

Hawks demand attack on Iraq, troops in Afghanistan

Political war rages over Bush military strategy

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While US bombs and cruise missiles rain down on Afghanistan, another kind of warfare is taking place in Washington: a bitter internal struggle within the Bush administration and the political and foreign policy establishment over the direction and methods to be employed in the American military onslaught in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The last week has seen a media barrage by those favoring a radical US escalation of the war. Demands have been raised for the rapid deployment of ground troops in Afghanistan and for publicly identifying Iraq as a target for imminent military action.

The conflict over war policy cuts across party lines, with sections of the Bush administration and some congressional Democrats and Republicans adopting the more hawkish position, opposed by others, headed within the administration by Secretary of State Colin Powell, who favor limiting the war to Afghanistan, at least for now.

These issues are not being broached in open political appeals to the American people, who have never been consulted in any serious way and are largely unaware of the active consideration of a second or expanded war. Rather, the struggle is conducted by means of selected leaks and planted commentaries in the media, aimed at influencing the narrow circle of elite opinion-makers in Washington.

The attack-Iraq-now faction wants to find Saddam Hussein responsible for the anthrax mailings in the United States and use the anthrax scare as the pretext for a wider war. The *Wall Street Journal* led off with an editorial October 18, and a week later the campaign had spread to the television networks and other daily newspapers.

That anthrax is only a pretext is proven by the fact that many right-wing commentators were on record favoring war with Iraq before the US bombing of Afghanistan began and before any anthrax infections were discovered.

The October 1 issue of the journal *Weekly Standard* carried an open letter signed by William Kristol, Gary Bauer, William Bennett, Midge Decter, Francis Fukuyama, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Charles Krauthammer, Martin Peretz, Richard Perle, Norman Podhoretz, among others. This pronouncement called for punishing Iraq for the September 11 suicide hijackings, regardless of whether Saddam Hussein was responsible: "It may be that the Iraqi government provided assistance in some form to the recent attack on the United States. But even if evidence does not link Iraq directly to the attack, any strategy aiming at the eradication of terrorism and its sponsors must include a determined effort to remove Saddam Hussein from power."

Now the same principle is being applied to the anthrax attacks: regardless of whether Saddam Hussein had anything to do with them, the "war on terrorism" requires a war on Iraq.

On October 26, ABC News ran a special investigative report by Brian Ross, declaring that Iraq had been conclusively linked to the anthrax in a letter sent to Democratic Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle. Ross reported that the spores found on the Daschle letter were "nearly identical to those discovered in Iraq in 1994. ABC NEWS also has learned that at least two labs have concluded the anthrax was coated with additives linked to the Iraqi biological weapons program."

Ross claimed that "five well-placed and separate sources have told ABC NEWS that initial tests have detected traces of bentonite and silica, substances that keep tiny anthrax particles floating in the air by preventing them from sticking together—making them more easily inhaled.... As far as is known, only one country, Iraq, has used bentonite to produce biological weapons."

Ross has produced more than one television "exclusive" which served US interests in relation to Iraq. When he worked as an investigative reporter for NBC News, he filed a report in April 1990 on alleged Iraqi attempts to obtain nuclear "triggers" from Western high-tech firms, a story which clearly required the tacit or active collaboration of American intelligence agencies.

Also significant is the identity of one of the report's producers: Chris Vlasto. He was last in the news when he was identified as a media agent of the right-wing operatives who engineered the Clinton impeachment. Vlasto picked up the tab for a celebratory dinner for Paula Jones and her Christian fundamentalist attorneys the day they succeeded in hauling Clinton before a grand jury and compelling him to testify under oath about his sexual history, including answering questions about Monica Lewinsky.

The morning after Ross's ABC News report, the go-slow-for-now faction in the Bush administration fired back in the *Washington Post*. A front-page lead article, co-authored by Bob Woodward and Dan Eggen, began: "Top FBI and CIA officials believe that the anthrax attacks on Washington, New York and Florida are likely the work of one or more extremists in the United States who are probably not connected with Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda organization, government officials said yesterday."

The *Post* quoted an unnamed "senior official" to the effect that "everything seems to lean toward a domestic source. Nothing seems to fit with an overseas terrorist type operation." Investigators probing the anthrax mailings for the FBI and the US Postal Service were considering "associates of right-wing hate groups" among the likely suspects. Some links exist between fascist anti-Semitic groups in the United States and Islamic fundamentalists in the Middle East, they

said, and at least one white supremacist group publicly praised the September 11 attack as a blow against the Jews.

A second *Washington Post* article on October 30 debunked the anthrax additive claim. “Federal officials said yesterday that the anthrax spores that infected workers at the *New York Post* and in the office of Senate Majority Leader Thomas A. Daschle (D-S.D.) were not mixed with bentonite, a mineral compound used by the Iraqi biological weapons program to make the spores more infectious,” the newspaper reported.

“The chemical findings appeared to support recent hints by various US officials that Iraq is not a prime suspect in the recent anthrax attacks, which have killed three and wreaked havoc with the postal system.”

As it did throughout the impeachment crisis, the *Wall Street Journal* responded to the discrediting of its case by escalating its demands for action. In rapid succession the *Journal* published columns by Republican Senator John McCain calling for the introduction of ground troops into Afghanistan, by Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman declaring Saddam Hussein “Target No. 2” in the US war effort, and by editorial page editor Robert Bartley maintaining that Iraq was the only logical suspect for the anthrax attack.

The column by Lieberman, the Democratic vice-presidential candidate last year, was particularly significant in giving a bipartisan coloration to the campaign for immediate war with Iraq. Lieberman quoted and praised Bush’s “historic address to Congress” on September 20 and called on the administration to “hold firm to the Bush Doctrine” of attacking not only the terrorists responsible for the World Trade Center attack, but any country or regime which could be said to harbor them.

Lieberman called on the government “to be unflinching in our determination to remove a uniquely implacable enemy and terrorist, Saddam Hussein, from power before he strikes at us with weapons of mass destruction,” adding, “whether or not Saddam is implicated directly in the anthrax attacks or the horrors of Sept. 11, he is, by any common definition, a terrorist who must be removed.”

The same theme—damn the facts, full speed ahead against Iraq—was the tenor of Bartley’s column, which criticized “bureaucracies at State, Defense and the CIA” for holding back the Bush administration through a pettifogging concern for evidence on the source of the anthrax attacks. Bartley ended with the worry that “our troops may be bogged down in the snows of Afghanistan while the main enemy goes untouched.”

A day later two prominent neo-conservatives, Charles Krauthammer and William Kristol, penned columns appearing in the *Washington Post* that bewailed the Bush administration’s war policy as feckless and self-defeating.

Krauthammer compared the Bush administration’s methods in Afghanistan to those of the United States in Vietnam, repeating the right-wing canard that the US was defeated in Vietnam because Johnson and Nixon used insufficient military force. The war in Afghanistan was proceeding with “half-measures,” he declared. “It has been fought to satisfy the diplomats rather than the generals.”

The United States should ride roughshod over popular opposition in the Arab and Muslim countries, abandon the pretense of concern over civilian casualties, and move ahead with maximum force: carpet-bombing of Taliban troops and Afghan cities with B-52s and B-2s, followed by full-scale invasion.

Kristol denounced what he called “three self-imposed constraints” on the war: the failure to send ground troops immediately to

Afghanistan, the failure to seek an immediate confrontation with Iraq, and the failure to capitalize on the anthrax scare for a full-scale war mobilization at home.

He denounced the notion that the anthrax attacks had a domestic source, criticizing the FBI and CIA officials cited in the *Post*’s own October 27 article. He asked rhetorically, “And what signal do we send when our law enforcement and intelligence agencies desperately try to convince the press” that the anthrax attacks might have no relation to the Middle East?

The political significance of such attacks on Bush was underscored the same evening on NBC Nightly News, when anchorman Tom Brokaw interviewed Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and cited the criticism by Krauthammer and Kristol. “Isn’t that the beginning of an unraveling of the political coalition here at home, if these conservatives are saying that as publicly as they are?” Brokaw asked.

Brokaw made clear his own view of the proper military strategy in the following extraordinary exchange:

Brokaw: *Military analysts that I’ve talked to say that we really won’t be successful there until we, the United States, puts in a division-size force, seize [sic] an airport, make [sic] that the base of operations, somewhere in Afghanistan, probably in the south would be the first place to do that.*

Rumsfeld : *Of course, there’s military experts that are on every side of these issues. And you cite one, but there’s—for every one you cite like that, there are some who have another opinion. That is a perfectly legitimate position that you’ve outlined. It is certainly something that people consider and discuss and has happened in other venues.*

The right-wing attacks on the Bush administration are characterized by a note of panic, bordering on hysteria. Kristol, for instance, wrote, “Now, we face the threat of the Taliban’s continuing in power through the winter. This would be something close to a disaster. It would convey an impression of American weakness.”

Underlying this desperation is a recognition that domestic public support for the Bush administration’s intervention in Central Asia, while superficially broad-based, is very thin. The onset of a full-fledged recession in the United States, or serious military reverses, could rapidly reveal the isolation of this government, whose origins lie in a stolen election, and whose social policies are deeply unpopular.



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