

Is Clinton preparing an "October surprise"?

New US provocations against Iraq

Shannon Jones
7 September 2000

Over the past two weeks prominent articles have appeared in major US newspapers setting the stage for a new confrontation with Iraq. Both in tone and content the articles suggest that the Clinton administration is preparing for an assault on the devastated Middle Eastern country in the run-up to the November 7 election.

A front-page article in the August 22 edition of the *New York Times* entitled "UN Readies Team to Check Weapons Held by Iraqis" speculated on the US response, including the possible use of force, if Iraq refused to admit a newly constituted team of UN weapons inspectors. The group, led by Hans Blix of Sweden, former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, will consist of members from 19 countries, an effort to accommodate objections by Iraq, as well as France and Russia, that British and American personnel had played too big a role in previous arms inspections.

The *Times* quoted an unnamed senior Clinton administration official who refused to rule out an "October surprise," i.e., military action on the eve of the presidential elections. "They will be making a severe mistake if they think an election campaign will affect how we carry out our foreign policy," the official declared.

On August 25 the *Miami Herald* carried an editorial entitled "Iraq's Self-Imposed Suffering—US Hard Line Justified by Hussein's Actions." The piece called on the Clinton administration to resist international pressure for a relaxation of sanctions. It strongly suggested that Clinton take military action should Iraq refuse to admit UN inspectors.

"Still, it would be a mistake here or abroad to believe that the United States and the Clinton administration—even amidst a hotly contested election

campaign—will not act forcefully. Republican criticism of Clinton administration policy toward Hussein properly has been that it is not forceful enough."

The *Herald* noted that earlier this month the CIA sent a message to Congress alleging that Iraq had rebuilt chemical and missile plants destroyed in the four-day US-British bombing assault carried out in December 1998.

On September 1 the *Washington Post* published a front-page article headlined "US Antimissile Unit Ready to go to Israel." It reported that the Pentagon had alerted an Army Patriot antimissile battery based in Germany for possible deployment to Israel.

The *Post* quoted US Defense Department officials who expressed concern that Iraq might launch a missile attack on Israel during the US presidential campaign. "We're not seeking a provocation," one unnamed official declared. "At the same time we want to let him [Hussein] know we are not distracted." An Israeli official quoted by the *Post* said the question of an alleged threat from Iraq had arisen in recent days out of a "strategic dialogue" with the White House. The piece concluded by citing US intelligence claims of "increasing signs of missile testing south of Baghdad."

However, the *Post* was unable to provide a single fact or piece of evidence to indicate that Iraq had done something to provoke a deployment of US missiles and troops to Israel. On the contrary, it cited a "senior administration official" who said he was "not aware of any specific threat from Iraq."

The latest round of anti-Iraq propaganda by the Clinton administration and the US media takes place in the context of growing opposition within the UN Security Council to the continuation of sanctions. With the issue slated for review this month, the United States may be seeking to preempt the UN debate with a

military provocation.

The United Nations suspended weapons inspections of Iraq in December 1998, just before the United States and Britain launched a four-day bombing blitz against the country. The bombing was the outcome of a calculated provocation by the US and Britain. The official pretext was the refusal of Iraq to permit inspection of the headquarters of the ruling Ba'ath Party, under conditions in which the US openly called for the overthrow of the Ba'athist government, supported dissident Iraqi political forces and frequently hinted at its desire to assassinate Saddam Hussein.

The attack, coming on the eve of the impeachment vote by the US House of Representatives, was in large part an attempt by Clinton to conciliate his right-wing Republican opponents.

Since December 1998, the United States and Britain have carried out regular bombing runs over so-called "no-fly-zones" in the north and south of the country. Iraq says 311 civilians have been killed and 927 wounded in these attacks.

Baghdad has made clear that it has no intention of cooperating with the new round of arms inspections being proposed by the UN. Years of increasingly intrusive inspections failed to produce evidence that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Moreover, UN arms monitoring went hand in hand with intelligence gathering by the American Central Intelligence Agency and other imperialist spy organizations. These covert and illegal actions were aimed at destabilizing or eliminating Saddam Hussein.

Under the terms of the new UN mandate for arms inspections, the US effectively retains veto power over any lifting of sanctions, an embargo that has already cost the lives of up to one million people, including 500,000 children.

Even within international diplomatic circles, few take seriously American contentions that Iraq poses any near-term military threat to the US and its Gulf allies. Scott Ritter, a former top weapons inspector for the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), now concedes that Iraq is for all intents and purposes disarmed.

Divisions are appearing in US ruling circles over policy toward Iraq. In an August 24 editorial entitled "What is the UN Doing About Iraq?" the *Chicago Tribune*, a pro-Republican newspaper, called for an end

to the economic blockade. It cited the impossibility of maintaining the current course because of objections from Russia, China and France.

There are signs that US attempts to keep Iraq isolated are crumbling. The recent trip, over US objections, of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to Iraq was the first visit by a head of state since the Gulf War.

Given the crisis-ridden state of US policy in the Gulf and the record of the Clinton administration of launching military attacks largely for domestic political reasons, it is by no means ruled out that Clinton will take military action against Iraq in the coming weeks. A major theme of Republican Presidential candidate George W. Bush is the charge that Clinton has underfunded the US military and allowed its readiness to decline. A new burst of missiles and bombs, at the cost of more Iraqi lives, might be considered a timely gesture to reassure the military and the right wing.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact