

Will George W. Bush launch a new US war of aggression against Iraq?

Jerry White
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By all indications the world will not have to wait long before the new Bush administration involves the United States in a bloody military adventure. The bellicose statements over the last several days, by representatives of the Bush administration, Pentagon officials and the news media, suggest that the first target of such aggression is likely to be Iraq.

Only hours before President-elect Bush took the oath of office on January 20, American bombs were raining down on Iraq. US warplanes patrolling a so-called no-fly zone in the south of Iraq killed six civilians in a missile attack near Samawa, on the border with Saudi Arabia. Witnesses said the bombs struck a cattle-feed depot run by the agriculture ministry, killing six warehouse workers and injuring three others.

The attacks continued Monday, January 22, with US and British planes based in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Turkey firing on civilian and military installations in both northern and southern provinces. Although the news media has barely reported these attacks, US and British planes routinely violate Iraqi airspace—on average every third day—and fire on Iraq's antiquated air defense systems and a host of civilian targets. At least 300 civilians have been killed in such raids over the last two years.

The same day as the bombing, the *New York Times* published a front-page article entitled “Iraq Rebuilt Bombed Arms Plants, Officials Say,” which quotes unnamed “senior government officials” accusing Iraq of rebuilding three factories west of Baghdad, which have “long been suspected of producing chemical and biological weapons.” The “new intelligence estimate,” the *Times* wrote, “could confront President Bush with an early test of his pledge to take a tougher stance against President Saddam Hussein than the Clinton administration did.”

In typical fashion, neither the US officials who are quoted nor the *Times* reporters provide evidence of the existence of any such weapons. Instead the Iraqis' insistence that the plants are used for commercial purposes, producing pesticides, herbicides and castor oil for brake fluid, is rejected out of hand, with suggestions that the chemicals were being used to make biological weapons.

Two of the factories were destroyed during the massive US-

British bombing raids in December 1998, which killed hundreds of Iraqi civilians. President Clinton ordered the bombings because Iraq was allegedly interfering with United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) inspectors, who left shortly before the bombing began. Baghdad officials had correctly charged that the UNSCOM inspectors were working for US, British and Israeli intelligence agencies, not to monitor weapons, but to provide military information to aid in the overthrow of the Iraqi government.

Because the Iraqi regime has not allowed inspectors back in the country since 1998, the *Times* article acknowledged that the US “did not yet have firm evidence the factories are now producing chemical or biological agents.” Nevertheless, the *Times* quotes one “senior military officer” saying, “We don't know for sure, but given his [Saddam Hussein's] past known behavior, there's probably a pretty fair chance that's what's happening.”

Responding to the report, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said, “The president expects Saddam Hussein to live up to the agreements that he's made with the United Nations, especially regarding the elimination of weapons of mass destruction.” Earlier Bush had told the *Times*, “Saddam Hussein must understand that this nation is very serious about preventing him from the development of weapons of mass destruction.”

During his campaign, Bush, whose father led the Persian Gulf War in 1991, denounced the Clinton administration for allowing the sanctions regime against Baghdad to weaken, and for moving too slowly in efforts to destabilize the Iraqi government. Bush has pledged strong support for the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, which authorized the Pentagon to provide the pro-US opposition forces inside Iraq with as much as \$97 million in arms and military training.

Testifying at his Senate confirmation hearing former General Colin Powell, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Gulf War, said Bush wanted to “re-energize the sanctions regime” and increase support to Iraqi groups trying to overthrow Hussein. Powell also said Hussein, “is not going to be around in a few years time.”

Vice President Dick Cheney, who was defense secretary during the war against Iraq, has also suggested a Bush

administration might “have to take military action to forcibly remove Saddam from power,” as has current Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Another key Bush aide, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, has said if Hussein provides an opportunity, Washington should “really try to hurt him, not just [deliver] a pinprick” air strike as Clinton employed.

