Washington presses ahead with war plans against Iraq

Editorial Board
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Following the last-minute cancellation of the planned assault on Iraq, American and British officials are letting it be known it is only a matter of time before they unleash a massive missile and bomb attack on the impoverished country. Reflecting their disappointment at the turn of events over the weekend, they are dropping any pretense of seeking a peaceful solution to the crisis in the Persian Gulf.

A military strike 'is going to happen sooner or later,' one US national security official told the *Washington Post*. British Prime Minister Tony Blair told Parliament, 'No warnings. No wrangling. No negotiations. No last minute letters. The next withdrawal of cooperation and [Saddam Hussein] will be hit.' The headline emblazoned across the front page of Tuesday's *New York Times* read: 'Allies See Bombing of Iraq as Inevitable.'

The American media cannot contain its war lust. Its commentary is dominated by recriminations over Clinton's decision to call off the attack and demands that Washington allow the UN weapons inspectors to provoke a confrontation with Iraq as rapidly as possible, and then strike without pause or mercy.

The US war drive is not only an exhibition of brutality, it is a demonstration of monumental cowardice. Washington's eagerness to bomb is based on the assumption that Iraq cannot retaliate and US air power can operate with impunity. This is taken for granted as well by the media, which sees war against Iraq as an opportunity to showcase American firepower.

Over the past several days details have emerged of the massive scale of the planned military campaign. The air war was to begin with some 300 cruise missiles, followed by at least several days of sorties by fighter bombers and B-52s. The world came within minutes of witnessing an assault on an essentially defenseless country that would have harked back to some of the worst atrocities of the century.

The Pentagon had advised Clinton that the 'rolling' attacks would kill possibly 10,000 Iraqis. 'That was the medium case scenario,' one administration spokesman said.

US officials were bitter at having once again to call off an assault. After Baghdad complied with the US demand to rescind its ban on UN weapons inspections, the Clinton administration, together with the Labour government in Britain, initially rejected Iraq's letter. They felt compelled to change their position when, the pretext for war having evaporated, they found themselves isolated within the UN Security Council and unable to count on public support from the Arab regimes in the Middle East.

In his press conference Sunday, Clinton reiterated the threat of a unilateral and unannounced attack. He added that the US was working for the removal of the government in Baghdad and cited the recently passed Iraq Liberation Act, which allocates $97 million for military aid to Iraqi opposition groups.

Aside from a general agreement on the desirability of dropping bombs, however, US policy toward Iraq is in considerable disarray. The much-vaunted international consensus in support of the US war drive collapsed as soon as Iraq said it would allow the resumption of weapons inspections. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan welcomed the letter from Baghdad and announced he was sending UN humanitarian officials back to Iraq; Russia, France and China embraced the Iraqi move; and a number of Arab regimes that had initially lined up against Iraq signaled their opposition to military action.

There was a split within the top levels of the Clinton administration itself, with Defense Secretary William Cohen, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Gen. Henry Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, calling for the air strikes to proceed, and Clinton's national security adviser Samuel Berger urging that they be suspended.

The contradictions of US policy

The difficulties for the US stem in part from the contradictions embedded in the policy it has pursued since the end of the gulf war. Ostensibly Washington is merely seeking to carry out the UN mandate for depriving Saddam Hussein's government of chemical and biological weapons and destroying its nuclear weapons program. This is a transparent pretext for maintaining the crippling sanctions placed on Iraq in 1991 in the hope that the devastation that they cause will lead to the downfall of the regime.

The claim that the US is motivated by the threat of 'weapons of mass destruction' is belied by its own international policies. Just two weeks ago the White House announced it was lifting most of the mild sanctions it imposed on Pakistan and India after these countries exploded nuclear devices earlier this year.

Moreover, the standard that the US imposes on Iraq for ending the sanctions cannot be met. Through the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM), which functions as a virtual arm of the US State Department and the CIA, Washington insists that Iraq prove a negative: the nonexistence of the capability (or the potential for developing the capability) to build so-called weapons of mass destruction.

The US rejects any negotiations with Iraq until this impossible hurdle is overcome. One of the functions of the demonization of Saddam Hussein and the gross exaggeration of the military danger he represents is to obscure the absurdity of this policy.

If the US really believed its propaganda about Iraq's arsenal of deadly weapons, it would be far less eager to go to war. Rather, as with the Soviet Union in the period of the Cold War, it would seek negotiations as a means of reducing tensions and stabilizing relations.

There is a connection between the lack of coherence in the administration's position and the growing element of recklessness in its actions. The greater the internal contradictions of the policy, the more heedless the measures employed to carry it out. The element of irrationality strengthens the influence of those within the administration who advocate a more extreme line.

The fact, moreover, that US forces have once again been brought to the

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brink only to be pulled back has exacerbated tensions within the military and between the military and the Clinton administration. This is another source of pressure on the White House to take extreme measures.

The role of UNSCOM has epitomized the cynicism of the US and its allies, as well as the United Nations. American officials have acknowledged that intelligence provided by this supposedly impartial body has been of great assistance in helping military planners draw up the list of Iraqi targets to be hammered by cruise missiles and bombers.

