

Washington debate continues over attack on Iraq

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A revealing discussion is underway in official Washington, as rival factions of the Bush administration, the congressional Democrats and Republicans, and the military brass debate the methods and pretexts which should be employed to accomplish their common goal of overthrowing Saddam Hussein and seizing control of the Iraq's oil resources, the second largest store of petroleum in the world.

The latest round of the debate is being played out in the pages of the leading US newspapers. On Sunday, July 28, the *Washington Post* published a front-page report by its Pentagon correspondent, Thomas Ricks, citing widespread opposition in the military to the Bush administration's plans for an invasion of Iraq.

According to the *Post* account, "Despite President Bush's repeated bellicose statements about Iraq, many senior US military officers contend that President Saddam Hussein poses no immediate threat and that the United States should continue its policy of containment rather than invade Iraq to force a change of leadership in Baghdad." These officers include members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the military's highest command, the newspaper said.

The Pentagon's caution is said to be based, at least in part, on fears that a US invasion would require the deployment of substantial ground forces that would be vulnerable to attack by nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, or would face staggeringly high casualties in house-to-house fighting for control of Baghdad, the capital city.

There is also concern that US policy in a postwar Iraq would be aimed at preventing the creation of a pro-Iranian Shi'ite state in the south of Iraq, or an independent Kurdish state in the north, seen as a threat to Turkey, the main US ally in the region. One Pentagon official told the *Post*, "I think it is almost a certainty that we'd wind up doing a campaign against the Kurds and Shi'ites"—in other words, an American war against Saddam Hussein could end up as a war against those forces within Iraq nominally allied with the US against Hussein's regime.

Two days later the *New York Times* published its own front-page account of the current state of military planning for Iraq, citing civilian and military officials who were exploring an alternative to full-scale invasion: a quick-strike attack on Baghdad, combining bombing and airborne troop assaults. This "inside-out" approach is aimed at killing Saddam Hussein and destroying the Iraqi command centers, based on the belief that the main Iraqi military forces will not fight on their own if cut off from the capital.

Whichever presented efforts to then minimize of warfare while preventing Saddam Hussein from using weapons of mass destruction, such a strategy could make the use of such weapons far more likely—by the American side. If the raid were unsuccessful, it could leave American soldiers isolated in or near Baghdad, surrounded by Iraqi forces. In that event, the US government might well decide to use nuclear weapons rather than allow its invasion force to be overwhelmed.

The *Times* said that internal Bush administration discussions "have been weighing troop deployments ranging from 70,000 to 250,000." There was no mention of the anticipated casualties on the Iraqi side, which would be especially severe in Baghdad, a huge, highly developed urban area of more than three million people. But humanitarian aid agencies have estimated that as many as 10,000 civilians would be killed in Baghdad alone.

A follow-up article in the *Times* the next day sought to estimate the financial cost of a war against Iraq, both in terms of outright expenditures on military supplies and personnel, and in terms of the economic dislocation resulting from a war in the Persian Gulf, which supplies much of the world's oil.

Unlike the 1990-91 Persian Gulf war, when the first Bush administration strong-armed US allies such as Japan, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia into paying the bulk of the cost, a war in 2002 or 2003 would be paid for almost entirely by the United States. The first gulf war cost the US Treasury nearly \$13 billion, out of a total cost estimated at \$61 billion. The second gulf war would likely require upwards of \$80 billion—six times the previous US outlay—under conditions where the US federal budget has plunged into deficit.

The Bush administration has already begun to take measures to forestall a new "oil shock" in the event of war with Iraq. Within a month of the onset of war in Afghanistan, Bush directed Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham to begin adding more than 100 million barrels to the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve. One estimate is that US government acquisitions for the reserve have accounted for more than one half of the growth in the demand for oil this year.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee will hold hearings on Iraq policy Wednesday and Thursday, beginning with foreign policy analysts and former government officials, and seeking the testimony of Bush administration officials later. Similar hearings before the House International Relations Committee will begin in late August.

Democrat Joseph Biden of Delaware, chairman of the Senate

committee, has repeatedly expressed his support for military action against Iraq, provided the Bush administration seeks congressional authorization and spells out its longer-term goals for the region. Explaining the delay in calling administration witnesses, Biden told the press, “It’s clear to me that the administration is still in the throes of a searching debate about what to do. I don’t want to put them in a position to prematurely have to reach a conclusion.”

