

Bush administration confirms plans for war against Iraq

The Editorial Board
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In an appearance by Secretary of State Colin Powell before a Senate committee, as well as through selected leaks to the press, the Bush administration has confirmed plans to launch a war with Iraq in a matter of months.

Powell's statements to a Senate Budget Committee hearing Tuesday were the most categorical by any top US official and scotched any illusions—apparently common in European governments—that the secretary of state would serve as a restraining force on psychopaths like Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz.

Clearly distinguishing between Iraq and the other two countries that Bush included in his State of the Union "axis of evil" diatribe, Powell said, "With respect to Iran and with respect to North Korea, there is no plan to start a war with these nations."

The unmistakable implication was that there *is* a plan to start a war with Iraq, and Powell added, "With respect to Iraq, it has long been, for several years now, a policy of the United States government that regime change would be in the best interests of the region, the best interests of the Iraqi people.... And we are looking at a variety of options that would bring that about."

The secretary of state barely stopped short of a public declaration of war, allowing that Bush "does not have a recommendation before him that would involve an armed conflict tomorrow."

This decision, with the most far-reaching and potentially disastrous consequences for the people of the Middle East, the United States and the world as a whole, has been taken without even a pretense of consideration for the American constitutional process—which requires a declaration of war—or for international law—under which "planning an offensive war" is a war crime.

The pace of American military action continues to accelerate—from bombing to invasion of Afghanistan, and now to the targeting of Iraq for what will inevitably become a much bloodier campaign. It is impossible to understand this drive to war as simply a response to the September 11 attacks. Rather, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon serve as a pretext, increasingly threadbare, for a program of militarism which has been in preparation for many years.

Iraq is a case in point. The United States savagely bombed Iraqi military forces and most of the country's cities and towns in 1991, in response to the occupation of Kuwait. The US and Britain continue to bomb Iraq more than a decade after the supposed end of the war, while the economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations, at US instigation, are responsible for a modern holocaust, the death of as many as one million Iraqis, mainly children, the elderly, the sick and the poor.

The claim that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is a threat to the United States and that war against Iraq is justified on the grounds of "self-defense"—as US officials declared last week at a NATO strategy conference in Munich—is a cynical lie. No evidence has been presented that Saddam Hussein had anything to do with the September 11 terrorist attacks, and even the American CIA no longer makes such claims.

The recklessness of American foreign policy has sent shudders through the world, most notably in Europe, where there are growing concerns among the ruling classes—as well as among broader masses of the population—that they confront in the Bush administration something radically new and dangerous. European Union external affairs chief Christopher Patten, a former general secretary of the British Tory Party, warned that the US military success in Afghanistan "has perhaps reinforced some dangerous instincts: that the projection of military power is the only basis of true security; that the US can rely on no one but itself; and that allies may be useful as optional extras."

The whole structure of international relations is being destabilized. Any government that comes into conflict with American foreign policy now risks being targeted for a military attack in the name of the "war on terrorism."

Statements outlining various scenarios for a US war with Iraq were leaked to three American newspapers over the past week. The *Los Angeles Times*, in an article February 10, said that the Bush administration was now engaged in "serious planning" for war with Iraq, and that Vice President Richard Cheney would convey the US decisions to client states in the Middle East during a nine-nation tour next month. Cheney will visit Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman, all of which could play a role in a US military onslaught on Baghdad.

The *Times* reported that the administration has made "two strategic decisions.... First, the Iraq problem has to be solved, not simply managed as it was during the two previous U.S. administrations.... Second, Washington is prepared to push beyond the limitations imposed by international sentiment, Arab public opinion and even the original U.N. resolutions that opened the way for Operation Desert Storm 11 years ago to force Iraq out of tiny oil-rich Kuwait."

The language used is particularly ominous. Not since Nazi Germany—with Hitler's demands for immediate liquidation of "the Czech problem" or "the Polish problem"—has a world power spoken in such terms, or acted with such blatant disregard for international opinion.

On February 12, both the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *USA Today* reported that a decision leading to war with Iraq had been made. The *Inquirer* quoted "a senior administration official" who told the newspaper that current discussion in the White House, Pentagon and State Department was not over the pros and cons of attacking Iraq, but how to do it. "This is not an argument about whether to get rid of Saddam Hussein," he said. "That debate is over."

The CIA has presented Bush with plans for a full-scale campaign of subversion, sabotage, covert action and bombing in the "no-fly" zones of northern and southern Iraq, in preparation for overt military action, the *Inquirer* said.

Officials told the newspaper that Cheney's trip, while portrayed publicly as consultation with Mideast leaders, was to deliver an ultimatum. "He's not going to beg for support," one senior official told

the newspaper. “He’s going to inform them that the President’s decision has been made and will be carried out, and if they want some input into how and when it’s carried out, now’s the time for them to speak up.”

USA Today cited Bush administration officials, including Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, Powell’s closest aide, as its source for reporting that a decision for war had been made. The newspaper said that diplomatic and political options for dealing with Baghdad would be advanced as well, but largely for the purpose of creating a pretext for military action.

The administration will seek the imposition of much tighter economic sanctions on Iraq when the current regime comes up for renewal in May by the UN Security Council, as well as placing demands on Baghdad to permit reentry of UN weapons inspectors who were expelled at the end of 1998. US spokesmen have openly declared that the real purpose of these demands is to provoke an Iraqi rejection and subsequent breakdown in the inspection process which can then be used to set a deadline for military attack.

The military scenarios being considered, according to *USA Today*, range from targeted bombing of the principal Iraqi ground force, the Republican Guards, in an effort to provoke a military rebellion, to arming local opposition forces such as the Kurds in the north and the Shi’ites in the south, to a full-scale invasion by up to 200,000 US troops.

There are a number of concrete indications that the preparations for war against Iraq are even more advanced than these reports suggest.

* US and British warplanes have intensified their bombing of Iraqi air defense facilities. The most recent air raids took place January 22 and 24 near the town of Tallil, 170 miles southeast of Baghdad.

* Thousands of Marines and other combat-ready troops are moving toward the region, although the military operations in Afghanistan have been sharply cut back.

* A delegation of State Department and CIA officials visited Kurdish-held territory in northern Iraq last month to make an on-the-spot survey of the forces available for military action against Baghdad.

* More than 1,000 military command-and-control personnel have been shifted from US bases to locations in the Persian Gulf, where they would be in position to direct a much larger force of combat troops.

* The commander of Marine forces for the US Central Command moved his headquarters from Florida to Bahrain, joining commanders for the Army, Navy and Air Force already in the region.

Meanwhile intense pressure is being brought to bear on the countries that occupy the most important strategic positions for a US war on Iraq: Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Iran was included in the “axis of evil” characterization, in part because of a growing conflict with the US over influence in western Afghanistan, which is predominately Persian-speaking. The more important motive, however, is to keep Teheran on the sidelines during a US attack on Iraq. The principal concern cited by US officials in halting the war with Iraq in 1991 was the fear that Iran would emerge as the dominant power in the Persian Gulf if Iraq’s military forces were completely destroyed.

Saudi Arabia has been the subject of a press campaign, particularly in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, suggesting that the US may withdraw its support from the monarchy—which would be a death sentence for the regime—and support some other form of rule, such as a military dictatorship, because of Saudi reluctance to serve as a base for a US invasion of Iraq.

In the case of Turkey, bribery rather than intimidation is the main US tactic. Earlier this month the IMF approved a \$16 billion loan to prop up the regime in Ankara, a bailout backed by the US despite its opposition to any similar measure for Argentina. There have been suggestions in the American and international press that Turkey is being given other incentives for supporting a war, ranging from an outright share of Iraq’s oil wealth—the Mosul oilfield is less than 100 miles from the Turkish

border—to US aid for the construction of an oil pipeline from the Caspian Sea to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan.

In return, Turkey may be asked to supply tanks and ground troops for the northern half of the war against Iraq. A columnist in the Turkish newspaper *Milliyet* recently called for the government to order the Turkish army to march on Baghdad rather than permitting a Kurdish uprising or waiting for an anti-Saddam military coup.

In a speech to his parliamentary caucus, Deputy Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz warned the United States against any unilateral strike on Iraq, declaring, “We do not tolerate the development, outside our knowledge and initiative, of a process that will have close impact on us, nor our priorities being disregarded and our national interests being trampled on.”

The Turkish regime is fearful that a war in Iraq could lead to the creation of an independent Kurdistan in the north, which would become a magnet for millions of Kurds in southeastern Turkey who are presently denied their national rights. In addition to reassurances on that issue, Yilmaz was demanding—if one translates the diplomatic jargon—that Turkey receive its share of the spoils in the coming carve-up of Iraq—a territory which was ruled by the Ottoman Empire for centuries, until it was seized by Great Britain during World War I.

According to a report appearing in the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on February 6, citing sources in Russian military intelligence, the US government is “preparing to launch a series of wars in the Middle East,” with the attack on Iraq to begin in September. The newspaper said that the US has begun concentrating the necessary forces in the region using the war in Afghanistan as a cover. Steps have also been taken to recruit Kurdish leaders to the plan, and to restore landing strips in the Kurdish-held region in northern Iraq.

The Russian report said that at least one scenario envisages the destruction of the Hussein government in the space of eight weeks through a combination of air strikes and ground assault by proxy forces. This would be followed by similar attacks on Iran and Syria if they offer any resistance to US domination in the region.

The timetable suggested in the Russian press may prove accurate, since there are practical reasons which could delay ground action against Iraq until late summer:

* Summertime temperatures in the Mesopotamian desert would make ground operations difficult for American troops.

* The Pentagon needs more time to move troops to the region and improve air bases and logistical support.

* The US arms industry requires some months to rebuild the Pentagon’s stocks of precision weapons, depleted first by the Kosovo war and now by Afghanistan.

* Ground action would be preceded by a period of heavy bombing, which could begin as soon as the necessary weapons are ready for use.

There is, however, a more fundamental reason for supposing that US action will begin no later than late summer, and even earlier, one that has nothing to do with logistics, geography or, indeed, any military considerations at all. A US war against Iraq would then unfold in the midst of the 2002 election campaign, creating the conditions for the Bush administration and the Republican Party to wrap themselves in the flag and portray domestic opposition as virtual treason.

Despite the attempts of the media to present Bush as a politically powerful and enormously popular president, he heads an administration which only took office thanks to an antidemocratic coup by a 5-4 majority of the US Supreme Court, and his domestic policies—huge tax cuts for the wealthy, slashing social spending, promoting the agenda of the fundamentalist Christian right—are deeply opposed by the vast majority of working people.

Without September 11 and the subsequent war in Afghanistan, this administration would today face mounting popular opposition, as it was held responsible for the deepening recession, the continuing wave of mass

layoffs, and the criminal activities of its closest business supporters, such as Enron. Even with the confusion created by the terrorist attacks and the full support of the congressional Democrats—and Bush’s 2000 opponent Al Gore, who called in a speech Wednesday for a “final reckoning” with Iraq—this is a regime in crisis.

War is the means chosen by American imperialism to establish a dominant position in the oil-rich Middle East and Central Asia. But more fundamentally, the drive to war is a manifestation of the deepening class antagonisms within the United States. War has become a political necessity for the survival of the Bush administration. As one of the principal media apologists for the administration, *Wall Street Journal* editor Robert Bartley, declared hopefully in a TV appearance after Bush’s State of the Union speech, “This Enron story isn’t going to last very long if we invade Iraq.”

The Bush administration represents the emergence, at the highest levels of American capitalism, of a criminalized, gangster element. Its attitude to democracy was shown in Florida, its attitude to working people is shown in Enron, its attitude to the world is being displayed in Afghanistan and Iraq. And the more Bush & Co. threaten war, the more they become compelled to translate words into action, regardless of the consequences. The deepening crisis of American imperialism is dragging the world towards a catastrophe.



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