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Former Vice President Al Gore  
Remarks to MoveOn.org  
New York University  
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-AS PREPARED-

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for your investment of time and energy in gathering here today. I would especially like to thank Moveon.org for sponsoring this event, and the NYU College Democrats for co-sponsoring the speech and for hosting us.

Some of you may remember that my last formal public address on these topics was delivered in San Francisco, a little less than a year ago, when I argued that the President's case for urgent, unilateral, pre-emptive war in Iraq was less than convincing and needed to be challenged more effectively by the Congress.

In light of developments since then, you might assume that my purpose today is to revisit the manner in which we were led into war. To some extent, that will be the case - but only as part of a larger theme that I feel should now be explored on an urgent basis.

The direction in which our nation is being led is deeply troubling to me -- not only in Iraq but also here at home on economic policy, social policy and environmental policy.

Millions of Americans now share a feeling that something pretty basic has gone wrong in our country and that some important American values are being placed at risk. And they want to set it right.

The way we went to war in Iraq illustrates this larger problem. Normally, we Americans lay the facts on the table, talk through the choices before us and make a decision. But that didn't really happen with this war -- not the way it should have. And as a result, too many of our soldiers are paying the highest price, for the strategic miscalculations, serious misjudgments, and historic mistakes that have put them and our nation in harm's way.

I'm convinced that one of the reasons that we didn't have a better public debate before the Iraq War started is because so many of the impressions that the majority of the country had back then turn out to have been completely wrong. Leaving aside for the moment the question of how these false impressions got into the public's mind, it might be healthy to take a hard look at the ones we now know were wrong and clear the air so that we can better see exactly where we are now and what changes might need to be made.

In any case, what we now know to have been false impressions include the following:

- (1) Saddam Hussein was partly responsible for the attack against us on September 11th, 2001, so a good way to respond to that attack would be to invade his country and forcibly remove him from power.
- (2) Saddam was working closely with Osama Bin Laden and was actively supporting members of the Al Qaeda terrorist group, giving them weapons and money and bases and training, so launching a war against Iraq would be a good way to stop Al Qaeda from attacking us again.
- (3) Saddam was about to give the terrorists poison gas and deadly germs that he had made into weapons which they could use to kill millions of Americans. Therefore common sense alone dictated that we should send our military into Iraq in order to protect our loved ones and ourselves against a grave threat.
- (4) Saddam was on the verge of building nuclear bombs and giving them to the terrorists. And since the only thing preventing Saddam from acquiring a nuclear arsenal was access to enriched uranium, once our spies found out that he had bought the enrichment technology he needed and was actively trying to buy uranium from Africa, we had very little time left. Therefore it seemed imperative during last Fall's election campaign to set aside less urgent issues like the economy and instead focus on the congressional resolution approving war against Iraq.
- (5) Our GI's would be welcomed with open arms by cheering Iraqis who would help them quickly establish public safety, free markets and Representative Democracy, so there wouldn't be that much risk that US soldiers would get bogged down in a guerrilla war.
- (6) Even though the rest of the world was mostly opposed to the war, they would quickly fall in line after we won and then

contribute lots of money and soldiers to help out, so there wouldn't be that much risk that US taxpayers would get stuck with a huge bill.

Now, of course, everybody knows that every single one of these impressions was just dead wrong.

For example, according to the just-released Congressional investigation, Saddam had nothing whatsoever to do with the attacks of Sept. 11. Therefore, whatever other goals it served -- and it did serve some other goals -- the decision to invade Iraq made no sense as a way of exacting revenge for 9/11. To the contrary, the US pulled significant intelligence resources out of Pakistan and Afghanistan in order to get ready for the rushed invasion of Iraq and that disrupted the search for Osama at a critical time. And the indifference we showed to the rest of the world's opinion in the process undermined the global cooperation we need to win the war against terrorism.

In the same way, the evidence now shows clearly that Saddam did not want to work with Osama Bin Laden at all, much less give him weapons of mass destruction. So our invasion of Iraq had no effect on Al Qaeda, other than to boost their recruiting efforts.

