What the Town Meeting on Iraq revealed: A political system in crisis

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The February 18th "International Town Meeting" at Ohio State University was a political debacle for the Clinton administration. Intended to demonstrate popular support for the impending air war against Iraq, the meeting instead revealed widespread disquiet about a new military assault, as well as resentment and suspicion toward the government and the media.

Neither the White House operatives and CNN officials who staged the event, nor the three top foreign policy aides who defended the government's war plans, were prepared for the sometimes loud and often pointed opposition expressed by sections of the audience. The White House was apparently so confident that its town meeting—properly vetted to screen out embarrassing questions—would project the "right" image, it chose CNN to broadcast the event, knowing that the network's global range would reach Saddam Hussein's headquarters. A measure of how badly it miscalculated was the decision of the regime in Baghdad to rebroadcast to the Iraqi public excerpts of the program, showing questioners challenging the Clinton administration officials.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Secretary of Defense William Cohen and national security adviser Samuel Berger thought they could go to Columbus and simply repeat their stock phrases about "weapons of mass destruction," "rogue states" and how the US represents "the will of the international community." In their arrogance, they exemplified the contempt of US policymakers for the intelligence of the American people.

No less astonishing than the administration's misreading of the public mood was the abysmally low level, from an intellectual standpoint, of its attempt to defend its policy. That people at the pinnacle of the government—ostensibly the most seasoned foreign policy specialists—should display such a combination of ignorance and incompetence can only mean they exist in a sheltered political environment, where none of the ideological assumptions of American imperialist policy are challenged, no one feels the need to answer to the people, and the overarching concern is how best to utilize the media to deceive the masses and manipulate public opinion.

Dodging the real questions

At the Town Meeting the three Clinton spokesmen resorted to pat phrases and diversions when confronted with questions reflecting many different standpoints, from those who implied a bombing attack would not go far enough, to those expressing concern over casualties, Iraqi as well as American, to those voicing outright opposition to US militarism and aggression. Challenged by a young teacher who asked why Washington was singling out Iraq when it supported many governments guilty of repression, torture and external aggression, Albright resorted to a crude smear, accusing the questioner of siding with Saddam Hussein.

At one level, the administration's political miscalculations reflect the degree to which the political establishment bases itself on the images of social reality created by the media — images which bear little relation to the actual state of affairs. Indeed, the immediate response of some Clinton officials was to fault CNN for failing to anticipate and block opposition to the administration's policy. The main conclusion that will be drawn in high places is the need to take even more extensive measures to control such media events in the future.

The evolution of the American media over the past several decades is itself a significant aspect of the growing alienation of the political system from the masses of working people. In the 1960s and 70s government and corporate officials repeatedly expressed concern over widespread coverage of civil unrest and protest at home, and the role of the US military abroad. With images of violence in American cities and US atrocities in Vietnam filling the airwaves, the media became a frequent target of political attack.

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw a series of well-publicized libel actions, including General William Westmoreland's suit against CBS, aimed at bringing the media under tighter control. A consensus developed within top corporate and political circles that coverage and commentary on the social contradictions of American society, and critical exposures of its foreign policy, had to be suppressed.

The role of the media was to highlight the positive features of American life and galvanize public opinion behind the foreign policy objectives of American capitalism. Above all, it had the job of building support for US military interventions and vetting their coverage so as to exclude images of death and destruction.

US militarism and media censorship

Since the early 1980s, each instance of US aggression has been presented to the American public in an increasingly censored and distorted manner, beginning with Grenada in 1983, including Panama in 1989, and reaching its high point in the war against Iraq. In Desert Storm virtually no pictures were shown of dead Iraqis, either soldiers

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or civilians. To this day no report has been given of the death toll from the bombs, missiles and bullets of the US and its Gulf War allies.

At the same time that the techniques for manipulating the news grew more sophisticated, the integration of the media into the capitalist state became more pronounced. Today, with barely a pretense of objectivity, the major news outlets function as propaganda organs of the government.

