

Bill
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World crisis hits home at town meeting

ARUNDEL — President Bush's speech had just ended. An aide to congressman Tom Allen quickly hit the television's mute button. And in the standing-room-only silence of the fire station community room, Marilyn Wentworth closed her eyes — and kept them closed.

"I was picturing two people," she later explained.

One is a recent graduate of the New School, an alternative high school in Kennebunk where Wentworth works as principal. The young man, now a Marine stationed in Japan, could be transferred any day to the massive military force poised to invade Iraq.

The other is the father of a student, actually one of the parents who co-founded the school three years ago. He's now in Kuwait, a member of the National Guard unit deployed out of Sanford four weeks ago.

"It's really hard when you know someone over there," Wentworth said. "I just feel like we're in an age where we just can't do this kind of thing anymore."

Wentworth came to Monday evening's town meeting with the congressman unalterably opposed to a pre-emptive attack on Saddam Hussein. She was hardly alone — of the three dozen people who packed the small community room, only two said after listening to Bush that they agreed with his decision to stop the talking and start the tanks.

Still, for all of its anti-war tilt, the gathering offered a revealing glimpse of what's happening in small towns and big cities all over the country this week.

The anxiety is palpable across the political spectrum as the hours tick away to this evening's deadline for Saddam to leave his country or else. So, considering the chances he'd ever do such a thing, is the sadness.

Bruce and Laura Read came from their home just up the road with their two daughters, Helen, 9, and Anne, 8. The family has done a lot of talking since shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, when Helen sat down with a box of crayons and drew an elaborate picture of people jumping out of a burning skyscraper.

Helen, her father told Allen after the congressman went out of his way to welcome the children, is "the inquisitive one." He was right. A short time later, the little girl raised her hand with a question that momentarily stopped the discussion in its tracks.

"What's a chemical attack?" Helen asked.

Allen, who scheduled this meeting weeks ago, arranged for a television so that Bush's speech could be folded into the agenda. He also made it clear from the outset that he opposes the president's strategy as much today as he did when he voted in October against the sole congressional resolution authorizing military action.

"This is exactly what I was afraid would happen," Allen said, recalling how he and a minority of others in Congress wanted either approval from the U.N. Security Council or another congressional resolution before Bush could attack Iraq.

"What's left for Congress to do?" Allen said, repeating an often-heard question. "Really, only pay the bills."

And listen. To his credit, Allen interrupted the Bush-bashing long enough to ask if anyone had a different point of view about the president's message and what will almost certainly follow. Two brave men — State Rep. Robert Daigle, R-Arundel, and Selectman David Lane — said they did.

"I think the president is doing exactly the right thing," said Daigle, adding that "with predictability comes stability in the world."

Lane noted that for 12 years, Saddam and his cohorts "haven't done what they said they would do, and that is to disarm."

Daigle's and Lane's comments, unlike some others, drew no applause. But it should be noted that in a room heavy with emotion, nobody shouted them down, either.

Also worth noting is the obvious: Meetings like Monday's would never be allowed in places like Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Nor would opinions like the one voiced by Marilyn Wentworth, who caused more than one person to squirm when she noted that Bush has stopped listening and therefore, "in a sense, *he's* being a dictator."

Allen shook his head in disagreement. He's been in Washington, D.C., long enough to know the difference between George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein.

Our president, noted our congressman, "is up for re-election in two years."

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