

Washington's phony pretext for Iraqi invasion

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Speaking before a Republican audience in Portland, Oregon June 24, Vice President Richard Cheney reiterated the Bush administration's intention to carry out a preemptive strike against Iraq under the pretext of preventing the use of "weapons of mass destruction."

He described alleged attempts by the regime of Saddam Hussein to produce such armaments as "a gathering danger," and vowed that a "regime that hates America must never be permitted to threaten Americans with weapons of mass destruction."

"Wars are not won on the defensive," added Cheney, echoing a speech delivered by Bush earlier this month at West Point, spelling out a global policy of preemptive aggression. "We must take the battle to the enemy," he said.

The Bush administration, backed by Democratic congressional leaders, has drawn up plans to wage a CIA-organized campaign aimed at overthrowing or assassinating the Iraqi president as the means of bringing about a "regime change."

As the *Washington Post* reported recently, the administration's plan calls for the "possible use of CIA and US Special Forces teams, similar to those that have been successfully deployed in Afghanistan since the September 11 terrorist attacks. Such teams would be authorized to kill Hussein if they were acting in self-defense."

The plan calls for funneling money, weapons, intelligence and training to Iraqi opposition groups as well as stepped up espionage against the Iraqi government and military.

It would appear that the administration is publicly reviving the criminal and reviled methods employed by the CIA in the 1960s and 1970s, when the agency ran what amounted to a "Murder Incorporated." It became notorious for engineering the successful assassinations of Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, Chilean President Salvador Allende, Dominican President Rafael Trujillo, Che Guevara and many others, not to mention the numerous failed attempts on the life of Cuban President Fidel Castro.

After a Senate investigation exposed these criminal activities in 1976, then-president Gerald Ford issued an

executive order banning assassinations by any US government agency. While no doubt such killings have continued, until now every subsequent administration has at least paid lip service to the ban.

Now, however, the Bush administration makes no attempt to conceal its intentions. To call its plan for overthrowing the Iraqi regime a covert action would be a misnomer, as it has seen to it that the details of this operation have been plastered across the front page of the *Washington Post* and other national dailies.

Meanwhile, CIA director George Tenet has repeatedly warned the administration that the chances of a CIA operation against Hussein succeeding are at best 10 to 20 percent. Some administration officials have confided that the "covert" war would likely serve merely as a prelude to a US invasion involving some quarter of a million troops.

The aim of any attack on Iraq will be not the elimination of biological, chemical or nuclear weapons programs, but the furtherance of Washington's hegemonic control over the oilfields of the Persian Gulf.

The Bush administration is well aware that whatever weapons development programs Iraq was running before the Persian Gulf War in 1991 were abandoned after the country's infrastructure was devastated by the extensive bombing campaign. Destruction extended not merely to military targets, but to electricity, water purification and health care facilities, resulting in an appalling loss of life. According to some estimates, the death toll from disease and malnutrition directly attributable to the US war—most of it consisting of young Iraqi children—stands at over 1.5 million.

At the end of 1998, Iraq expelled United Nations weapons inspectors after escalating provocations and growing suspicion that the inspection operation was a Trojan horse for US attempts to overthrow the Hussein regime.

United Nations officials are currently attempting to negotiate an agreement with Baghdad to allow a resumption of the inspections. Iraq's foreign minister and the UN secretary general are scheduled to meet in early July for a third round of talks on allowing the inspectors to return.

The Bush administration is determined to block such an agreement and to halt any multinational operation that could call into question its unsubstantiated allegations about an Iraqi threat. This is the principal purpose of the administration's leaking details of its plans for a covert war and the assassination of the Iraqi president, according to someone intimately familiar with US machinations in the region.

Scott Ritter, a former US Marine, headed the Concealment Investigations Unit for the United Nations Special Commission Unit (UNSCOM) that operated in Iraq. He has testified that by the time UNSCOM was pulled out of Iraq in 1998 in preparation for a US bombing campaign, Iraq's weapons program had been destroyed and the country had effectively been disarmed.

In a column published earlier this month in the *Los Angeles Times*, Ritter charged that the plot to assassinate Hussein and use covert CIA and Special Forces teams inside Iraq was deliberately leaked to the media in an attempt to sabotage any revival of weapons inspections. He also confirmed Iraqi suspicions about the use of the weapons teams by US intelligence.

"I recall during my time in Iraq the dozens of extremely fit 'missile experts' and 'logistics specialists' who frequented my inspection teams and others," he wrote. These "experts," he said, were "drawn from such US units as Delta Force or from CIA paramilitary teams such as the Special Activities Staff"; in other words, trained assassins.

According to Ritter, the Iraqi regime had long suspected that the inspections "were nothing more than a front for a larger effort to eliminate their leader." With the Bush administration's release of its "covert" action plan, he added, "the Iraqis will never trust an inspection regime that has already shown itself susceptible to infiltration and manipulation by intelligence services to Iraq.... The true target of the supposed CIA plan may not be Hussein but rather the weapons inspection program itself."

Thus, the key preparation of a full-scale war against Iraq under the pretext of eliminating the danger from weapons of mass destruction is scuttling UN inspections that could establish that no such danger, nor such weapons, even exist.

There is ample reason to believe, however, that Washington is developing its own "weapons of mass destruction," including biological warfare materials that pose a direct threat to the population in the US itself.

Those within the Bush administration seeking a war against Iraq first seized upon the anthrax attacks of last year, alleging an Iraqi connection. Those allegations quickly fell apart as all the evidence pointed to a domestic source for the attacks, in particular a right-wing scientist connected to Washington's own biological weapons program.

More than nine months after the anthrax sent through the mail to Democratic politicians and the news media claimed the lives of five, two of them postal workers, the FBI claims it has identified no prime suspect. The Federation of American Scientists, which conducted a careful study of the anthrax incidents, concluded that no more than 10 likely suspects in the US who possessed the ability—including access to the particular strain of anthrax, knowledge of dispersal methods and vaccination against its effects—to carry out the attacks.

The suspect is believed to be a current or recent scientific employee at the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID), located at Fort Detrick, Maryland.

Those familiar with the investigation have suggested that the FBI has refused to make an arrest because the individual who carried out the attack "knows too much" about Washington's own secret biological weapons programs.

There is another, more sinister possibility—that the anthrax attacks were carried out by elements within the government with the aim of terrorizing the population into unquestioning support for the Bush administration's "war on terrorism."

The former commander of the USAMRIID program, Col. David Franz (ret), commented with some satisfaction in April on the results of the anthrax attacks: "I think a lot of good has come from it. From a biological or a medical standpoint, we've now five people who have died, but we've put about \$6 billion in our budget into defending against bioterrorism."

Barbara Hatch Rosenberg, who chairs the Federation of American Scientists Working Group on Biological Weapons, suggested a cover-up in a June 19 statement on the probe:

"Either the FBI is under pressure from DOD [Department of Defense] or CIA not to proceed because the Suspect knows too much and must be controlled forever from the moment of arrest; (For the good of the country, is it really more important to hide what he knows than to let justice be served?)," wrote Ms. Rosenberg, "or the FBI is sympathetic to the views of the biodefense clique; or the FBI really is as incompetent as it seems."



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