My purpose here is less to praise or criticise, than to suggest a parallel. The decision led by the United States to abandon the United Nations and to go to war against Iraq, with or without the support of other countries, arguably adds an international dimension to that country's long history of vigilante politics and law enforcement. Vigilantism, encouraged by the frontier spirit and bolstered by the doctrine of popular sovereignty and an insistence on the right to carry arms for self-protection, has been a well documented feature of the nation's history since at least the days of gold-rush San Francisco and Montana. Groups ranging from lynch mobs to well-organised committees of several thousand citizens claiming to be the forces of law, order and decency have predictably had mixed receptions in the country. For some, they have all too often displayed an arrogant and brutal intolerance draping sectional interests in the flag of justice. For others, including many influential citizens, vigilantes have been genuinely reluctant breakers of the law whose aim was paradoxically its maintenance when formal mechanisms fail. On both sides of the argument, rhetoric has often outrun reason.

If vigilantism within the State is so contested, it is not surprising if its international manifestations are even more debatable. The United Nations is not a 'government' in the full sense of the term, and international law is seemingly more obviously contractual than that within the nation. But the structure of the situation has much in common with the old West and other vigilante scenes. The formal legal mechanisms of the Security Council are distrusted and deserted when it appears that they will not yield desired results. Claims of high moral purpose and counter-claims of unnecessary haste to violent action are asserted. It is true that both the American government and its British and other partners have argued the legality as well as the morality of their case under pressure from internal and external critics, but strong counter-arguments have simply been rejected, while the stated reasons for avoiding a second Security Council vote have been contested.

I am sentient of the ambiguities of vigilantism, and cannot share in either wholesale condemnation or praise of it. Each case demands separate assessment. Due process is often an imperfect and manipulable instrument of justice, just as its
abandonment may stem from noble or base sentiments. I also know that many citizens of the United States are disturbed and repelled by this part of their country's history. Yet it still appears to be of interest that the historical home of widespread vigilante action, and the source historically of the most powerful apologetic literature on its behalf, is also the prime mover now in the self-confident identification of 'evil' and the pre-emptive declaration of war against it when formal international institutions are deemed insufficiently effective in the prosecution of its perpetrators.

* Originally published in Cambridge Anthropology, 23:2, 2003, 67-8