

Political lessons of the war in Iraq

Statement of the World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board

Three weeks after the first bombs fell on Baghdad there can be no longer any doubt that the war waged against Iraq is a criminal enterprise of historic dimensions.

Rarely has a war been fought on the basis of such huge differences in weaponry and fire-power. On the one side US and British troops armed with the latest high-tech weaponry are able to rely on undisputed dominance of the air; on the other side are primitively equipped Iraqi soldiers using tanks dating back to the 1960s. No one has as yet provided reliable figures of Iraqi civilian and military victims of the invasion, but there can be no doubt they are in the tens of thousands. What is taking place in Iraq has more in common with a massacre than a war.

The reasons given for beginning the war have proved to be completely without substance. There is not the slightest trace of the “weapons of mass destruction” with which, it was alleged, Iraq threatened its neighbours and the US. The Iraqi government, which had everything to lose in the war, would have likely resorted to such weapons if it had possessed them in the first place.

The claim that the war is being fought to bring “democracy and freedom” to the Iraqi people has also been shattered by daily pictures of bodies blown apart by allied bombing raids, the deliberate targeting of independent media sources such as the offices of Al-Jazeera, and, above all, the plans made public by the White House for a military occupation of the country after the war.

The “Iraqi Interim Administration” is waiting on call in luxury villas in Kuwait. It consists almost exclusively of high-ranking American officials and military personnel with close connections to US big business and those neo-conservative circles around the Pentagon which for years have demanded a war against Iraq. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, his deputy Paul Wolfowitz, and Pentagon advisor Richard Perle enjoy close relations with the right-wing Likud government in Israel and are hated throughout the Arab world.

Ex-general Jay Garner, who heads the Interim Administration and is directly subordinate to US Supreme Commander Tommy Franks, is a self-confessed neo-conservative who has criticised the Israeli army in the occupied territories for being too restrained in its treatment of Palestinians. If Garner regards Israeli military policy in occupied Palestine as overly restrained, one can only imagine what he has in store for the people of an occupied Iraq.

The most important task for the Interim Administration is the awarding of lucrative contracts, financed by the proceeds from Iraqi oil, for the rebuilding of the devastated country and the privatisation of its oil industry. The man to be made responsible for Iraqi oil production is former Shell manager Philip Carroll. His appointment itself makes a mockery of the claim that the Iraqi people are to benefit from the country's oil wealth.

Such developments underscore the fact that the aggression against Iraq is nothing less than a classic colonial war, aimed at the plundering and subjugation of a poor country and, in the longer term, the entire region. It was launched although there was no indication of any potential threat from the side of Iraq itself. The war was then justified with falsified evidence and deceitful pretexts. It is an act of aggression that violates all international law.

European governments share responsibility for the war

European governments—in particular, the French and Ger-

man—share responsibility for this monstrous crime. Although in the United Nations they both rejected the war, they have in practice given direct or indirect support to the US-British war effort.

The German government has refused to bar US and British war planes from using German airspace and has allowed the use of Allied bases on German soil for the prosecution of the war. They have made such allowances even though they expressly contravene the German constitution, which regards as a criminal offence subject to prosecution any support for the preparation and carrying out of a war of aggression. In the terms laid down by the constitution, it is illegal to permit German territory to be used for the prosecution of an aggressive war. In 1973, for example, the government of Willy Brandt based itself on the constitution when it blocked the use of German facilities during the Yom Kippur war between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Three Israeli freighters that sought to load American war material in the port of Bremerhaven were ordered to leave German territorial waters.

The present government of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has not dared to even contemplate a similar action, although there can be no doubt that refusal of German airspace and the use of bases on German soil would have created considerable difficulties for the US war machine—and given a powerful boost to the antiwar movement within America itself.

Since the start of the war, Paris and Berlin have dropped their verbal objections and sanctioned the aims of the war as articulated by the Bush administration, supporting “regime change” in Baghdad—this despite their previous denunciation of the war as a violation of the charter of the United Nations.

In Berlin, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer assured his British counterpart, Jack Straw, as follows: “We hope the regime will collapse as soon as possible.” In an official government statement the following day, Chancellor Schröder expressed his desire that “with the overcoming of the dictatorship, the Iraqi people will be able to realise as quickly as possible their hopes for a life of peace, freedom and self determination”—a statement calculated to win the approval of every figure in the American government.

For his part, the French head of state expressed his solidarity with allied fighting troops in a letter to the British Queen. In the letter, President Jacques Chirac apologised for damage to British war graves located in France. “Let me tell you that at this time when your soldiers are engaged in battle,” he wrote, “the thoughts of the French people are naturally with them.”

For Berlin and Paris, their military alliance with the US in NATO, their joint economic relations—in short, their own foreign policy interests—are far more important than such issues as international law and the fate of the Iraqi people. As Schröder declared in his government statement: “We should not forget that the states which are now waging war against Iraq are alliance partners and friendly nations.”

The stance taken by Schröder and Chirac in response to the aggressive course of the US government calls to mind the appeasement policy of the British government in the 1930s towards the expansionist ambitions of Adolf Hitler. The British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, thought that a combination of concessions and conciliation regarding German occupation of the Rhineland and Austria, and then annexation of the Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia, would be sufficient to contain the German dictator. In fact, such concessions only served to encourage Hitler's delusions of world

power and conquest.

