreover, one must insist on a fact that Hitchens knowingly leaves out: Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia owes a great deal in the first place to Washington’s sponsorship. Bin Laden and his cohorts were encouraged and assisted as part of the plan to destabilize the USSR in the late 1970s and 1980s. They constitute a Frankenstein monster produced by the Carter and Reagan administrations.

In a previous article on Iraq (“Macbeth in Mesopotamia”) Hitchens resorted to the type of argument he advanced last autumn in relation to the proposed attack on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Addressing an audience that might have some knowledge of the history of the region, the *Nation* columnist was obliged to note in the recent piece that the US “had at least a hand in the coup” that brought Hussein to power, that it “encouraged him in his attack on Iran” and that “he was given the greenest of lights” to invade Kuwait. He continued, “[T]hese, too, were all interventions in the affairs of Iraq. And if there can be interventions one way, in favor of the regime, there is at least a

potential argument that an intervention to cancel such debts would be justifiable.”

To paraphrase what we wrote last year, the logic of this reasoning is unimpeachable. Since the US ruling elite has aided Hussein in the past and generally inflicted misery on the Iraqi population (Hitchens omits the murderous character of the sanctions policy), it should be given a blank check to intervene again—and in a far more devastating fashion.

US policies have proven disastrous for the people of Iraq, Afghanistan and the entire region. They are driven, not by an interest in giving the Iraqis “a chance to have a democratic life,” as Hitchens absurdly claims, but primarily by the desire to control the country’s oil, a word that curiously never emerges from the columnist’s keyboard.

The responsibility for overthrowing the Hussein regime belongs to the Iraqi workers and poor, in alliance with the international working class, and not the American military.

When in history has liberation ever resulted as a happy byproduct of imperialist intervention? Hitchens’s reactionary reasoning has been standard fare for colonialism’s apologists since some time in the mid-nineteenth century. Every brutal incursion by the British Empire into Africa and Asia, which coincidentally enriched a handful back in the mother country, was justified on the basis of its “civilizing mission.”

In the twentieth century Japan’s attack on Manchuria, fascist Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia and Nazi Germany’s occupation of parts of Czechoslovakia were all defended as “humanitarian interventions” by their perpetrators. Japan declared its intention to establish an “earthly paradise,” defending Manchuria from “Chinese bandits.” Hitler announced Germany’s desire to end ethnic tensions and violence in Czechoslovakia and “safeguard the national individuality of the German and Czech peoples,” in an operation “filled with earnest desire to serve the true interests of the peoples dwelling in the area.”

There is nothing new under the sun when it comes to the lies of imperialism’s apologists in defense of brigandage. Over the course of the past century the American ruling class has organized “regime change” in countless cases, replacing leftist or nationalist regimes that it did not care for with puppet governments prepared to bloodily suppress political and popular opposition. As to the claim that Washington will “liberate” Iraq, Trotsky noted decades ago that “American imperialism is in essence ruthlessly rude, predatory, in the full sense of the word, and criminal,” but that “America is always liberating somebody, that’s her profession.”

There is nothing innovative about Hitchens’s approach. The crudity of his arguments speaks to his political and social evolution. He feels no more need than the gangsters running the US government to explain or convince.

The manner of the journalist’s departure from the *Nation* speaks volumes about the liberal and erstwhile liberal milieu in which his foul views have incubated. In a statement published in their October 14 edition, the *Nation*’s editors write of their “keen regret” that Hitchens is leaving their pages. They go on, “We will miss his eloquent and passionate voice and his elegantly crafted prose.” As far as Hitchens’s style goes, to each his own. Those who are impressed by his bloated, casually dispensed cynicism are either political novices or as jaded and degenerate as he.

More significantly, however, the editors are singing the praises of a man who, over the past number of years, has lined up on the most critical questions of the day with the ultra-right, supporting an extra-constitutional coup d’état, the stealing of a national election and predatory, neo-colonialist wars in Central Asia and the Middle East.

What does it say about the *Nation* that it didn’t kick him out years ago? There is some question as to whether Hitchens’s or the editors’ statement is the more repugnant.

Hitchens’s political evolution is instructive, if not particularly surprising. He represents a type excreted out of the pores of the English middle class in considerable quantities over the past century or so, from Oswald and Cynthia Mosley (one-time Independent Labour Party members who formed the British Union of Fascists in 1932) to the legion of former Communist Party members and fellow travelers (Kingsley Amis, Iris Murdoch, Stephen Spender, et al) who discovered the Tory Party, the Catholic Church or the CIA during the Cold War.

What has distinguished the thinking and writings of this social layer has been a reliance on the hodgepodge of English empiricism and an essential lack of seriousness. The British ruling class has never been unduly worried by such figures; it simply waits patiently, ready to bestow an OBE or even a knighthood when the inevitable change of heart takes place.

In the 1970s Hitchens was apparently a member or supporter of the state-capitalist International Socialist group (the forerunner of the Socialist Workers Party) in Britain and makes much of having sold their newspaper on London streets at the time. In other words, he once evinced a certain sympathy for Trotskyism. Given a considerable predisposition to cynicism and careerism (the *Nation* itself is a hothouse of cynicism), Hitchens lost whatever confidence he once had in the perspective of socialism under the impact of the defeats suffered by the working class and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1980s and 1990s. The project of social revolution let him down, and he has moved on.

This is an individual who wants to be on the side of power, who likes flattery and money, who is easily impressed. The new power, indeed the only power in his eyes, is American imperialism, and more specifically, the extreme right in the US. He only awaits an invitation from the White House.

Hitchens, who has been hobnobbing with the wealthy and influential for years, is leaving the *Nation* primarily because the association with its tepid liberals is increasingly untenable, given his new friends on the far right (although the opportunity to enrich himself elsewhere no doubt comes into it too). He is anxious to burn his bridges. We have no hesitation in predicting that Hitchens has not completed his evolution. There is a logic to these processes. This is a political freebooter and scoundrel who is fated to end up in the company of sinister and fascist-minded elements.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact