

Latin American Voices:

CLAS hosted a screening of the award-winning film “No End in Sight” on the UC Berkeley campus in April 2007, prior to its commercial release. “It’s a sober, revelatory and absolutely vital film,” the *New York Times* said of Charles Ferguson’s documentary that scrutinizes U.S. policy decisions in Iraq. Drawing on surprisingly frank interviews with an impressive array of high-level government officials, military personnel and journalists, Ferguson’s film explores questions related to U.S. diplomacy, political and military oversight and the role of ideology in shaping policy.

But how has the U.S.-led war in Iraq been received in Latin America? What implications, if any, have there been for U.S.–Latin American relations? Seeking responses, the Center for Latin American Studies asked Latin American scholars, journalists and public intellectuals to respond to the film. Commentators included: Roberto Guareschi (former editor of *El Clarín*, Argentina); Daniel Coronell (News Director of “*Noticias Uno*” and a columnist for *Semana*, Colombia); Sergio Aguayo (Professor of International Relations at El Colegio de México and a columnist for *Reforma*); Javier Couso (Professor of Law at the Universidad Católica de Chile); and Juan Gabriel Valdés, Chile’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations (2003–03) and a member of the Security Council during the deliberations prior to the invasion of Iraq. Ambassador Valdés’ comments appear below.

The film “No End in Sight” made a profound impression on me. And it brought to mind an event that took place in October of 2002, during my term as Chile’s Representative to the United Nations. At a lunch given by the Mission of Ireland to the United Nations, the ambassadors from the Arab countries allied with the United States gave us their perspectives on the proposed war in Iraq, which was already looking inevitable.

“It will take them 15 days to win the war and 30 years to get out of there,” said the Egyptian ambassador. “The Americans, fascinated by technology, have lost the capacity to gather human information: the CIA has no idea what a pound of bread costs in Iraq,” added the Jordanian ambassador. “They’ve sidelined all the experts on the Middle East and brought in loyal Cheney supporters to make decisions they know nothing about,” commented the



U.S. military convoy in Iraq in 2003.

Ambassador of Saudi Arabia. “The Shiites, with the support of the Iranians, will not rest until they erase every vestige of Sunni power,” the Algerian ambassador maintained. “Iran will emerge from this as the great power of the region,” said another. “A catastrophic scenario would envelop even Turkey,” several affirmed. And on and on.

That day, the Arab ambassadors to the United Nations accurately predicted what would happen in Iraq during the years following the American invasion. The aforementioned comments were copied directly from notes I took at the meeting.

It is surprising to think that, at that time, the Arabs were getting the same response from the United States as the representatives from Mexico and Chile, who were Elected Members of the UN Security Council during the lead-up to the Iraq war. Whenever we asked U.S. representatives how

Juan Gabriel Valdés



Photo courtesy of Charles Ferguson.

they were planning to deal with the aftermath of the military victory, we were told that, if we were good friends, we should trust them. “We know what we are doing and you, as a good friend of ours, should also know what to do: Support us.” That was invariably the response. Washington’s instructions to U.S. Ambassador John Negroponte seemed to be, “Don’t talk about the war — and even less about the occupation.” The main difference was that while we Latin Americans could only “suspect” the Arabs “knew” very well what would come later, after the occupation. I, for one, could never have imagined that the irresponsibility was so great.

Today I see that the American people couldn’t either.

How could this have happened? How is it possible that the most powerful country on earth made such stupid decisions that are so opposed to its own national interest?

Because of my experiences at the UN, I feel very closely

connected to the personal tragedies of the people interviewed in the film. I feel the essential honesty of what they express. I share, as a sincere friend of the United States, their indignation about the absolute irresponsibility of those who decided on this war and planned the occupation of Iraq. I cannot stop thinking about Hannah Arendt and the banality of evil when I see Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld describe “the irrelevance” of the sacking of Baghdad. And I realize that this banality of evil is always covered by a blind ideology which selects the facts that favor it and distorts them until a complete lie is created that must, sooner or later, smash up against reality.

Finally, I think that this documentary is very inspiring in that it allows us to see that the Iraqis’ terrible pain is, with time, creating a deep moral wound in the United States. This makes me share the deep desire that is alive in every friend of the United States all over the world: that the situation may soon change. For this to happen, the first step is inevitably the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq.

This movie is a painful and brilliant effort. It may help us reach the light at the end of the tunnel.

To read all the commentaries, please visit the Center for Latin American Studies’ website at <http://clas.berkeley.edu>.

Ambassador Juan Gabriel Valdés and then-Secretary General Kofi Annan at the UN.



Photo from UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe.