

Clinton's countdown to war

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With the military buildup against Iraq nearly complete, the next phase of US war preparations will be launched February 17 with a televised speech by Clinton, delivered from the Pentagon. This address is to be followed on the 18th by a televised “town meeting” at Ohio State University, headed up by the secretaries of State and Defense and Clinton’s national security adviser.

Clinton has scheduled his speech for noon, evidently guided by the desire to feed the networks selected sound bites for their evening news telecasts. The following day’s forum in Ohio will be orchestrated to create an illusion of public discussion, while the government, aided by the corporate-controlled media, intensifies its drive to stampede the American people behind a new assault that will maim and kill countless thousands of Iraqi civilians. The citizen participants at Wednesday’s “town meeting” will, no doubt, be carefully vetted.

Clinton is being criticized in some quarters for failing to clearly explain the rationale behind a new bombing attack on Iraq, but those within Congress and the media who criticize are no more able to explain the purpose for a new war than the president. This is in large measure because the real reasons have nothing to do with the official mantra — the supposed need to control a despot and destroy his ability to wield “weapons of mass destruction.”

Lacking even George Bush’s 1990-91 pretext of defending “little Kuwait,” US spokesmen can only present as fact entirely unsubstantiated claims of chemical and biological weapons production, and declare that if the coming round of carpet bombing doesn’t somehow eliminate the supposed danger, then the US will simply bomb again. One thing is certain: they cannot come before the American people and speak of the real war aims, i.e., the need to defend the interests of US-based oil companies and other

transnationals, and position the US military for future wars in that strategic region.

This week’s media side show highlights the entirely undemocratic process by which a tiny economic and political elite in America makes decisions — such as the decision to go to war — with potentially catastrophic implications for masses of people. This time around there is neither the formality of congressional debate nor the pretense of opposition to aggression from within either of the two big business parties.

No less cynical than the pretense of public debate at home is Washington’s claim to be seeking a diplomatic settlement. In reality, its entire negotiating stance is calculated to block a peaceful resolution.

The US is not engaged in negotiations at all. Negotiations presuppose that both sides are prepared to bend. Even if one were to assume that Iraq had chemical and biological weapons, in a genuine negotiation the Iraqis would get some benefit for agreeing to their destruction. The US would be discussing such questions as a date certain for termination of the sanctions, interim measures to lessen the impact of the embargo, guarantees for the restoration of Iraqi sovereignty, etc.

But the Americans declare all such issues to be out of bounds. They are involved, in other words, in ultimatums, not diplomacy or negotiations. As one US official told the *Wall Street Journal*, describing international contacts with Saddam Hussein, “We’ve all agreed: the most difficult situation is if he complies.”

As the military assault nears, the real dimensions of the planned strikes against Iraq, and the wider implications of the impending war, are beginning to emerge. Secretary of Defense William Cohen, just returned from a tour of the Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms, declared on national television Sunday that US air strikes would target not only suspected chemical and

biological weapons facilities, but all military installations housing forces which could threaten neighboring countries. This formulation would legitimize dropping a bomb on tens of thousands of buildings in Iraq.

Democratic Senator Carl Levin of Michigan declared that an American air attack on Iraq would set an important precedent for the treatment of other “rogue states,” among which he included Iran and Libya. In other words, the US government is developing a rationale for preemptive military action against any nation which runs afoul of the foreign policy objectives of American imperialism.

Congressional Republicans demanded more ambitious goals for the operation, including the ouster of Saddam Hussein and the outright dismemberment and occupation of Iraq. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott suggested targeting Saddam Hussein in the bombing raids, while Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson of Texas urged the expansion of the present “no-fly” zones into “no-drive” zones in which all Iraqi government vehicles would be hit with air strikes.

Workers must take to heart these declarations. They give an indication of the incendiary trajectory of American foreign policy.

The only force that can prevent ever wider and more bloody eruptions of militarism is the international working class, fighting as a united force, independently of all capitalist regimes and leaderships.

US workers, in particular, must not allow themselves to be dragged into a new imperialist war carried out to further the global profit interests of American big business. They should understand that a new war in the Persian Gulf is only the beginning. The aims of Wall Street and the Pentagon ultimately require the military occupation of entire countries and regions of the world, for which purpose countless thousands of youth and workers are to be sacrificed.



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