

Bush administration issues new threats

Is the US planning a war against Cuba?

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A series of accusations and threats leveled by officials of the Bush administration this week have raised serious questions about whether Washington is planning to expand its global “war on terrorism” to include military aggression against Cuba.

In a speech entitled “Beyond the Axis of Evil,” the number-three man in the State Department, John Bolton, claimed that the Castro regime had developed “at least a limited biological warfare research and development effort,” and provided “dual-use biotechnology” to “other rogue states,” including Iran, Syria and Libya.

A spokesman for the Cuban interests section in Washington called Bolton’s accusations “a big lie and a big slander.”

Bolton, the undersecretary for arms control and international security affairs, is a right-wing lawyer and long-time protégé of Senator Jesse Helms. He first came into prominence as the Justice Department official who stonewalled Congressional committees requesting information on the illegal Iran-contra operation used to finance the covert CIA war in Nicaragua.

Since his appointment to the State Department, he has emerged as a leading proponent of US militarism, supporting a war against Iraq and announcing plans to rescind Washington’s 25-year-old commitment not to launch nuclear attacks against countries that do not possess nuclear weapons.

“We call on Cuba to cease all biological weapons-applicable cooperation with rogue states and to fully comply with all of its obligations under the Biological Weapons Convention,” Bolton declared in a speech to the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing think tank. “States that renounce terror and abandon weapons of mass destruction can become part of our effort,” he added. “But those that do not can expect to become our targets.”

Further, the undersecretary of state charged: “Castro has repeatedly denounced the US war on terrorism. He continues to view terror as a legitimate tactic to further revolutionary objectives.” As evidence, he cited the Cuban president’s visits to Iran, Syria and Libya, all likewise designated by Washington as “terrorist-sponsoring states.”

These claims are laughable. While warning darkly that the Cuban menace lies just “90 miles from our shores,” Bolton can cite no instance of Cuban-sponsored terrorism against the US. For its part, Havana can point to countless CIA-sponsored terrorist attacks against Cuba, from the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 to the multiple attempts to assassinate Castro and more recent bombings and acts of economic sabotage carried out by US-based Cuban

counterrevolutionary groups.

While invoking unspecified allegations of Cuban violations of the Biological Weapons Convention as the pretext for threatening US aggression, Bolton has staked out a position internationally that the US is essentially exempt from the terms of multinational treaties. He served as the Bush administration’s point man in the “unsigning” of the treaty establishing the International Criminal Court and, on the issue of biological weapons, single-handedly sabotaged an international conference last December that was to have established enforcement mechanisms for the treaty. Washington has no intention of allowing international surveillance of its own vast efforts to develop and manufacture weapons of mass destruction.

As for the claims that Cuba has exported “dual-use biotechnology,” virtually all of the equipment and materials necessary to develop biological weapons are utilized in basic civilian scientific processes ranging from the production of pharmaceuticals to the development of protein for animal feed.

Washington’s assertion that US imperialism has the right to attack militarily “rogue states” presumed to be developing weapons of mass destruction is not new. It figures prominently in the justifications given for an invasion of Iraq. And, in 1998, it was invoked in the US attack on the al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum. While the Clinton administration insisted that the Sudanese plant was being used to manufacture chemical weapons, subsequent investigations established that it was devoted entirely to producing medicine.

In Cuba’s case, the allegations of biological weapons production also have a “dual use.” The country’s biotechnology industry is one of the most advanced in the world, producing pharmaceuticals for export and developing hundreds of groundbreaking drugs and agricultural biotechnology products. These include recombinant treptokinase, a “clot buster” for heart attack victims, and a new meningitis vaccine, which it is expected to soon begin marketing in partnership with the US-British drug company, SmithKline Beecham.

The Cuban government has estimated potential export earnings from the country’s biotechnology industry during the 1998-2003 period at \$800 million, despite US efforts to enforce a 40-year-old economic blockade aimed at preventing Havana from trading with other countries. The new charges of biological weapons—never before made by a US administration—serve not only as a pretext for military attack, but also as a justification for tightening the trade

stranglehold on the island nation.

Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Otto Reich, meanwhile, told a meeting of the Council of the Americas May 6 that the Bush administration had “ordered a review of policy tools to attempt to accelerate Cuba’s transition to democracy.” He did not specify what new “tools” were under consideration, but given the administration’s increasingly reckless use of military force, as well as Reich’s own record and views, they could very well involve armed aggression.

A right-wing Cuban émigré, Reich began his career as a CIA operative with the closest links to the Miami-based anti-Castro mafia. He first came into the public eye in the 1980s as the director of the Office of Public Diplomacy, an invention of the CIA and the network established by Lt. Col. Oliver North to wage Washington’s dirty war against Nicaragua. Government investigators found the office and Reich guilty of carrying out illegal, government-funded propaganda aimed at winning support for the contra mercenary army and manufacturing disinformation to blackguard the Sandinista government.

Collaborating with US Army psychological warfare units, Reich floated fraudulent news stories alleging the Sandinistas were massacring the Miskito Indians and had acquired advanced MiG fighter jets from the USSR to prepare attacks on US territory.

After revelations of the illegal Iran-contra network forced an end to this operation, Reich was given the post of US ambassador to Venezuela. There he engineered the release of Orlando Bosch, the Cuban exile terrorist leader who had been jailed by Venezuelan authorities for organizing the bombing of a Cuban airliner that claimed the lives of 73 civilians. He has admitted direct responsibility for at least 50 other terrorist attacks.

Bosch remains a leader of the Cuban exile groups in Miami, which now exercise unprecedented influence over US foreign policy through their political protégé, Reich.

Among the most peculiar remarks made by Reich in his speech to the Council of the Americas were those related to last month’s abortive coup against the government of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. The assistant secretary of state was intimately involved in the preparations for the coup, meeting in Washington with virtually all of the key Venezuelan participants in the weeks before the military joined with business leader Pedro Carmona in establishing a junta. Reich announced US backing for the overthrow in its immediate aftermath. Washington’s celebration proved short-lived, however, as the junta disintegrated in barely 24 hours under the pressure of mass protests and conflicts within the military command.

“We have information that four Cuban airplanes landed at Maiquetía [the airport in Caracas] on the morning of April 12, when the result of this alteration of the constitutional order was still in doubt,” Reich declared to the audience at the State Department. “What were they doing there? What were they bringing? We don’t know, and if we did know, I wouldn’t say it here.”

Cuba’s Foreign Relations Ministry categorically denied that any Cuban planes landed at the Venezuelan airport April 12. “If it had been necessary to land a Cuban civilian airplane to collect Cuban diplomatic personnel who were besieged by Mr. Reich’s friends,

or for any other humanitarian and peaceful objective, we would have done it and we would have no reason to hide it,” the ministry said. “But the affirmation of Mr. Otto Reich constitutes an absolute lie.”

For its part, the Venezuelan government pointed out that on the day in question the airport was under the control of units loyal to the US-backed junta, whose right-wing supporters had attacked the Cuban embassy in Caracas.

Reich’s statement apparently represented a cynical attempt to deflect growing evidence of his own involvement and that of other US officials in the coup fiasco. Among the more recent revelations is the fact that US military airplanes and warships provided communications and intelligence aid to the coup’s organizers. Chavez reported that Venezuelan radar detected the presence of the ships and planes during the coup attempt.

“Maybe that’s what Chavez is talking about,” said Reich, referring to his allegation about the Cuban planes.

Reich was simply practicing the old tricks he learned as a CIA propagandist, the “big lie” technique of blaming your enemy for the crimes you yourself have carried out.

He and a cabal of right-wing veterans of the dirty wars and death squads in Central America now dominate US foreign policy toward Latin America. This group includes Elliot Abrams, the Reagan aide indicted for lying to Congress about the illegal contra operation and then pardoned by the elder George Bush. Abrams now serves as a key figure in the National Security Council and played a leading role in the Venezuelan events.

John Negroponte, who as ambassador to Honduras in the early 1980s oversaw the US-backed contra war headquartered in that Central American country, is now ambassador to the United Nations. Roger Noriega, another right-wing Cuban American and ex-aide to Senator Helms, is the ambassador to the Organization of American States, while John Poindexter has been named director of a new US Information Awareness Office. Poindexter was found guilty together with Oliver North of conspiracy and obstruction of justice for his part in organizing the Iran-contra network. The conviction was overturned on appeal.



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