And on the nuclear issue of course, it turned out that those documents were actually forged by somebody -- though we don't know who.

As for the cheering Iraqi crowds we anticipated, unfortunately, that didn't pan out either, so now our troops are in an ugly and dangerous situation.

Moreover, the rest of the world certainly isn't jumping in to help out very much the way we expected, so US taxpayers are now having to spend a billion dollars a week.

In other words, when you put it all together, it was just one mistaken impression after another. Lots of them.

And it's not just in foreign policy. The same thing has been happening in economic policy, where we've also got another huge and threatening mess on our hands. I'm convinced that one reason we've had so many nasty surprises in our economy is that the country somehow got lots of false impressions about what we could expect from the big tax cuts that were enacted, including:

- (1) The tax cuts would unleash a lot of new investment that would create lots of new jobs.
- (2) We wouldn't have to worry about a return to big budget deficits -- because all the new growth in the economy caused by the tax cuts would lead to a lot of new revenue.
- (3) Most of the benefits would go to average middle-income families, not to the wealthy, as some partisans claimed.

Unfortunately, here too, every single one of these impressions turned out to be wrong. Instead of creating jobs, for example, we are losing millions of jobs -- net losses for three years in a row. That hasn't happened since the Great Depression. As I've noted before, I was the first one laid off.

And it turns out that most of the benefits actually are going to the highest income Americans, who unfortunately are the least likely group to spend money in ways that create jobs during times when the economy is weak and unemployment is rising.

And of course the budget deficits are already the biggest ever - with the worst still due to hit us. As a percentage of our economy, we've had bigger ones -- but these are by far the most dangerous we've ever had for two reasons: first, they're not temporary; they're structural and long-term; second, they are going to get even bigger just at the time when the big baby-boomer retirement surge starts.

Moreover, the global capital markets have begun to recognize the unprecedented size of this emerging fiscal catastrophe. In truth, the current Executive Branch of the U.S. Government is radically different from any since the McKinley Administration 100 years ago.

The 2001 winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics, George Akerlof, went even further last week in Germany when he told Der Spiegel, "This is the worst government the US has ever had in its more than 200 years of history...This is not normal government policy." In describing the impact of the Bush policies on America's future, Akerlof added, "What we have here is a form of looting."

Ominously, the capital markets have just pushed U.S. long-term mortgage rates higher soon after the Federal Reserve Board once again reduced discount rates. Monetary policy loses some of its potency when fiscal policy comes unglued. And after three years of rate cuts in a row, Alan Greenspan and his colleagues simply don't have much room left for further reductions.

This situation is particularly dangerous right now for several reasons: first because home-buying fueled by low rates (along with car-buying, also a rate-sensitive industry) have been just about the only reliable engines pulling the economy forward; second, because so many Americans now have Variable Rate Mortgages; and third, because average personal debt is now at an all-time high -- a lot of Americans are living on the edge.

It seems obvious that big and important issues like the Bush economic policy and the first Pre-emptive War in U.S. history should have been debated more thoroughly in the Congress, covered more extensively in the news media, and better presented to the American people before our nation made such fateful choices. But that didn't happen, and in both cases, reality is turning out to be very different from the impression that was given when the votes -- and the die -- were cast.

Since this curious mismatch between myth and reality has suddenly become commonplace and is causing such extreme difficulty for the nation's ability to make good choices about our future, maybe it is time to focus on how in the world we could have gotten so many false impressions in such a short period of time.

At first, I thought maybe the President's advisers were a big part of the problem. Last fall, in a speech on economic policy at the Brookings Institution, I called on the President to get rid of his whole economic team and pick a new group. And a few weeks later, damned if he didn't do just that - and at least one of the new advisers had written eloquently about the very problems in the Bush economic policy that I was calling upon the President to fix.

But now, a year later, we still have the same bad economic policies and the problems have, if anything, gotten worse. So obviously I was wrong: changing all the president's advisers didn't work as a way of changing the policy.

