

## Editorial: The Consequences of Nothing

April, 2003

Questions, questions, on multiple channels, nearly 24-7, assault the senses like machine gun fire.

Do we have the right strategy? Are Iraqis happy? Sad? Mad? Do we care? Will the U.N. share in the peacekeeping? What about weapons of mass destruction? Are there enough forces on the ground? Does Iraq want freedom? Were we right to proceed without U.N. approval? Will prisoners of war be treated fairly? Should we have raised our flag? How long will war last? Is it about oil, WMDs, revenge, freedom, world security? Does anyone know?

Before it began, one local teen asked a different sort of question, “Why don’t we bring democracy to lots of other countries too, like in Africa?” Maybe now, with fighting underway, the answer to that question will be more obvious. For all those who lived through Vietnam, the difficulty of “bringing democracy” to a nation invokes memories of the high price in lives lost, in families torn by bitter dissent, of ongoing protests, and the worst memory—the possibility of failure.

For many these are the only memories, and for today’s youth the only visual connections are manufactured by Hollywood in countless movies that tell a simplified story of a most complex world event. But the context of Vietnam should never be forgotten—the Cold War and the persistent, often ruthless advance of communism at that time in third world countries, funded by the U.S.S.R. or China.

The lesson should be that world events of this kind are never simple. Wars are more questions than answers. Wars are multiple missions, twisted emotions, complex goals, and absolutely unknown conclusions.

Meditating on Lincoln’s tortured soul as he contemplated engagement in the Civil War—uncertain of its final outcome—it seems likely his thoughts turned more to the consequences of inaction than to the outcomes of action. Because in any crisis, the “first question” that must be answered, before deciding when to fight, how to fight, where to fight, must be: what happens if we do nothing? The most significant questions for Lincoln centered on the impending dissolution of the world’s greatest experiment in freedom and self-government, and on the likely continuation of and persistent arguments over slavery—both of those being very real consequences of inaction.

Lincoln could not be certain of victory; still he pursued war as though victory was the only option. Lincoln’s overriding goal, which he stated repeatedly, was to prevent the consequences of inaction, to save the union.

In WWII the consequences of inaction were obvious. Apply the “first question”—what would have happened if we did nothing? The outright murder of millions and Hitler's march across Europe never would have been halted had the U.S not finally acted. Even our delayed entry into Europe may have cost more lives. Few second-guess our decision to act in WWII, and few criticize the rectitude of our actions through the war. The consequences of inaction in hindsight were so horrific. But how many young people are aware of our inaction up to the bombing of Pearl Harbor? Ask, and see how many think WWII began at Pearl Harbor.

In Iraq, stated administration goals are to prevent the use and spread of weapons of mass destruction, to stop aid, training and harboring of terrorists, and to remove from power the despot Hussein who has murdered and tortured his own people in a brutal, repressive, minority regime. The consequences of inaction in Iraq were and still are clear: mass destruction with unimaginable weapons, increased terrorism aimed at the United States, and the murder of innocents.

What of the consequences of action? These are the continuing questions. And war was not embarked upon without deliberating fully over other options and alternatives, potential losses, right strategies, and post-war settlements and goals.

But the “first question”—what happens if we do nothing? Asked and answered. For George W. Bush and for Tony Blair and for 45 other nations the consequences of inaction are unthinkable, and they pursue war as though victory is the only option.

The majority of Americans and British give our president and Britain's prime minister credit for answering that “first question” on a sound moral basis, with the best interests of their nations at heart. The alternative, that the decision was based on an activist agenda of power seeking, profiteering or vengeance is abhorrent—an insult to both nations. As war proceeds the questions about day-to-day actions and decisions will continue, as they should. Mistakes may be made. Strategies may prove ineffective. Soldiers may blunder on the battlefield. But if we have answered the “first question” on a sound moral basis, we are on the right course.

An anti-war proponent was recently overheard to say, “Bring back the days when the worst mistake the president made was to have sex in the Oval Office.” Well yes, eight years of lurid misdeeds and international inaction by that administration lulled us through the '90s with a false sense of contentment and peaceful prosperity. But reality has a way of rearing its ugly head. Those years of inaction had consequences—inaction over the embassy bombings and the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole, inaction over stolen military secrets and inaction on intelligence about the dangerous Osama Bin Laden—which resulted in the proliferation of a terror network that eventually brought down the World Trade Center towers.

When the consequences of inaction involve the security of the country, when lives and freedom are at stake, there will always be those who consciously choose inaction, thus whose errors will be mostly those of omission. That is the safe way, the easy way. If one

never takes responsibility, one can't be blamed for mistakes. There's a reason that in their time Lincoln and other great wartime leaders have been both loved and loathed, but always have been uniquely lonely in their commitment to their cause. Having answered that "first question" with the best interests of their fellow citizens at heart, having accepted that great responsibility, the rest of the questions that inevitably follow place them at risk of being wrong, wrong, and wrong again.

Only in hindsight do we usually see that the "first question" is really all that mattered, that freedom, peace and security really do have a price—and they're worth it.