

**Why Talk?**  
**The U.S. Invasion of Iraq**  
*by*  
**John D. French**

For Latin Americans the events in Iraq have an eerie familiarity. In matters of military and foreign policy the United States cut its teeth on Latin America and the Caribbean. Since the nineteenth century it has been engaged in “regime change” and neocolonialism throughout the region. In 1898 it intervened in Cuba, raising its flag over the island national and establishing a military government. This ushered in the U.S. century of empire. After Cuba, the United States continued its imperial policy by ousting leaders or inciting revolts in Panama, Venezuela, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Grenada, and El Salvador, to name only a few. The term “weapons of mass destruction” now joins the other terms, such as “bandits,” “rebels,” “guerrillas,” “subversives,” and “narco-traffickers,” that it employs to justify its interventionist policies. The continuation of this imperial policy now looms over Iraq and the Middle East, threatening to engulf the entire region in internecine warfare. Latin Americans worry that, if the United States consolidates its position in the Middle East, they will once again confront an emboldened U.S. imperialist aggressor with new designs on the region. At the recent Dallas meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, the historian John French gave the moving speech on the subject that appears below.

—The *LAP* Collective

Why do we talk? Because we must, because otherwise we will suffocate. If we do not talk, our voices will dry up as our minds become inured to the injustice and suffering being inflicted by our government.

To whom do we talk? To each other—to gain knowledge, to secure our strength, to learn what we need to know in order to talk to still others. We must talk not only with the like-minded but with the light-minded, not only with those who are already convinced but also—and especially—with the

John D. French is an associate professor of history at Duke University. This article was originally a talk given at the Second Emergency Forum on War of the Latin American Studies Association in Dallas, TX, on March 28, 2003.

LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue XXX, Vol. XX No. X, March 2003 1-  
DOI: 10.1177/0094582X03255484  
© 2003 Latin American Perspectives

still-to-be-convinced. And, yes, we must speak not only to the powerless but especially to the powerful, to those in the United States who could have prevented this disaster.

Does talk matter? Yes, more than ever, and our talk must be louder than ever, more forceful, more public, and more sustained.

Why do those of us who are U.S. citizens carry ourselves with heavy hearts and mournful expressions—incredulous at what has happened and is happening in our name?

It is because we are ashamed of our government, which has resolved to compound the catastrophe of 9/11 with a criminal disaster of a war pursued illegally and unilaterally.

It is because we are ashamed of the ignorance of a large sector of our people, who have allowed themselves to be led into an adventure, a crusade, that violates every hope that we have had, as a people, as to how we wish to be seen within the wider world in all its diversity.

It is because we are ashamed of our leaders, who are waging a war of conquest and pursuing a return to a colonial imperial enterprise that we as a people have never accepted as a project for a country born out of the first great anticolonial revolution of the modern era.

It is because we are ashamed of the cowardice of those, especially in the spheres of politics and the media, who knew better but failed to act when this illegal and immoral aggression, this crime against peace, could and should have been prevented in the U.S. Congress.

It is because we are ashamed of our own failure to do all that we could and should have done, in time, to have forced the feckless cowards in our nation's capital to stand up in opposition to this adolescent fantasy of war ordered by George W. Bush and maneuvered from backstage by the most sordid ensemble of Darth Vaders that have ever schemed in our White House (and I insist on the "our," because the White House is the people's house).

Men like Rumsfeld, Cheney, Wolfowitz, and Perle do not care about the opinion of the peoples of the world, but there are many here in the United States, especially Latin Americanists, who do, and they are immensely proud of the governments of Chile and Mexico, who along with those of Cameroon and Angola refused the blandishments they were offered for providing a fig leaf for conquest.

Men like Rumsfeld, Cheney, Wolfowitz, and Perle have never for a moment cared about the suffering peoples of Iraq, and they do not care in the least about the people of the United States, whose lives and futures they have made more precarious and unsafe and whose children's lives they are proposing to sacrifice, without a blink, in a reckless venture of wars without end.

Each and every one of us who is a U.S. citizen has much to feel angry about, in personal and collective terms. The reckless and criminal actions of our government offend our national conscience. It will take years for us to win back the provisional trust that other peoples have granted us, despite some of our rulers' past actions, when the United States has stood for human decency, fairness, and respect for international law, self-determination, and human rights.

What is talk worth? The answer is simple. If we shy away from talk, they have won and we have lost, and so have the people of the world.

It is said that talk is cheap, and this is usually taken to mean that it is useless. But we must remember that it is by talking that we make love as well as war, that we teach morality as well as violate it, that we stop evil as well as camouflage it with bluster and lies.

It is vitally important for us, as U.S. citizens, to realize that we are not alone—that accompanying us are the many freedom-loving peoples and governments, of many different religious, political, and ideological outlooks, who are united in their repudiation of a sordid and cruel invasion that its architects believe will open a new imperial age.

It is our task to put an end to this nightmare, to turn back what the preachers and practitioners of war would have the world believe is a massive tide for war within the United States. In truth—and this is especially important for our Latin American friends to understand—this war drive is not a mighty popular tide but a ripple unbacked by the informed opinion of the majority of U.S. citizens.

I have confidence in the common sense of U.S. citizens, and I believe that our actions will speed the day when these adventurers and tyrants in Washington will be thrown onto the trash heap of history. And when that happy day arrives they will find themselves in the company of some past U.S. presidents, including Polk, McKinley, and Teddy Roosevelt, as well as Saddam Hussein and a whole succession of English kings and prime ministers. To have invaded Mexico for land and riches, to have seized Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Panama—none of these is any different from invading Kuwait for oil or, shamefully today, invading Iraq for oil. It's as simple as that.

The powerful cannot be allowed to live by different standards from those of the weak, and war cannot be allowed to be the means to achieve materialistic advantage. The united voices of decent, honest, democratic-minded people are all that we can count on to guarantee a world where these things do not happen. It will require talk—lots of loud, bold, organized struggle. It will demand persistent action by all of us until we win and vigilance thereafter.