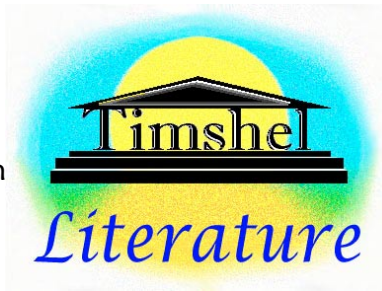


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## **Just Thinking, 06/09/03:**

### **Where Are They?**

**(The Anti-War Arguments Based on the President's Supposedly Exaggerated Claims)**

by Justin Katz

In December 1998, the University of Rhode Island made headlines based on an entirely fabricated controversy. The student paper, *The Good 5¢ Cigar*, ran a cartoon forewarning of the racism that would engulf the University of Texas were it to end its affirmative action practices, a topic that had been in the news. The newly constituted Brothers United for Action (BUA) took offense, protested, listed demands, and inspired various conciliatory gestures — including a budget for themselves — from the school's authorities. Among the appeasers was the Student Senate, which cut the *Cigar's* funding.

After a few days of limited protests and extensive coverage, the university hosted a forum to address the issue. During his opening statements, BUA leader Marc Harge explained his group's position thus: "The *Good 5-Cent Cigar* has lost its ethical and moral mandate." When the floor was opened for questions from the audience, it became his all-purpose response:

Why do you believe that your group can decide what activities the university funds?

"The *Good 5-Cent Cigar* has lost its ethical and moral mandate."

Does it matter that your group misinterpreted the meaning and intent of the cartoon?

"The *Good 5-Cent Cigar* has lost its ethical and moral mandate."

Although the underlying issues are entirely different, the mentality behind this mantric rebuttal brings the controversy to mind in the context of the questions, rife with innuendo, about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The “rhetorical questioning” has devolved into little more than a legitimacy drop cloth thrown over underlying ulterior motives. One can make deductively reasonable guesses as to what those motives might be — political ambition, moral insecurity, ideological intransigence — but the questions themselves persist.

That they require repeated and prominent asking to maintain relevance is obvious from the minimal amount of new information required to spark repetition. Indeed, to keep the topic in the public conversation, various media outlets, from *the Guardian* to *the New York Times* to the Associated Press, have misrepresented statements of Bush administration officials, cited anonymous “analysts,” and selectively quoted from the broad pool of intelligence documents available before the war.

The reason that such tactics are necessary is that there is no real basis for the theme to be pounded for so long a duration. To be sure, the search for the WMDs ought not be allowed to peter off — if only because any weapons that still exist may have been, or soon could be, dispersed to dangerous parties. However, while the United States is shoulder deep in the mire of helping a nation to learn to be free, as a preface to reconstruction after a decades-long decomposition, it is premature and counterproductive to begin sowing seeds of doubt.

This is particularly true considering that WMDs were not the sole justification for war, and the argument about them focused on Saddam Hussein’s unwillingness to prove his relinquished ambitions. The broader context of the war included, of course, the War on Terrorism and the faltering credibility of the United Nations, as well as Iraq’s significance to the global economy and its strategic position, both geographically and for diplomatic purposes, to increase leverage and decrease the likelihood of more-dangerous wars. However, three distinct arguments were made

for war based specifically on the country and its leading regime, with different people emphasizing different aspects to varying degrees.

Before the war, the administration's appeals to the human atrocities in Iraq were often dismissed as lip service. Even those who attributed some degree of sincerity to them tended to move discussion on with a "yeah but." Plenty of regimes abuse their people, the argument went, why attack Iraq? Now that the extent of those atrocities is being revealed in heart- and gut-wrenching detail, some post-war-anti-war advocates require reminding that President Bush mentioned the humanitarian crisis in every speech in which he made the case for war. He did so to illustrate the loathsome nature of the regime. He did so in the context of enumerating the many United Nations mandates at which Hussein had thumbed his nose. And he did so as a simple matter of moral principle, apart from international relations.

The other two specific justifications for war served to highlight Hussein's regime among the too-crowded field of monsters. Before the war, those who positioned themselves against the administration found it necessary to express doubt about Hussein's links to al Qaeda, despite the evidence, and to disregard the explicit links and support that the dictator gave to "lesser" terrorist groups. To assist in this, they postulated an ideological wall that they insisted would prevent Osama bin Laden and Hussein from working together. Furthermore, they simply wrote off all explanations of the ways in which international terrorist organizations operate: obscuring connections and allying with each other and with sympathetic nations in a fluid fashion.

Finally came weapons of mass destruction. While there were undoubtedly some Westerners who seized on the possibility of a vaguely "imminent" threat from weapons already in existence in order to reconcile conflicting humanitarian, pacifist, and even anti-American sentiments, the argument for war was not presented with that level of specificity. For this reason, those who argue that the inability to unearth adequate evidence of WMDs belies the imminence of

the threat are merely using the lack of discovered stockpiles to continue their antebellum tirades. “Stockpiles,” in their view, were not enough to justify war; only evidence of intent to use them would have sufficed.

WMDs also became a point of emphasis because they were the only issue that anti-war voices were willing to address with credulity. Indeed, their credulity was such that the discussion centered around the UNMOVIC inspectors’ ability to find and destroy the weapons that everybody believed Iraq to have. Lost in the more-recent chatter is the fact that those who argued for war found it necessary to state and restate that the inspectors were not employed to find and destroy weapons, but to act as the medium through which the Ba’athists could prove that the weapons and programs had been dismantled. The term “smoking gun” before the war meant obvious refusal to cooperate, not a missile loaded and ready to fire.

Given that very few prominent players, from world leaders to Hans Blix to reputable commentators, objected to war on the basis of there being no WMDs, their objections had to be constructed around the assumption of the weapons’ existence. Perhaps the most germane “Where are they?” would refer to the anti-war arguments that took the best available information, as well as common sense conclusions drawn from Hussein’s actions, into account and still concluded that war was not justified.

The answer to this question is simple: recalling the disconnected, sharply parsed statements that, a few months ago, had a veneer of plausibility now, after the discovery of mass graves for children and their dolls, would surely leave one open to accusations of having lost his or her ethical and moral mandate.