Why is the US going to war in the Gulf?

The IWB Editorial Board
3 February 1998

The United States government is in the final stages of the buildup for a new war in the Persian Gulf. The Pentagon has deployed two aircraft carriers, numerous warships armed with cruise missiles and a contingent of more than 300 advanced warplanes, ready to launch bombing raids on Iraq on a few hours' notice.

This attack will go far beyond the brief air strikes ordered by Clinton in previous confrontations with the Iraqi regime. The Pentagon, with the full backing of Congress and the media, is preparing to launch a sustained air attack on densely populated areas.

There is increasingly open talk of a war to "bring down Saddam Hussein" and suggestions that US aims can be realized only through the occupation of Iraq by American troops.

In advance of the war, the media is seeking to inure American public opinion to a massive loss of life. NBC's Andrea Mitchell declared on the evening news that Americans should expect "hundreds of thousands" of Iraqi casualties. New York Times columnist William Safire warned that "casualties [are] to be expected" and suggested that Iraqi resistance to a US attack would "invite a nuclear response."

Washington's policy in the Persian Gulf is to accuse its prospective victim of precisely the crime which the Pentagon is itself organizing: the use of weapons of mass destruction against a virtually defenseless population. It should not be forgotten that for all the media hysteria about Saddam Hussein, the United States remains the only nation to have ever used nuclear weapons in war.

The government is counting on a politically disoriented and misinformed population to passively accept a new war. It relies upon a corrupt, corporate-controlled media to serve as a cheering squad for the American military. Nowhere in the press or on the airwaves has there been an attempt to critically examine US allegations against Iraq or probe the real interests underlying the US war buildup.

Within official political circles there is even less critical thought. Not a single significant figure from either party has so much as questioned US policy, much less demanded a Congressional debate and the constitutionally-mandated vote on a declaration of war. While they are engaged in a ferocious internecine struggle over issues such as Clinton's personal morality, on the question of war against Iraq the Democrats and Republicans are united.

"Weapons of mass destruction"

The killings are to be carried out in the name of the American people and justified by the need to protect Americans from "weapons of mass destruction." This phrase, endlessly repeated, is being used to preempt any serious debate and benumb public opinion.

Since 1990 the US has employed the alleged threat of Iraqi weapons to maintain an embargo which has crippled Iraq economically and plunged the vast majority of its population into conditions of hunger, disease and misery. Under a resolution which Washington pushed through the United Nations, these sanctions cannot be lifted until it is proven that Iraq no longer possesses either weapons of mass destruction or the means to produce them.

UNSCOM, the UN agency charged with implementing this resolution, has been roaming the country for seven and a half years without producing a shred of evidence that Iraq is producing or concealing such weapons. UNSCOM functions without any timetable, free to extend its inspections, as well as the embargo, indefinitely. No matter what Iraq does to comply, there are new demands, provocations and threats of military intervention.

The essence of the UNSCOM mission is to demand that Iraq prove something which can never be proven. The production of biological and chemical weapons requires neither substantial resources nor advanced technology. According to one arms expert, substantial biological weapons materials can be produced in a 10-by-15 foot room with little more than a beer fermenter. How can one prove that such a facility does not exist in a country of 22 million people with a territory larger than the state of California?

One of the principal charges floated by US officials is that Iraq has developed the capacity to manufacture "deadly VX gas." Yet the components and technology used in making this gas are employed in the manufacture of common pesticides used in agriculture the world over.

The American people should be aware of how easily "weapons of mass destruction" can be secretly manufactured. Using little more than fuel and fertilizer, Timothy McVeigh was able to manufacture such a device, killing 168 people at the Oklahoma City federal building. Similarly, a Japanese Buddhist cult was able to manufacture and deploy a deadly gas in the Tokyo subway system.

If Washington is setting out to destroy the capacity to develop such weapons everywhere in the world (except of course, for the US), no country is safe from American bombs.

Washington claims that Iraqi weapons of mass destruction pose a clear and present danger. If this is true, why doesn't the rest of the world feel threatened as well? Those countries closest to Iraq's borders should presumably feel the greatest danger of all. Yet all of them, including Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which supported the last Gulf war, oppose US intervention. Even Iran, which did suffer Iraqi chemical weapons attacks in the Iran-Iraq war, is against an American attack.

Can all of these governments be indifferent to an imminent threat of annihilation by Iraqi chemical and biological arms? Or do they perhaps understand that the American charges are fabricated and aimed at masking Washington's real objectives?

How the US started the last war

The regime of Saddam Hussein functioned throughout the 1980s as a firm US ally. Washington worked to build up the regime militarily as a counterweight to the Iranian revolution. UN inspectors have exhaustive documentation on Iraq's previous chemical and biological weapons programs precisely because the equipment and materials for

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the production of these weapons were supplied largely by US firms acting under licenses supplied by the Reagan and Bush administrations. Washington encouraged the production of these weapons for use against both Iran and Iraq's own Kurdish population.

