

The Sudan-Afghanistan attack: Clinton uses cruise missiles to placate political opponents

Editorial Board
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As dawn broke on Friday in Sudan and Afghanistan the extent of the damage inflicted by the previous day's US bombing became known. Twenty people were killed in Afghanistan. More than a dozen were wounded in the wreckage of the pharmaceutical plant targeted in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum.

Notwithstanding White House claims to the contrary, it is obvious that the military strikes were undertaken not to counter an unspecified terrorist threat to the United States, but to stave off the more immediate danger of a political collapse of the Clinton administration. The attacks were intended to send a message, not so much to Osama bin Laden--the latest in a long line of bogeymen invoked by US governments--but rather to the powerful right-wing faction of the ruling elite which has spearheaded the attack on Clinton.

Given the timing of the bombings, the administration could not avoid the widespread suspicion that the purpose of the attacks was to distract attention from the wave of revelations in which Clinton has been all but engulfed. It is certainly true that such considerations influenced the precise timing of the assault. But considerations of a more fundamental character are involved in the decision to launch the cruise missiles.

Despite its bizarre and disgusting forms, the political crisis in Washington has always been, in essence, a struggle over the direction of US policy, both at home and abroad. The purpose of the relentless assault that has been carried out through the medium of the independent counsel has been to force, either through the weakening of the administration or its removal, a sharp shift to the right.

In terms of domestic policy, this means a rapid intensification of attacks on the social position of the working class through the gutting of all restraints on the functioning of the capitalist market and the accumulation of corporate profit and private wealth.

In terms of international policy, it means a tremendous expansion in the use of military power to secure the interests of American imperialism.

By bombing Afghanistan and Sudan, Clinton has sent a clear signal that he now understands the survival of his presidency depends upon his adopting the platform of his most right-wing opponents.

The signal did not go unnoticed in Washington. Senator Orrin Hatch, who on Monday night had publicly called Clinton a 'jerk,' and the *Wall Street Journal*, which on Tuesday had branded him a 'sociopath,' applauded the bombing. The media, which had all but universally proclaimed Clinton a liar for his role in the Lewinsky affair, quickly accepted, in relation to the military strikes, the sweeping and unsubstantiated claims of his administration.

The unilateral attacks on Sudan and Afghanistan were carried out without any warning. In their immediate aftermath, a series of frankly incredible claims have been made to justify the administration's actions.

Claim #1: 'Convincing evidence' existed to prove that Saudi exile Osama bin Laden was responsible for the August 7 car bomb blasts at US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Even setting aside the difference between 'convincing evidence' and conclusive proof, a not unimportant distinction where military strikes are involved, no credible factual substantiation has been thus far presented. If the US government had discovered incriminating evidence at the African embassy bomb sites, it would have made it public. But within the timeline offered by the government--between the embassy explosions and the decision to launch the retaliatory attacks--no such evidence could have been discovered, let alone analyzed.

The bomb blasts occurred on the afternoon of August 7. By August 12 the plan for retaliation had been drawn up. It was approved by Clinton on August 14. Previous experience shows that it takes weeks and months to uncover and analyze forensic evidence from such blasts. In this case investigators were only beginning to sift through the rubble and question witnesses when the attack plans were made. No analysis of material from the site could have been carried out. None of it had even been shipped back to the US for

further study.

Claim #2: The cruise missile attack was required to prevent another impending terrorist attack like those of August 7.

The claim that the US struck Afghanistan and Sudan to safeguard Americans from imminent terrorist attack is flatly contradicted by the spate of warnings from the State Department that Thursday's strike placed US facilities and citizens around the world in danger of retaliatory action. It is impossible to explain, moreover, how an imminent attack, presumably in its operational stages at the time the cruise missiles were fired, could be prevented by bombing a pharmaceutical plant and a desert camp located hundreds of miles from any potential terrorist target. There are, after all, no American citizens or functioning embassies in Afghanistan or Sudan. Furthermore, now that the danger has been neutralized, why haven't its plan, scope and target been made public? Precisely who or what was in jeopardy?

Another question arises: If US intelligence services could determine with such certainty that a terrorist attack was imminent--presumably through a network of agents and contacts close to bin Laden, who tracked his movements and activities--why could they not foresee and prevent the August 7 car bombs? What accounts for the remarkable improvement in US intelligence information that has taken place over the last two weeks?

In the context of the political crisis enveloping the White House, the embassy bombings--whoever carried them out--has provided an opportunity and pretext for a dramatic lurch to the right by the Clinton Administration. A continuous and relentless theme of the political attack on Clinton has been his reluctance to use military force unilaterally, that is, without consultation and approval of US allies and the United Nations.

During the standoff with Iraq in February the Clinton administration, not willing at that point to take military action without the support of the UN Security Council, accepted a compromise negotiated by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. At the time, right-wing editorialists and Republican Party leaders denounced Clinton for subordinating decisions about US military policy to this international body.

In contrast, on Thursday US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright emphasized that the Clinton Administration had acted unilaterally and would do so again. In pursuing the worldwide interests of American big business, Washington will no longer be constrained by considerations of diplomacy or international relations. The administration did not even bother to say whether it had received permission to send its missiles across Pakistani airspace.

Military strikes are now to be expected with greater

frequency and severity. Clinton underscored that Thursday's attack would not be an isolated event. He proclaimed that the US is now engaged in an ongoing 'war' against a vast and nebulous 'terrorist' threat stretching all the way around the globe.

This theme has been developed by Albright and other administration spokesmen, who have invoked the ominous image of a global and protracted twilight struggle, in which the US plans to strike repeatedly at targets around the world, without warning and without deference to national sovereignty.

As he has so often in the past, Clinton is seeking to survive the attacks of his right-wing opponents by bowing to their political demands and adopting their program. It would be premature, however, to conclude that the survival of the Clinton administration has been assured. More convincing demonstrations, on the domestic as well as the international front, of the sincerity of his deathbed conversion will be demanded. Thursday's military attack is only the first, not the final, payment to the reactionary forces of finance capital which, in the final analysis, determine the policies of the United States.

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