

American public left in dark on US war aims in Iraq

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The discussion that has broken out in official Washington over when and how to go to war with Iraq is in no sense a genuine public debate. Representatives of various factions of the ruling elite—Bush administration officials, congressional leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties, the military-intelligence establishment—are weighing in. But the American people are excluded. There is no genuine democratic content in these discussions, which include, among other topics, intensive consideration of how to manipulate public opinion.

The very terms of the debate at Senate hearings held July 31-August 1 revealed the cynical and sinister character of the congressional proceedings. Speaker after speaker agreed that Saddam Hussein should be removed as Iraqi ruler and that the United States government had the right to carry out a policy of “regime change” in a country on the other side of the world. The only differences expressed were over the best methods for accomplishing this goal—and the best means for “selling” such a war to the American people.

The official US debate might be entitled, with apologies to Pirandello, “Six Wars in Search of a Pretext.” The entire political and media establishment agrees on the goal of war with Iraq. But different factions propose rival scenarios.

Some advocate the Afghan model: the use of high-tech weaponry, CIA spies and a small force of US troops on the ground, combined with massive air power. Others, particularly in the Pentagon, see something more akin to the 1991 Persian Gulf War, with half as many troops, perhaps 250,000, to occupy the country. Another proposal is for tank columns to race from Kuwait to Baghdad, targeting only the Iraqi Republican Guards, in the belief that regular Iraqi army troops will not fight for Saddam Hussein. A fourth version is an airborne assault on the Iraqi capital, aimed at decapitating the regime by killing the Iraqi president. A scenario involving a military coup and the assassination of Hussein also has its boosters.

The political pretext for hostilities with Iraq keeps shifting, as the Bush administration seeks, so far unsuccessfully, to find a pretext that can stampede the public behind its war plans.

On one day war against Iraq is necessary because UN weapons inspectors have been absent from the country since 1998, and Baghdad has supposedly resumed the development of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. (However, when Iraq offered last week to readmit the inspectors, the Bush administration immediately rejected the proposal).

The next day Hussein’s removal from power is declared a must because the Iraqi ruler already has weapons of mass destruction and may give them to Al Qaeda—although the enmity between the Islamic fundamentalism of Al Qaeda and the secular nationalism of Hussein’s

Ba’athist regime is well established.

A day later it turns out that Hussein must be removed because he might use weapons of mass destruction against American targets himself (although that would be suicide for his regime) or against Israel (which possesses an estimated 200 nuclear bombs).

On the morrow Hussein is declared a threat to his Arab neighbors and to the supply of oil from the Persian Gulf to world markets, despite the fact that Iraq signed a boundary agreement with Kuwait giving up all claims on the emirate, and that all of the Gulf states publicly oppose an American attack on Baghdad.

By the end of the week, Saddam Hussein is declared responsible for the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, justifying a retaliatory war.

This latest—and most desperate—attempt to manufacture a *casus belli* was reported by the *Los Angeles Times* August 2. The newspaper wrote that the White House and Pentagon had decided to endorse claims that suicide hijacker Mohammed Atta met with an Iraqi official in the Czech Republic several months before September 11, although both the CIA and FBI have dismissed the Czech report as unproven and unfounded. As the front-page *LA Times* report made clear, the Bush administration made its decision not as a result of new intelligence information, but because it felt the need for a September 11 link to generate support for its war plans.

The reason for this thrashing about in search of a pretext for war is the fact that the real motives cannot be revealed to the American people. The preparations for war have a twofold cause: the drive by the American ruling elite to establish unchallenged control over Persian Gulf oil, the most important strategic prize in the world, and the desire of the Bush administration to divert public attention from the mounting social and political crisis at home, expressed most clearly in the corporate scandals and the plunging stock market.

At the Senate hearings, both Democrats and Republicans expressed concern that the Bush administration had failed to devise a workable plan for military operations, mobilize support internationally, or rally American public opinion behind an invasion to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Republican Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska asked, “Would we further destabilize the entire Middle East if we took military action against him? Who would be our allies? And what kind of support would there be inside Iraq? These kinds of questions are critical. You could inflame the whole Middle East plus Iran.”

Committee Chairman Joseph Biden, a Democrat from Delaware, voiced confidence in assurances from the Bush administration that there would be no overt military moves against Iraq until early in 2003. He said he would be “very, very surprised,” adding that President Bush is “nowhere near making the hard decision as to when

and how.” But in a subsequent appearance on the NBC program *Meet the Press* August 4, Biden said that ultimately the decision would be for war, and that Bush would be able to make a case for it to Congress and the public.

In his opening statement, the committee’s ranking Republican, Richard Lugar of Indiana, painted a somber picture of the consequences of war in the Persian Gulf. “This is not an action that can be sprung on the American people,” he said. “We must estimate soberly the human and economic cost of war plans and postwar plans.”