This process has been reinforced by the increasing monopolization of the mass media. The major television networks in the US are now owned by a handful of corporate conglomerates—Disney (ABC), General Electric (NBC), Westinghouse (CBS), the Murdoch empire (Fox) and Time Warner (CNN).

The marriage of the corporate-controlled media and the state is reflected as well in the personnel who occupy the uppermost ranks of reporters, news anchors and commentators. Millionaires and multi-millionaires in their own right, they routinely hobnob with the so-called movers and shakers of the business and political world. The guest list at any major state function will include a significant number of TV news personalities and press commentators.

Media and government — a tight knit circle

The politically incestuous relationship between big business, the government and the media is exemplified by personal ties. To cite a few examples: NBC White House correspondent Andrea Mitchell is married to Alan Greenspan, the chairman of the Federal Reserve Board; CNN's chief international correspondent Christiane Amanpour is married to James Rubin, the assistant secretary of state for public affairs; and ABC News' Cokie Roberts is the daughter of Hale Boggs (D-Louisiana), the late House majority leader.

Under such conditions, it is no wonder that the media—and the politicians who base themselves on focus groups, polls and the advice of media spin masters—can become entranced by the images of their own making. The very fact that the media, in practical terms, lacks any independence from the capitalist state actually contributes to the political disorientation within the ruling circles. Just in the space of a few weeks the pundits have been blindsided first by the public reaction to the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal, and now by the growing disquiet over a military attack on Iraq.

The problem for Clinton and the entire political establishment highlighted by the Town Meeting in Ohio cannot be solved by media manipulators. That event provided a glimpse of the profound isolation of the ruling elite in America from the masses of working people.

The insulation of policy makers has grown dramatically over the past two decades, as the chasm has widened between the rich and the super rich on the one hand, and the vast majority of the population on the other. To an unprecedented degree, the economic and political elite in America live in a world of luxury and power that has only the most tenuous connections to the world of economic insecurity and stagnant or falling living standards inhabited by working people.

The official institutions of politics and mass communications function shamelessly as the handmaidens of corporate wealth and power. Dazzled by the success of the stock market, lulled by the subservience of what is called the organized labor movement, the narrow and privileged social layer that holds the reins of power is inclined to take for good coin the media images of a prosperous and contented nation.

Clinton's Pentagon speech — illusion and reality

Indeed, one day before the Ohio disaster, Clinton presented in his speech from the Pentagon just such an idyllic picture of America at the end of the 20th century. The only threat to universal peace and prosperity, he asserted, was the demonic force supposedly embodied in the person of Saddam Hussein.

Columbus was chosen as the site for the Town Meeting because of its credentials as a white collar, conservative city. But how many families in the Columbus area have been hit by corporate downsizing, the decay of public education, the soaring cost of health insurance, and the general decay of urban life?

It was this social reality and the growing alienation of masses of people from the existing political system that found their expression—as yet in a politically unfocused form—in the Town Meeting. In its aftermath, commentators worried out loud that the very image of working people and students standing up to government officials and challenging their war propaganda, at an event broadcast around the world, would have a catalytic effect, reassuring millions of others that they are not alone in their anger and opposition, and emboldening them to speak out against the government's policies. The New York Times noted nervously that the forum at Ohio State University was "eerily reminiscent of the protests and passions generated by the Vietnam War."

At the same time, the Town Meeting expressed the increasingly hollow and worm-eaten character of democracy in America. The fact that the ruling class and its political representatives feel they can launch major military interventions without so much as the pretense of serious public debate, or even the constitutional requirement of Congressional approval, is one expression of the incompatibility of political democracy with the existing level of social inequality.

It is critical that the growing social discontent, which will inevitably express itself in great class struggles, find expression in a political program that articulates the real needs and interests of the masses of working people.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is dedicated to providing the political analysis, historical knowledge and socialist perspective which the coming mass movement will require. This is the only basis for opposing imperialist war and the assault on democratic rights.

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