According to CNN, Richard Butler, the former head of the UN inspection team—who played a key role provoking confrontations with Iraqi officials in order to provide the pretext for military strikes by the Clinton administration—is once again pressing for the resumption of arms inspections. According to CNN's National Security Correspondent David Ensor, Butler feels a threatened military confrontation with Iraq might persuade the Russians and others to back the US demand. With the Iraqis strongly opposing the reintroduction of UN inspectors, a confrontation over this issue may be just the “opportunity” Rice and other Bush officials are looking for.

There has been no lack of effort, both by the outgoing Clinton administration and Bush's, to create the political conditions for an attack on Iraq. Before taking office Bush met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and spent more than half of the meeting discussing Iraq. The following day outgoing Defense Secretary William Cohen issued a report claiming that Iraq had rebuilt its weapons infrastructure and may have begun covertly producing some chemical or biological agents. Cohen's report, included in the Pentagon's review of global “hot spots,” which the new administration would have to confront, claimed that Iraq “shows no let-up in its pursuit to reconstitute its pre-war weapons and missile capabilities,” adding that Baghdad could resume chemical agent production “within a few weeks or months.”

A day later, on January 11, Navy Secretary Richard Danzig made the extraordinary decision to change the status of a US pilot shot down on the first day of the Gulf War—January 17, 1991—from “killed in action” to “missing in action.” The decision, based on claims by an Iraqi defector that he saw a US pilot in an Iraqi hospital after the start of the war—and contrary to reports from eyewitnesses who saw the US plane explode—was used to suggest that Saddam Hussein was still holding American prisoners, 10 years after the war ended. One US official said of the Iraqis, “They're clearly concealing information. We don't have anything to say he is alive. But we can't say he is dead.”

Iraqi officials denounced the reports as a “new and cheap American lie” aimed at providing a new pretext for aggression against the country, and pointed out that in 1996 Iraq allowed a Red Cross team, including US personnel, to inspect the site where the wreckage of the US plane went down.

As in the case of the *New York Times* January 22 article, the US media has marched in lockstep with the efforts to justify a new military confrontation with Iraq. CNN, for instance, ran a TV special on the January 16 anniversary of the Gulf War, entitled, “Iraq: the Unfinished War.” The program made no

effort to explain why 10 years after Iraqi troops were driven from Kuwait—the sole reason cited by Bush Sr., Powell and others for the launching of the war—it remained “unfinished.” As the title of the program indicates, the US government and its representatives in the media will only consider the war complete when Saddam Hussein is assassinated or overthrown and the US establishes control over the entire region.

The new Bush administration comes to power as the US has become increasingly isolated internationally in relation to its policy towards Iraq. The US-led trade embargo has been defied by a growing number of European and Middle Eastern countries, including Russia and France, which have resumed commercial flights into Baghdad's refurbished airport. In addition the various Arab bourgeois regimes that backed the sanctions are also facing increased pressure to distance themselves from the punitive measures against Iraq, because of the growing anti-American sentiment throughout the region. There were even recent British newspaper reports that London—the most enthusiastic partner in the US aggression against Iraq—was rethinking its policy of enforcing the no-fly zones because of the high number of civilian casualties, although the Foreign Office was quick to deny the claim.

The criminal policy of sanctions and continuous military assaults has wreaked havoc on Iraq's 23 million people, half of whom live in poverty. The sanctions have led to hundreds of thousands of deaths, including 11,000, mostly children, in December alone. But to the chagrin of US officials, Saddam Hussein has remained in power.

Various advisers have reportedly warned the new Bush administration that the situation in the Middle East and internationally is far more complex than when Bush's father, Powell and Cheney carried out the slaughter of Iraqi soldiers and civilians 10 years ago. It would be folly, however, to believe that international isolation would prevent the United States from waging a renewed war against Iraq. On the contrary, the Bush administration is even more oblivious to international reaction and may be more willing to fire a shot across the bow of the French, Russians and other erstwhile allies, to shore up its failing policy and reassert American domination in the region.

There are also domestic political considerations involved in a possible decision to launch an attack on Iraq. A politically weak government, considered illegitimate by broad masses and facing an economic downturn, the Bush administration may be more apt to launch a bloody adventure in hopes of diverting attention away from the social crisis at home.



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