The Senate hearings adjourned August 1 and will resume in September with testimony from administration officials. Similar hearings will begin before the House International Affairs Committee, chaired by conservative Republican Henry Hyde of Illinois, who headed the impeachment effort against President Clinton. Hyde said that a full-scale invasion of Iraq “may not be the best course of action,” and urged “serious debate” on whatever plan is eventually proposed by the White House.

The American press continues to cite deep divisions within the Bush administration over the war plans. The *Washington Post* reported August 1 that Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld “are pushing most forcefully for aggressively confronting Hussein, arguing that he presents a serious threat and that time is not on the side of the United States,” while Secretary of State Colin Powell and CIA Director George Tenet “are asking skeptical questions about a military campaign, especially about the aftermath of what most in the administration assume would be a fairly swift victory.”

Much of the senior Army and Navy command has opposed an immediate strike at Iraq on practical grounds, lining up with Powell, the former chairman of the joint chiefs, in “an unusual alliance between the State Department and the uniformed side of the Pentagon, elements of the government that more often seem to oppose each other in foreign policy debates.”

The *Post* account said that at a July 10 meeting of the Defense Policy Board, a civilian advisory group that has spearheaded the drive for war as soon as possible, officials voiced frustration with military opposition and called for “a few heads to roll” in the Army command.

The criticism of Bush’s policy towards Iraq voiced by Army generals, Democrats and liberals has nothing to do with opposition to American aggression. Rather, the concern is that the administration is proceeding recklessly, without making the preparations necessary for a protracted and bloody struggle and without sufficiently considering the international ramifications of such a war.

There is particular concern over the vehement opposition to a US war expressed by most of the European countries and by longtime US allies and stooges in the Middle East itself. French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, voicing the common view of the European governments, except for Great Britain, said July 30 they would support a US war against Iraq only if it was endorsed by the UN Security Council—an unlikely event given that France, Russia and China all have veto power there.

King Abdullah of Jordan visited Washington August 1 and met with Bush at the White House. During a stop in London on his way to the talks, he gave press interviews declaring that US officials were making a “tremendous mistake” if they ignored international opposition to an invasion of Iraq. “[E]verybody is saying this is a bad idea,” he said. “If it seems America says we want to hit Baghdad, that’s not what Jordanians think, or the British, the French, the

Russians, the Chinese and everybody else.”

Abdullah rebuffed claims by US officials that they would use Jordan as a staging area for troop movements into Iraq and air strikes on that country. Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher said, “Jordan has made it clear it cannot be used as a launching pad,” and added, “we have not been asked.”

In a column published August 1 in the *Washington Post*, Samuel Berger, national security adviser in the Clinton administration, warned against the danger of “a Bay of Pigs in the Persian Gulf”—i.e., an ill-prepared attack that results in a military and political debacle.

Berger wrote, “[W]e must define the necessary objective more broadly than simply eliminating Hussein’s regime. We must achieve that in a way that enhances—not diminishes—America’s overall security.” The former Clinton aide expressed particular concern over the destabilization of other regimes in the region, concluding, “It would be a Pyrrhic victory, for example, if we got rid of Saddam Hussein only to face a radical government in Pakistan with a ready-made nuclear arsenal.”

Similar concerns were voiced in an August 3 editorial in the *New York Times*, which appealed to Bush to “talk candidly about why he feels military action against Iraq may soon be necessary, and what the goals, costs and potential consequences of a war would be.” Expressing fear of the consequences of even a successful war, the *Times* noted, “Military victory in Iraq would leave Washington temporarily responsible for guiding the future of a major Arab oil-producing country in the heart of the Middle East. The first challenge would be preventing Iraq’s dissolution... A splintered Iraq would tempt Iran, frighten Turkey and perhaps lead to regional war.”

The *Times* concluded, with typical sanctimony, that a unilateral US attack on Iraq “must be preceded by democratic deliberation and informed decision-making.” However, there is no assurance that the Bush administration will even seek formal congressional sanction for military action.

Both Biden and Lugar said they expected Bush to do so, as his father did in 1990 before the first US war in the Persian Gulf. Two Senate Democrats, Dianne Feinstein of California and Patrick Leahy of Vermont, introduced a resolution July 30 calling on the administration not to initiate a war with Iraq without congressional consent. Republican Arlen Specter introduced a similar resolution two weeks earlier, but Republican Minority Leader Trent Lott said the White House could launch a war on Iraq on its own authority.

The US Constitution explicitly reserves the power to declare war to Congress, but this provision has been largely ignored by American presidents throughout the Cold War and its aftermath. The last war declared by Congress was World War II, and US governments have waged wars in Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan, and dispatched troops for lesser combat in dozens of other countries, either with no congressional vote at all or with resolutions that fell short of an outright declaration of war.



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