

Hyde's warning: "Perils of the Golden Theory"

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [May 16, 2006](#) issue

Republican member of Congress Henry J. Hyde opened a budget hearing of the House International Relations Committee on February 16 with a speech he called "Perils of the Golden Theory." A reporter for National Public Radio called it flowery. I found it to be eloquent and nuanced, with a profundity one rarely encounters at a congressional budget hearing. (To read the entire speech, go to www.house.gov and follow links to the International Relations Committee and then to "speeches.")

Hyde, a 31-year congressional veteran (he will retire at the end of this term), is a staunch conservative Catholic who is best known for the Hyde Amendment, which prohibits federal funding of abortions. He is also a champion of human rights. He demanded answers for the murders of religious workers by a military dictatorship in Central America that was closely allied with the U.S. Recently, in a letter to President Bush, he objected strongly to portions of the Israeli separation wall that cut off Palestinian Christians from their schools, hospitals and churches.

Because Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was on hand to present her budget to Hyde's committee, Washington media covered the session. The recent Hamas election victory was fresh news, so Hyde's speech was seen through that prism, and NPR used clips from the speech. Otherwise, media reports largely ignored it as just another internal Republican conversation. This was a mistake.

The speech makes no overt reference to either Hamas or the war in Iraq. It has, rather, a larger philosophical concern: "It is a truism that power breeds arrogance. A far greater danger, however, stems from the self-delusion that is the more certain companion. For individuals and countries alike, power inevitably distorts perceptions of the world by insulating them in a soothing cocoon that is impervious to what scientists term 'disconfirming evidence.'"

Implying that the Bush administration remains impervious to overwhelming evidence of failure is a familiar lament among opponents of the war in Iraq. But Hyde is no

flaming liberal. He is a Republican of considerable stature in Washington. When the 82-year-old Hyde warns of the long-term consequences of the Bush policies in the Middle East, attention must be paid.

Martin Jacques paid attention in a column he wrote for the London *Guardian*: “Hyde argues that such is the overweening power of the U.S. that it may not hear or recognize the signals when its policy goes badly wrong, a thinly veiled reference to Iraq.”

What caught Jacques’s attention in Hyde’s speech was this bold assertion: “Our power, then, has the grave liability of rendering our theories about the world immune from failure. But by becoming deaf to easily discerned warning signs, we may ignore long-term costs that result from our actions and dismiss reverses that should lead to a reexamination of our goals and means.”

The reporter who called the speech “flowery” may have been influenced by the title. Hyde is quite specific as to why he chose “Perils of the Golden Theory.” He uses the phrase to identify a school of thought that has “gained increasing prominence in our national debate, namely the assertion that our interests are best advanced by assigning a central place in our foreign policy to the worldwide promotion of democracy.” Hyde confesses that he is a freedom-loving believer in democracy. But he insists:

There is no evidence that we or anyone can guide from afar revolutions we have set in motion. We can more easily destabilize friends and others and give life to chaos and to avowed enemies than ensure outcomes in service of our interests and security. . . . In a world where the ratios of strength narrow, the consequences of miscalculation will become progressively more debilitating. The costs of golden theories will be paid for in the base coin of our interests.

Hyde closed his speech with this final warning: “To allow our enormous power to delude us into seeing the world as a passive thing waiting for us to re-create it in an image of our choosing will hasten the day when we have little freedom to choose anything at all.”

The current war in Iraq calls to mind a dispatch sent by a foreign correspondent to the *Times* of London:

The people of England have been led in Mesopotamia [today's Iraq] into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity and honor. They have been tricked into it by a steady withholding of information. The Baghdad communiqués are belated, insincere, incomplete.

The report was written in August 1920, by T. E. Lawrence, also known as Lawrence of Arabia.

The *Guardian's* Jacques concludes his March 28 column with another comment on Hyde's speech:

Iraq was supposed to signal the U.S.'s new global might: in fact, it may well prove to be a harbinger of its decline. And that decline could be far more precipitous than anyone has previously reckoned. Once the bubble of U.S. power has been pricked, in a global context already tilting in other directions, it could deflate rather more quickly than has been imagined. Hyde's warnings should be taken seriously.