

Kurt Vonnegut vs. the !&#*!@

In November, Kurt Vonnegut turned 80. He published his first novel, *Player Piano*, in 1952 at the age of 29. Since then he has written 13 others, including *Slaughterhouse Five*, which stands as one of the pre-eminent anti-war novels of the 20th century.

As war against Iraq looms, I asked Vonnegut, a reader and supporter of this magazine, to weigh in. Vonnegut is an American socialist in the tradition of Eugene Victor Debs, a fellow Hoosier whom he likes to quote: "As long as there is a lower class, I am in it. As long as there is a criminal element, I am of it. As long as there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

—Joel Bleifuss

You have lived through World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Reagan wars, Desert Storm, the Balkan wars and now this coming war in Iraq. What has changed, and what has remained the same?

One thing which has not changed is that none of us, no matter what continent or island or ice cap, asked to be born in the first place, and that even somebody as old as I am, which is 80, only just got here. There were already all these games going on when I got here. ... An apt motto for any polity anywhere, to put on its state seal or currency or whatever, might be this quotation from the late baseball manager Casey Stengel, who was addressing a team of losing professional athletes: "Can't anybody here play this game?"

My daughter Lily, for an example close to home, who has just turned 20, finds herself—as does George W. Bush, himself a kid—an heir to a shockingly recent history of human slavery, to an AIDS epidemic and to nuclear submarines slumbering on the floors of fjords in Iceland and elsewhere, crews prepared at a moment's notice to turn industrial quantities of men, women and children into radioactive soot and bone meal by means of rockets and H-bomb warheads. And to the choice between liberalism or conservatism and on and on.

What is radically new in 2003 is that my daughter, along with our president and Saddam Hussein and on and on, has inherited technologies whose byproducts, whether in war or peace, are rapidly destroying the whole planet as a breathable, drinkable system for supporting life of any kind. Human beings, past and present, have trashed the joint.

Based on what you've read and seen in the media, what is not being said in the mainstream press about President Bush's policies and the impending war in Iraq?

That they are nonsense.



My feeling from talking to readers and friends is that many people are beginning to despair. Do you think that we've lost reason to hope?

I myself feel that our country, for whose Constitution I fought in a just war, might as well have been invaded by Martians and body snatchers. Sometimes I wish it had been. What has happened, though, is that it has been taken over by means of the sleaziest, low-comedy, Keystone Cops-style *coup d'etat* imaginable. And those now in charge of the federal government are upper-crust C-students who know no history or geography, plus not-so-closeted white supremacists, aka "Christians," and plus, most frighteningly, psychopathic personalities, or "PPs."

Continued on page 45