

'United We Think'

Professors leave no consequence unturned in forum about Iraq

Nothing may be more unusual than bringing eight UNC professors together in one room to discuss one topic and find out that, on the whole, they agree. And particularly not on a topic as hotly discussed as the United States vs. Saddam Hussein. But when the GAA presented the question, "Should the U.S. attack Iraq?" this fall, that's what happened.

The GAA, as part of its "Think Fast" series on news topics of current interest, collaborated with UNC's curriculum in peace, war and defense to present a public forum Sept. 25 to examine the Iraqi question. GAA President Doug Dibbert '70 opened the event by telling the audience the panel's purpose was to illuminate and provide context, and he pointed out that while the eight panel members would all bring passion to their subjects, they wouldn't necessarily agree. "It is not important that we think alike, but that we think," said Dibbert.

While the presentations were indeed passionate, there was no disagreement among the panelists over whether the United States should attack Iraq unilaterally. Whether from the legal, political, diplomatic or security perspectives, or from the perspectives of history, ethics or religion, panel members gave a wide range of reasons why unilateral attack would be dangerous, disastrous or even illegal.

Richard H. Kohn, professor of history and chair of the curriculum in peace, war and defense, moderated the forum. He was joined by Mark J.C. Crescenzi, assistant professor of political science; Carl Ernst, professor of religious studies; Michael H. Hunt, professor of history; Douglas MacLean, professor of philosophy; Sarah D. Shields, associate professor of history; James A. Stimson, professor of political science; and A. Mark Weisburd, professor of law.

Would a unilateral pre-emptive attack on Iraq be legal? Weisburd, a former foreign service officer and author of a book on the use of force, said that, in his judgment, such a move "simply doesn't meet the international legal requirements for self-defense. An attack would seriously impact on the relations between the United States and the world in general simply because the U.S. [would be] saying a well-understood benchmark of self-defense doesn't

apply to us, and that would risk sending a message that we accept no constraints on our behavior. The likely concerns that will arouse in other countries is easy to imagine."

Kohn said acting unilaterally not only would be illegal but would present a great risk to long-term U.S. security. "Without the sanction and legitimacy of world opinion ... we would be setting in motion the processes that would lead to war and insecurity over the next generation or half century that ultimately would be far more dangerous to the national security of the U.S. than any weapons in the hands of any state today," said Kohn. "We would be recruiting for al Qaeda."

Could a pre-emptive attack by the United States be morally or ethically justified? MacLean, who specializes in moral philosophy and applied ethics, said that a war is just only if all peaceful means of response have been exhausted. "The threshold for a pre-emptive strike must be very high," he said, "and many doubt it's been met."

Is war necessary for U.S. national security? Mark Crescenzi, who teaches in the areas of international relations and security, believes it is not necessary for security, with the exception of a highly unlikely scenario, such as if the smallpox virus were to be used against the United States. "A fundamental direct threat [from Iraq] just isn't there," he said. Iraq is not capable of a direct attack, according to Crescenzi; it would need a third party to deliver its current stockpile. Taking preemptive action against Saddam and having him unleash his weapons in self-defense is a greater threat to our security than Iraq is right now, according to Crescenzi.

Many of the speakers outlined scenarios of disaster if the United States moved forward unilaterally. "The United States will not be a welcome liberator, even though the Iraqis know better than we do just how horrific Saddam Hussein has been," said Shields, who specializes in Middle Eastern history. "Anti-American sentiments will grow and continue to grow, and the continuing anger will lead to escalating [terrorist] attacks."

Ernst, an expert on Islam, added that unilateral action on the part of the United States



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About 500 people attended the GAA's latest "Think Fast" program about the United States and Iraq.

would be seen as a war against Islam and Muslims in Muslim-majority countries and that it would further throw fuel on the fire of the most extreme Muslim thought. "It would mean much greater insecurity than we see now," he concluded.

Hunt was asked to comment on the impact of a war on U.S. foreign relations. According to Hunt, the recently released Bush doctrine on national security portrays the United States as the keeper of global security with the right to interfere in the affairs of other states, all the while spreading American values. Hunt questioned the unilateral thinking in current U.S. foreign policy and said he believes the United States' single-minded pursuit of security and neglect of the global impact of our policy is dangerous. The United States does itself damage by severing ties with the global diplomatic community, he said.

Stimson, who specializes in the intersection of public opinion and government, considered how Americans might react to an invasion of Iraq. Stimson said that history tells us that no matter how much disagreement there is before a war, the morning after an invasion the public will be behind the effort. "And in this case, Bush will be lionized as a great, decisive president," he said.

He went on to point out that the absence of criticism doesn't ultimately mean support and that within a year the early surge of support likely would be gone. To illustrate American fickleness, he pointed out that the elder President Bush was the most popular president in history in January 1991 and he was out of office in 1992.

In Crescenzi's words, "The ugly question of what we'll do after the war is over" no doubt will remain open for some time. ■

— Miriam Sauls