The right-wing clique dominating the White House have reacted in similar fashion to the conciliatory stance of leading European governments. Already new threats have been made against Syria, Iran and North Korea, and the list of enemies, the White House has made clear, can be extended when necessary—including even Europe itself.

In a barely concealed threat, President Bush declared at a joint press conference with British Prime Minister Tony Blair last Tuesday: “Evidently, there’s some scepticism here in Europe about whether or not I mean what I say. Saddam Hussein clearly knows I mean what I say.”

The ease with which the White House has been able to ignore international rules and United Nations decisions, the arrogance with which it has set out to determine the fate of Iraq and divide up the country’s resources among its closest business allies has only served to encourage the regime in its aspirations towards world dominance.

While European governments may hope for some sort of return to normality after the war is over, quite the opposite will take place. The war against Iraq has only served to whet the appetite of American imperialism.

What is to be done?

If there is one lesson to be drawn from the course of the war, it is the utter inability of existing institutions—governments as well as political parties—to provide any alternative. To the extent that parties and governments draw any conclusions from the unilateral actions of the US, it is the need to speed up their own program of militarization and escalate their pursuit of Great Power politics.

Chancellor Schröder, for example, concluded his government statement on the Iraq war with the remark: “We have to seriously reconsider our own military capacities.” Three weeks previously, Foreign Minister Fischer declared: “We have to strengthen our military power so that we are taken seriously in this sphere.”

Within the spectrum of German parties, it is above all the Greens, the former party of pacifism, that has become the most persistent protagonist of European rearmament. According to its new policy, the much discussed plan for European cooperation in military questions has to be turned into a reality, and the decision of 1999 to establish a 60,000-strong European intervention force realised as quickly as possible.

The proposal has been met with complete support in Paris and signs of agreement in London. Tony Blair, who has tied his own political future to support for the US president and the Iraq war, is looking for an opportunity to loosen the embrace of his transatlantic big brother.

Such a course of militarization can only end in disaster. It sets into motion a race to rearm that will be financed at the expense of working people and the socially disadvantaged. The logic of such a policy inevitably leads to intensified military conflicts and a possible Third World War.

The only way to counter these dangers is through the construction of a new political movement entirely independent of the existing parties and political institutions.

The mass international antiwar demonstrations of February 15 and 16—including powerful protests inside the US itself—showed that the basis for such a new political movement exists. The demonstrations were the biggest ever in history and the expression of a broad popular movement against war. Millions took part.

Nevertheless, protest by itself is not enough. The movement requires a political orientation and perspective. It has to draw the lessons from the failure of the old political organisations.

In the final analysis, the current war is the product of irresolvable contradictions at the heart of the world capitalist system. The global character of modern production is no longer compatible with the capitalist system of competing nation states and private ownership of the means of production.

In 1914 and again in 1939 Germany, as the strongest European economic power, sought to resolve these contradictions by reorganising Europe under its own domination. It failed. Today, the United States, as the most powerful economy, is undertaking the same task—only on a world scale. The military subjugation of Iraq is the first step toward the reorganisation of the world in the interests of American big business. This attempt is also doomed to failure.

Whoever balks at drawing a parallel between America today and Germany in 1939 should not forget that Germany followed broadly the same aims in the Second World War as it did in the First. There were significant differences between the monarchist regime of Wilhelm II and Germany under the Nazis, but they both represented the interests of the same reactionary circles—finance capital, the big industrial concerns and extreme right-wing forces in the state and military.

The current American government also bases itself on the most reactionary layers of American society—criminal elements who gained enormous wealth and influence during the stock market boom of the last 20 years, together with neo-conservative and Christian fundamentalist layers. The Bush clique came to power on the basis of a stolen election and tramples on basic democratic rights in America itself.

As was the case with Hitler in 1939, Bush in 2003 is using war as a means of diverting attention from the enormous contradictions within American society and seeking to project the mounting social tensions at home into militarism abroad. Social polarisation in America has taken staggering forms, with a thin layer of the super-rich confronting the broad masses, for whom life is becoming more and more precarious.

The old reformist organisations have no answer to these developments. They themselves have close links to business interests and defend the national state and the profit system. The rise to prominence of the clique surrounding Bush demonstrates, in particular, the bankruptcy of the American Democratic Party. But in Europe, social democratic and former Communist parties have also shown they have nothing to offer in dealing with pressing social and political problems. For the past 20 years they have been moving unswervingly to the right.

The movement against imperialist war must develop as an international, independent and socialist movement, basing itself on the broad masses of working people. It must unite the issue of war with burning social questions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has set itself the task of constructing such a movement, and providing the necessary political orientation. Produced by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality parties, it provides daily analyses of world developments and fights for the development of an international socialist perspective and program. We call upon all those participating in the antiwar rallies to read the WSWS, establish contact with the Editorial Board, distribute its articles and statements, and submit their own articles and commentaries. We further call on all those committed to the struggle for social equality, democratic rights, peace and a better world to join the Socialist Equality Party and help build a new mass socialist movement of the international working class.

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