In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war and with new opportunities opening up as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, Washington no longer needed Saddam Hussein's services. It prepared its intervention in the Gulf by luring Saddam Hussein into a trap.

In July 1990 Hussein told the US ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, of his intentions to seek a military solution to increasing tensions with neighboring Kuwait. Glaspie deliberately led Hussein to believe that an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait would not be opposed by the US.

Washington then proceeded to implement its longstanding strategic goal of establishing a permanent military grip over the strategic and oil-rich Persian Gulf region. It squelched every attempt at reaching a peaceful, negotiated solution to the crisis. In a one-sided and brief war it destroyed Iraq's industrial infrastructure and military capacity while leaving Saddam Hussein's regime intact. In the aftermath of the war it provided this regime with tacit support for its suppression of rebellions by the Shiite population in the south and the Kurds in the north.

The US achieved its beachhead in the Gulf, maintaining a permanent military presence and large military stockpiles. But the regimes of the region as well as America's economic rivals in Europe have increasingly chafed at the domination which Washington achieved through the first Gulf war. With the Iraqi military no longer posing a credible threat, the justification for the US presence in the region is becoming increasingly tenuous. Thus, the need for a new war.

What are America's war aims?

US policy in the Persian Gulf, as throughout the world, is determined by the strategic and economic interests of American capitalism. With military control over the Gulf, the US maintains a chokehold over the oil supplies upon which its principal economic rivals in Europe and Japan depend.

Moreover, from a geopolitical standpoint, the Gulf region provides the US with a base of operations from which it can project its power into the whole of the Caucasus and South Central Asia. Iraq lies just a few hundred miles from the oil and gas fields of the Caspian Sea basin, where US conglomerates have been staking their claim.

There are other motivating factors. Seven years is a long time for the United States not to be involved in a war somewhere on the planet. A defining feature of US imperialism is its incessant drive to settle matters by military intervention. Not a decade has gone by since the Second World War in which America has not launched one or more wars. In the 1950s, it was Korea; in the 1960s and 70s, Vietnam. In the 1980s, US forces intervened in Lebanon, Panama, Libya and Grenada, while Washington sponsored covert wars in Central America and Africa. In the beginning of the 1990s there was the war in the Persian Gulf.

The needs of the military-industrial complex enter into the equation. New weapons systems must be tested and officers and enlisted men trained in combat. The type of massive military apparatus which exists in the US cannot be maintained indefinitely without fighting a war somewhere.

Perhaps most decisive in US calculations is the fear of a new economic slump and the social instability that rising unemployment and falling incomes will produce at home. War provides a useful diversion. The army can absorb some of the jobless as cannon fodder and the spectacle of carnage abroad serves to distract the population from deprivation at home. It is not a coincidence that the present buildup toward war in the Gulf has developed in tandem with the growing crisis of capitalism in the key economic centers of Asia.

Saddam Hussein's regime

Saddam Hussein heads a ruthless dictatorship which has crushed the aspirations of the Iraqi people. But, it must be pointed out, he was supported in this endeavor by Washington.

Moreover, his regime is hardly unique. In the past several months the Clinton administration has embraced such figures as Indonesia's Suharto and Laurent Kabila, the new head of the Congo. The former massacred a million of his own people in the US-backed coup of 1965, and the latter exterminated tens of thousands of Hutu refugees. When it comes to the business of mass murder, Hussein is bush league by comparison.

Despite its repeated invocation of "human rights," Washington has never evaluated regimes according to how they treat their own people. It formulates its international relations on the basis of the profit interests of US big business.

The policy which the US has pursued toward Iraq over the past seven and a half years constitutes one of the great crimes of this century. A country which had attained a relatively high level of economic development has been reduced in the space of a few short years to barbaric conditions. It is estimated that as many as a million and a half people—at least half of them children—have died as a result of hunger and disease caused by the war's destruction and the subsequent embargo. Infant mortality rates have increased ten-fold.

A report issued by the World Health Organization on January 26 warned of the catastrophic impact of the embargo on the health conditions in Iraq: "The level of care has fallen seriously and many illnesses have reappeared because of the continuous lack of medicines since the implementation of the embargo… Illnesses such as tuberculosis, malaria and cholera have become commonplace in the past few years because of malnutrition, dirty water and a lack of medicine."

The drive to war in the Persian Gulf demonstrates once again how decisions are orchestrated behind the backs of the American people. The great masses of working people are reduced to spectators as the Democratic and Republican politicians carry out policies which have the most dire consequences. Denied access to information, lied to and manipulated by the media, working people are disenfranchised by the existing political system.

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