Nevertheless, there is a growing consensus within American political and military circles to downgrade their reliance on UNSCOM or dispense with it entirely, and shift to a more direct attack on the Iraqi regime. Top US officials, including Clinton, declared that the military strike they were pushing for would mean the end of UNSCOM weapons inspections. Even as Clinton on Sunday called the return of UNSCOM the most desirable outcome of the crisis, he for the first time announced a policy of bringing down the Iraqi government, thereby undercutting the pretense that UNSCOM's mission is purely 'professional' and 'technical.'

Aims of the bombing campaign

The massive scale of the bombing campaign drawn up by the US shows that its war preparations have little to do with facilitating the work of weapons inspectors. According to press reports, American bombers and cruise missiles were poised to attack Republican Guard installations, presidential palaces, missile defenses, air bases and industrial sites. The aim of operation Desert Thunder was threefold: to kill Saddam Hussein, destroy Iraq's conventional military forces, and produce such terrible human and material devastation as to undermine the regime.

Republican Senator Richard Lugar last Thursday called for the murder of Hussein, as did *New York Times* columnist A.M. Rosenthal in an op-ed piece the following day. To prepare public opinion and send a message to Baghdad, the *Times* on Saturday published a prominent article reporting that White House lawyers had conducted a secret review of a 1976 executive order barring US personnel from plotting or carrying out assassinations, and concluded that the US can legally target terrorists for elimination. Clinton administration officials acknowledged to the *Times* that last August's missile attack on Afghanistan was an attempt to kill Osama bin Laden.

As for what is to follow the bombing campaign, there is neither consensus nor clarity among American policy makers. A former Bush administration official quoted by the *Washington Post* summed up the unease in some political and military circles: 'So you bomb: What's your ultimate objective ... and how does the use of force achieve it?' A high-ranking Pentagon official told the *Post*, 'We were collectively still concerned about the day-after scenarios.' Said another senior Pentagon official, 'The question was, what would we do next?'

The inexorable logic of the US vendetta, however, is the introduction of ground troops and an attempt to occupy the country. Lugar and *New York Times* columnist William Safire, among others, have called for an invasion to bring down the Iraqi regime and replace it with one directly subservient to Washington.

Other commentators have raised the possibility of a nuclear attack. Monday's *Financial Times* carried a column which considered the options under consideration: 'At the other end of the spectrum comes the suggestion that the cold war doctrine of deterrence is the key. Sure, Baghdad may develop lethal germ and nerve agents. But the US should tell Mr. Saddam that their use would invite fearful retaliation. The Tomahawks would carry nuclear warheads. Iraq, quite simply, would be annihilated.'

What fuels America's war policy?

The recklessness of American policy in the Persian Gulf is bound up with both international conditions and domestic considerations. US ambitions in the oil-rich Caspian region to the northeast of Iraq (see 'New Caspian oil interests fuel US war drive against Iraq'), sharpening conflicts among the major capitalist powers in the Persian Gulf, Central Asia and further afield, international financial instability, declining oil prices, and an intense social and political crisis within the US create the conditions for an eruption of US imperialism.

In the 1980s, when Saddam Hussein was conducting a bloody war against Iran, the US helped him build up his military forces and maintained the friendliest relations with his regime. But the Bush and Clinton administrations have so completely based their politics, both foreign and domestic, on the demonization of this former US ally, that the White House could not shift course and negotiate with Baghdad even if it wanted to. A measure of the instability and crisis of American imperialism is the fact that it is locked into a policy in the Persian Gulf that is pregnant with catastrophe.

American policy makers, bedazzled by the destructive power of their military hardware and lulled by the weakness of their chosen victim, have barely considered the implications of a large-scale attack on Iraq. Whatever equilibrium exists in the Near East, Middle East and South Central Asia would be blown apart. The resulting chaos would increase the momentum toward the introduction of US troops. Other countries, feeling their vital interests threatened, could be drawn into a conflict that would extend far beyond the borders of Iraq. War on Iraq could lead to war with Iran, Syria, and even Russia.

Tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people in an entire region of the world can rapidly be engulfed by tragedy. But the direct implications for the American working class are also ominous. Ultimately, the sons and daughters of working people in the US will be sent into the inferno set by the White House, Congress and the Pentagon.

The turn to war will moreover be accompanied by intensified attacks on the living standards and democratic rights of American workers. A significant aspect of the current war drive is the lack of concern on the part of the government for public opinion. There has been no attempt to win domestic support for a war against Iraq.

This is in contrast to the war buildup last winter, when Clinton administration officials held a series of town meetings around the country to make their case for air strikes against Iraq. What they found was growing opposition to US policy among students, workers and others. The televised town meeting at Ohio State University last February turned into a political debacle, when three top administration officials were almost speechless in the face of widespread antiwar sentiment among those in attendance.

The lesson which the government has apparently drawn is to avoid even the pretense of a public debate, and strike before any opposition can emerge. The more overt the militarism of its policy abroad, the more naked its contempt for democratic principles at home. Inevitably the political establishment will react to rising public opposition to its policies, domestic as well as foreign, with an assault on democratic rights.

Both capitalist parties and the media bear an immense responsibility not only for the devastation they are preparing for countless thousands of working and poor people in Iraq and elsewhere, but for the enormous price to be paid by American workers for their criminal policies.

See Also:
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