The Bush administration is moving along at least three parallel tracks to manufacture a pretext for war against Iraq: continuous provocations in the no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq; attempts to reintroduce UN weapons inspectors into the country; and the issuing of threats of “preemptive” attacks on alleged nuclear, biological and chemical weapons facilities.

US and British warplanes bombed a communications bunker in southern Iraq on Sunday, July 28; the sixth such incident in the month of July after a period of comparative quiet during the first six months of the year. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said such attacks could be expected “on a weekly basis.”

Pentagon officials said last week that the enforcement of the no-fly zones continues to yield valuable information on Iraqi military deployments, while disrupting and destroying the country’s air defenses and familiarizing American pilots with the target environment. The US and Britain have spent more than \$11 billion on air operations over Iraq since the end of the Persian Gulf War, far more than the total spent on humanitarian aid for the starving people of that blockaded country.

UN sponsored talks with Iraq over the resumption of weapons inspections have been stalled by the US insistence that Americans have full participation in the inspection program. This has been rejected by Iraqi officials, who point out that during the previous round of inspections, from 1991 to 1998, CIA agents worked under cover as United Nations inspectors, seeking to locate Saddam Hussein and other top Iraqi leaders and target them for assassination.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Naji Sabri told Reuter’s news agency that Washington wants to overthrow the Iraqi government and install “a puppet regime” which will give US companies access to the country’s oil reserves. “The US has an eye on Iraqi oil,” he said.

Sabri said that given US threats of war against Iraq, Baghdad could not permit American inspectors to return to Iraq under UN cover. “Those spies would update information about civilian, economic installations as well as security and military positions and give this data to US intelligence and military bodies so as to use them in attacking Iraq,” he said.

The Iraqi official’s analysis found support from an unexpected source—Rolf Ekeus, the Swedish diplomat who headed UN weapons inspections in Iraq from 1991 to 1997. Speaking on Swedish radio, he said there was no doubt that the US manipulated the inspection process for its own purposes.

Ekeus said that he personally rebuffed US efforts to use the inspections to get information on the whereabouts of Saddam Hussein. The US government also used inspections to provoke conflict with Iraq “that could be used as a justification for a direct military action,” he said. Ekeus told a Swedish newspaper that after he left his UN post, he learned that the US had placed two CIA agents among his inspectors.

The US has long used the no-fly zone and the inspection issue to keep up the pressure on Baghdad. Its newest provocation is the beginning of public discussions of unilateral military strikes against weapons facilities in Iraq and Iran, following President Bush’s speech to West Point cadets June 1 in which he announced a new doctrine of preemptive warfare.

The *Washington Post* reported July 29 that there are ongoing discussions in the Bush administration about a possible military strike against an Iranian nuclear reactor that is being built at Bushehr with technical assistance from Russia. Both Iran and Russia maintain that the reactor, set for completion in 2003 or 2004, is a power station for civilian use. Inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency have visited the site under terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The *Post* noted that the Israeli government has publicly warned Iran against opening the Bushehr plant. The Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* reported last month that the Sharon government was conducting an urgent review of policy toward Iran and quoted one security official saying, “everything must be done, including, if necessary, using force to prevent Tehran from achieving nuclear weapons capabilities.”

An attack on Iran would be modeled on the 1981 Israeli air assault that destroyed an Iraqi reactor facility at Osirak. Given the greater distance to be traveled, and the extensive US military presence in the region, such an air strike against Iran would only be possible with active US support.

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld was asked at a press conference July 29 about possible air strikes on alleged chemical, biological and nuclear weapons facilities in Iraq. Indicating the matter has been studied intensively in the Pentagon, Rumsfeld said such strikes would not be sufficient because of Iraqi countermeasures and concealment. “The idea that it’s easy to simply do what you suggested ... from the air,” he said, “is a misunderstanding of the situation.” The clear implication was that only the dispatch of ground troops and the outright conquest of Iraq would suffice.

One of the charges against the Nazi leaders at Nuremberg was that they “plotted aggressive war” against countries such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, Denmark, Norway and Yugoslavia. Similar charges would be in order against high officials in Washington, as they openly scheme to wage war against a country that poses no credible threat to the United States.



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