I remembered all that last month when everybody was looking for who ought to be held responsible for the false statements in the President's State of the Union Address. And I've just about concluded that the real problem may be the President himself and that next year we ought to fire him and get a new one.

But whether you agree with that conclusion or not, whether you're a Democrat or a Republican -- or an Independent, a Libertarian, a Green or a Mugwump -- you've got a big stake in making sure that Representative Democracy works the way it is supposed to. And today, it just isn't working very well. We all need to figure out how to fix it because we simply cannot keep on making such bad decisions on the basis of false impressions and mistaken assumptions.

Earlier, I mentioned the feeling many have that something basic has gone wrong. Whatever it is, I think it has a lot to do with the way we seek the truth and try in good faith to use facts as the basis for debates about our future -- allowing for the unavoidable tendency we all have to get swept up in our enthusiasms.

That last point is worth highlighting. Robust debate in a democracy will almost always involve occasional rhetorical excesses and leaps of faith, and we're all used to that. I've even been guilty of it myself on occasion. But there is a big difference between that and a systematic effort to manipulate facts in service to a totalistic ideology that is felt to be more important than the mandates of basic honesty.

Unfortunately, I think it is no longer possible to avoid the conclusion that what the country is dealing with in the Bush Presidency is the latter. That is really the nub of the problem -- the common source for most of the false impressions that have been frustrating the normal and healthy workings of our democracy.

Americans have always believed that we the people have a right to know the truth and that the truth will set us free. The very idea of self-government depends upon honest and open debate as the preferred method for pursuing the truth -- and a shared respect for the Rule of Reason as the best way to establish the truth.

The Bush Administration routinely shows disrespect for that whole basic process, and I think it's partly because they feel as if they already know the truth and aren't very curious to learn about any facts that might contradict it. They and the members of groups that belong to their ideological coalition are true believers in each other's agendas.

There are at least a couple of problems with this approach:

First, powerful and wealthy groups and individuals who work their way into the inner circle -- with political support or large campaign contributions -- are able to add their own narrow special interests to the list of favored goals without having them weighed against the public interest or subjected to the rule of reason. And the greater the conflict between what they want and what's good for the rest of us, the greater incentive they have to bypass the normal procedures and keep it secret.

That's what happened, for example, when Vice President Cheney invited all of those oil and gas industry executives to meet in secret sessions with him and his staff to put their wish lists into the administration's legislative package in early 2001.

That group wanted to get rid of the Kyoto Treaty on Global Warming, of course, and the Administration pulled out of it first thing. The list of people who helped write our nation's new environmental and energy policies is still secret, and the Vice President won't say whether or not his former company, Halliburton, was included. But of course, as practically everybody in the world knows, Halliburton was given a huge open-ended contract to take over and run the Iraqi oil fields-- without having to bid against any other companies.

Secondly, when leaders make up their minds on a policy without ever having to answer hard questions about whether or not it's good or bad for the American people as a whole, they can pretty quickly get into situations where it's really uncomfortable for them to defend what they've done with simple and truthful explanations. That's when they're tempted to fuzz up the facts and create false impressions. And when other facts start to come out that undermine the impression they're trying to maintain, they

have a big incentive to try to keep the truth bottled up if -- they can -- or distort it.

For example, a couple of weeks ago, the White House ordered its own EPA to strip important scientific information about the dangers of global warming out of a public report. Instead, the White House substituted information that was partly paid for by the American Petroleum Institute. This week, analysts at the Treasury Department told a reporter that they're now being routinely ordered to change their best analysis of what the consequences of the Bush tax laws are likely to be for the average person.

Here is the pattern that I see: the President's mishandling of and selective use of the best evidence available on the threat posed by Iraq is pretty much the same as the way he intentionally distorted the best available evidence on climate change, and rejected the best available evidence on the threat posed to America's economy by his tax and budget proposals.

