

## From



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## Washington

# SUPPORT FOR BUSH BROAD BUT THIN



George Bush

**I**N many ways, the people and institutions of the United States seem publicly united behind President George Bush as rarely before in his decision to send a huge American expeditionary force to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Public opinion polls show considerable backing for the dispatching of American forces and coming to the protection of Saudi Arabia; even for the calling up of the reserve forces now underway for the first time since Vietnam, and of civilian airlift capacity for the first time since the programme was established after World War II.

The still vacationing president and commander-in-chief is receiving compliments and accolades from a variety of sources for his handling of things to date — especially for his mobilisation of so many allies, the UN, most of the countries of the Arab League, and even the former protagonist the Soviet Union. Few political figures seem eager to criticise the president in any direct or sustained manner.

Yet, just below the surface there is considerably more unease, uncertainty, and challenge than might be realised by those far from American shores and less attuned to the nuances and shifting alliances of American politics and opinion.

Support for the Bush administration's unprecedented actions — actions which more and more appear to be leading to a major war in the Mid-east with unforeseen ramifications — is very broad at this point.

Yet the depth of that support is very much in question here. In fact what appears to many from afar as a solid wall of support

frequency.

From both Right and Left voices of concern and caution are beginning to prop up in a strange alliance of those urging restraint rather than belligerence. And at the same time the primary voices urging belligerence, the primary protagonists for taking on Saddam with the full military might the US will soon be able to unleash are those usually associated with the pro-Israeli lobby — to mention just a few Henry Kissinger, analysts from the Jewish lobby's Washington Institute on Near East Affairs, *The New Republic* magazine, Alexander Haig, and *US News & World Report*.

A few days ago, in an article headlined "Conservative are leading murmurs of dissent to Bush actions in Mid-east", *The Washington Post* summarised some aspects of these initial stirrings within American politics.

"Opposition to the administration is confined so far to small minorities on the Left and the Right," the article went on to conclude. With the Cold War ended on American terms, the basic reality that "conservatives are reluctant internationalists" is once again coming forward.

Buchanan has quickly become the point-man for this conservative approach. As former White House communications director in the Reagan years, Buchanan is now a nightly participant in the national debate through his co-hosting of CNN's "Crossfire", his syndicated column, and his regular appearances on other popular TV public affairs shows.

Bush has "gone too far in terms of his rhetoric and too far in terms of his commitment"

## AMERICAN HOME FRONT

The 'Home Front' is of course where the United States lost the Vietnam war — ending with the terribly embarrassing moments some 15 years ago with American helicopters lifting off from the Saigon embassy hands stretching out from those we left behind. There is no doubt that the US has the technology and the fire-power to defeat any country in the world, certainly a country of but 18 million people now embargoed from everything including arms and food. But there are various constraints on American power, foremost among them public opinion and press opinion back home. So in many ways the 'Home Front' is a crucial element determining the outcome of any American military under-taking, placing constraints on the use of that power, potentially rendering that power unuseable.

Buchanan noted in a recent interview. "There's no interest so vital that we should consider using American ground forces to disgorge Iraq from Kuwait," he added. "Even if we were successful in getting Iraq out of Kuwait, that would launch a permanent troop and treaty commitment that I'm not sure this country can sustain."

Meanwhile, on the progressive Left, the charge against Bush policies is being championed by the *New York weekly The Nation* magazine which in the current issue calls American policies "naked imperial intervention".

Furthermore, a new citizens group — the Coalition Against Intervention in the Mid-east — is being organised by former Johnson administration attorney general Ramsey Clark.

Another outspoken voice from the Left is that of *Harpers* magazine publisher John MacArthur who has been raising pointed questions on radio and TV about conserving energy, not sending our military to fight for oil.

I recall having lunch some years back with a former ambassador who was very close to the Reagan administration but comfortable sitting at the time in one of the foreign policy "think-tanks" that permeate Washington. It was a few weeks before the Beirut airport were destroyed by a suicide bomber in 1983.

This former ambassador simply told me, quite some time in advance, that President Reagan would soon be ordering the Marines out of Beirut. I said I didn't see it; that the Israelis were very eager to keep us there

and that once committed we just couldn't pick up and leave so easily. He told me Reagan wasn't going to be able to maintain that commitment; that public opinion was switching against our involvement, that many in the military wondered how long they were going to have to stay, and that too many of Bush's own advisers were having second thoughts.

Of course the Marine barracks disaster greatly escalated the tensions at that time, directly leading to the American pullout.

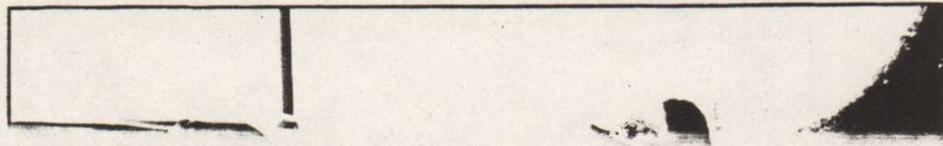
But the basic point to all this is not only that conditions and perspectives change, but that in a democracy like the US press opinion and expert opinion, commentators and analysts, and eventually public opinion often followed political opinion, are all quite transient and fickle. And this is especially the case in today's US which has not faced a serious military conflict of the type that may now be imminent since Vietnam.

America has been quick to make commitments in the past; commitments it then tried to keep but wasn't always able to sustain.

It's too early to know for sure if the 1990 commitment of huge American forces to the Mid-east in opposition to Saddam's Iraq is going to turn the tide.

It's too early to know if a long-term commitment is even what the White House has in mind.

But for sure there are already the initial winds of dissent from both the intellectual Right and Left. And protests, reminiscent of the past, may not be too far behind; especially once the shooting starts.



American troops and equipment rushed to Saudi Arabia: the question of fate and future for the 'Home Front'.

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Years of pro-Israel  
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and, especially in the  
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