In each case, the President seems to have been pursuing policies chosen in advance of the facts -- policies designed to benefit friends and supporters -- and has used tactics that deprived the American people of any opportunity to effectively subject his arguments to the kind of informed scrutiny that is essential in our system of checks and balances.

The administration has developed a highly effective propaganda machine to imbed in the public mind mythologies that grow out of the one central doctrine that all of the special interests agree on, which -- in its purest form -- is that government is very bad and should be done away with as much as possible -- except the parts of it that redirect money through big contracts to industries that have won their way into the inner circle.

For the same reasons they push the impression that government is bad, they also promote the myth that there really is no such thing as the public interest. What's important to them is private interests. And what they really mean is that those who have a lot of wealth should be left alone, rather than be called upon to reinvest in society through taxes.

Perhaps the biggest false impression of all lies in the hidden social objectives of this Administration that are advertised with the phrase "compassionate conservatism" -- which they claim is a new departure with substantive meaning. But in reality, to be compassionate is meaningless, if compassion is limited to the mere awareness of the suffering of others. The test of compassion is action. What the administration offers with one hand is the rhetoric of compassion; what it takes away with the other hand are the financial resources necessary to make compassion something more than an empty and fading impression.

Maybe one reason that false impressions have played a bigger role than they should is that both Congress and the news media have been less vigilant and exacting than they should have been in the way they have tried to hold the Administration accountable.

Whenever both houses of Congress are controlled by the President's party, there is a danger of passivity and a temptation for the legislative branch to abdicate its constitutional role. If the party in question is unusually fierce in demanding ideological uniformity and obedience, then this problem can become even worse and prevent the Congress from properly exercising oversight. Under these circumstances, the majority party in the Congress has a special obligation to the people to permit full Congressional inquiry and oversight rather than to constantly frustrate and prevent it.

Whatever the reasons for the recent failures to hold the President properly accountable, America has a compelling need to quickly breathe new life into our founders' system of checks and balances -- because some extremely important choices about our future are going to be made shortly, and it is imperative that we avoid basing them on more false impressions.

One thing the President could do to facilitate the restoration of checks and balances is to stop blocking reasonable efforts from the Congress to play its rightful role. For example, he could order his appointees to cooperate fully with the bipartisan National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, headed by former Republican Governor Tom Kean. And he should let them examine how the White House handled the warnings that are said to have been given to the President by the intelligence community.

Two years ago yesterday, for example, according to the Wall Street Journal, the President was apparently advised in specific language that Al Qaeda was going to hijack some airplanes to conduct a terrorist strike inside the U.S.

I understand his concern about people knowing exactly what he read in the privacy of the Oval Office, and there is a legitimate reason for treating such memos to the President with care. But that concern has to be balanced against the national interest in improving the way America deals with such information. And the apparently chaotic procedures that were used to handle the forged nuclear documents from Niger certainly show evidence that there is room for improvement in the way the White House is dealing with intelligence memos. Along with other members of the previous administration, I certainly want the commission to have access to any and all documents sent to the White House while we were there that have any bearing on this issue. And President Bush should let the commission see the ones that he read too.

After all, this President has claimed the right for his executive branch to send his assistants into every public library in America and secretly monitor what the rest of us are reading. That's been the law ever since the Patriot Act was enacted. If we have to put up with such a broad and extreme invasion of our privacy rights in the name of terrorism prevention, surely he can find a way to let this National Commission know how he and his staff handled a highly specific warning of terrorism just 36 days before 9/11.

And speaking of the Patriot Act, the president ought to reign in John Ashcroft and stop the gross abuses of civil rights that twice

have been documented by his own Inspector General. And while he's at it, he needs to reign in Donald Rumsfeld and get rid of that DoD "Total Information Awareness" program that's right out of George Orwell's 1984.

The administration hastened from the beginning to persuade us that defending America against terror cannot be done without seriously abridging the protections of the Constitution for American citizens, up to and including an asserted right to place them in a form of limbo totally beyond the authority of our courts. And that view is both wrong and fundamentally un-American.

But the most urgent need for new oversight of the Executive Branch and the restoration of checks and balances is in the realm of our security, where the Administration is asking that we accept a whole cluster of new myths:

For example, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was an effort to strike a bargain between states possessing nuclear weapons and all others who had pledged to refrain from developing them. This administration has rejected it and now, incredibly, wants to embark on a new program to build a brand new generation of smaller (and it hopes, more usable) nuclear bombs. In my opinion, this would be true madness -- and the point of no return to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty -- even as we and our allies are trying to prevent a nuclear testing breakout by North Korea and Iran.

Similarly, the Kyoto treaty is an historic effort to strike a grand bargain between free-market capitalism and the protection of the global environment, now gravely threatened by rapidly accelerating warming of the Earth's atmosphere and the consequent disruption of climate patterns that have persisted throughout the entire history of civilization as we know it. This administration has tried to protect the oil and coal industries from any restrictions at all -- though Kyoto may become legally effective for global relations even without U.S. participation.

Ironically, the principal cause of global warming is our civilization's addiction to burning massive quantities carbon-based fuels, including principally oil -- the most important source of which is the Persian Gulf, where our soldiers have been sent for the second war in a dozen years -- at least partly to ensure our continued access to oil.

We need to face the fact that our dangerous and unsustainable consumption of oil from a highly unstable part of the world is similar in its consequences to all other addictions. As it becomes worse, the consequences get more severe and you have to pay the dealer more.

And by now, it is obvious to most Americans that we have had one too many wars in the Persian Gulf and that we need an urgent effort to develop environmentally sustainable substitutes for fossil fuels and a truly international effort to stabilize the Persian Gulf and rebuild Iraq.

The removal of Saddam from power is a positive accomplishment in its own right for which the President deserves credit, just as he deserves credit for removing the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. But in the case of Iraq, we have suffered enormous collateral damage because of the manner in which the Administration went about the invasion. And in both cases, the aftermath has been badly mishandled.

The administration is now trying to give the impression that it is in favor of NATO and UN participation in such an effort. But it is not willing to pay the necessary price, which is support of a new UN Resolution and genuine sharing of control inside Iraq.

If the 21st century is to be well started, we need a national agenda that is worked out in concert with the people, a healing agenda that is built on a true national consensus. Millions of Americans got the impression that George W. Bush wanted to be a "healer, not a divider", a president devoted first and foremost to "honor and integrity." Yet far from uniting the people, the president's ideologically narrow agenda has seriously divided America. His most partisan supporters have launched a kind of 'civil cold war' against those with whom they disagree.

And as for honor and integrity, let me say this: we know what that was all about, but hear me well, not as a candidate for any office, but as an American citizen who loves my country:

For eight years, the Clinton-Gore Administration gave this nation honest budget numbers; an economic plan with integrity that rescued the nation from debt and stagnation; honest advocacy for the environment; real compassion for the poor; a strengthening of our military -- as recently proven -- and a foreign policy whose purposes were elevated, candidly presented and courageously pursued, in the face of scorched-earth tactics by the opposition. That is also a form of honor and integrity, and not every administration in recent memory has displayed it.

So I would say to those who have found the issue of honor and integrity so useful as a political tool, that the people are also looking for these virtues in the execution of public policy on their behalf, and will judge whether they are present or absent.

I am proud that my party has candidates for president committed to those values. I admire the effort and skill they are putting into their campaigns. I am not going to join them, but later in the political cycle I will endorse one of them, because I believe that we must stand for a future in which the United States will again be feared only by its enemies; in which our country will again lead the effort to create an international order based on the rule of law; a nation which upholds fundamental rights even for those it believes to be its captured enemies; a nation whose financial house is in order; a nation where the market place is kept healthy by effective government scrutiny; a country which does what is necessary to provide for the health, education, and welfare of our people; a society in which citizens of all faiths enjoy equal standing; a republic once again comfortable that its chief executive

knows the limits as well as the powers of the presidency; a nation that places the highest value on facts, not ideology, as the basis for all its great debates and decisions.

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