

US bribes and threatens “allies” over Iraq

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17 September 2002

In the wake of Bush’s ultimatum to the United Nation’s General Assembly to back a US war against Iraq, Washington has launched a multi-sided campaign to bribe and threaten governments around the world.

“A thieves’ kitchen” was Lenin’s apt designation for the UN’s predecessor, the League of Nations. Today’s campaign by Washington at the UN to win support for another war on Iraq makes it clear that the appellation still applies. The flurry of quid pro quos and dirty deals has all the dignity of mobsters divvying up the spoils. While in his speech to the General Assembly the US president claimed that his goal was world peace, a piece of the action is what he is offering to world leaders in return for acquiescence to US aims.

Secretary of State Colin Powell returned to the UN this week with the aim of ramming through a Security Council resolution within the next several days demanding that Iraq comply unconditionally with 16 separate resolutions imposed after the last Gulf War or face military action. Confronted with widespread opposition abroad and skepticism at home over its claims that Iraq represents a paramount threat to national and world security that can be ended only through a US invasion, Washington is demanding that the UN provide it with an international cover for American militarism.

On Monday, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan announced that Baghdad had agreed to allow UN weapons inspectors back into the country. They were withdrawn under pressure from Washington in 1998 in advance of a four-day US-British bombing campaign.

US officials have repeatedly insisted that whether the weapons inspectors are admitted or not, Washington’s policy will remain one of “preemptive” war aimed at installing a US puppet regime in Baghdad. They have also ruled out any possibility that the regime of Saddam Hussein will fully comply with UN resolutions, making it clear that if the inspectors do return, their function will be to create provocations and provide a casus belli once Iraq is deemed in defiance of US/UN dictates.

To set up a pretext for war, however, the Security Council resolution must be crafted according to American specifications and approved by nine of the panel’s 15 members, with none of the five permanent members—the US, Russia, Britain, France and China—casting a veto. Other governments in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere must be brought on board to provide bases and other forms of support for US forces participating in the attack.

The main prize, of course, is oil. Neither American officials nor leaders of the so-called Iraqi opposition—the collection of royalists, wealthy exiles and ex-generals gathered in the Iraqi National Congress—make any bones about their intention to transfer the lion’s share of Iraq’s rich oilfields to the US-based petroleum multinationals after a successful US war.

While endlessly repeating unsubstantiated claims about “weapons of mass destruction” and feigning concern over Saddam Hussein’s

internal repression, the strategic objective that the US is pursuing is control over Iraqi oil. The country has the second-largest proven oil reserves in the world—an estimated 112.5 billion barrels—trailing only Saudi Arabia. With growing concerns about the stability of the semi-feudal Saudi monarchy, the US administration is determined to seize control of Iraq.

This objective, however, cuts across the interests of a number of countries, including three that hold veto power in the UN Security Council—France, Russia and China. They, together with a half a dozen other countries, have signed major contracts with the Iraqi regime to explore for petroleum or rebuild the country’s oil infrastructure. Most of these contracts are designed to take effect once the 12-year-old UN economic sanctions are lifted. The State Department-sponsored Iraqi oppositionists have insisted that all of these contracts will be abrogated when and if the current regime is overthrown through a US invasion.

Historically, both Russia and France had extensive economic interests in Iraq before the 1991 Gulf War and are loathe to see the US establish unfettered control over the country. Russia, in particular, still claims \$8 billion in debt that the Saddam Hussein regime incurred with the former Soviet Union. Washington’s none-too-subtle tactic is to promise these and other countries an unspecified share of the booty if they support the US war, while threatening that they will be cut off without so much as a barrel of crude should they oppose it.

James Woolsey, the former CIA director and US corporate adviser who has emerged as a leading cheerleader for a speedy war against Iraq, bluntly spelled out this approach in an interview with the *Washington Post*. “It’s pretty straightforward,” he said. “France and Russia have oil companies and interests in Iraq. They should be told that if they are of assistance in moving Iraq toward decent government, we’ll do the best we can to ensure that the new government and American companies work closely with them.” But, he added, “If they throw in their lot with Saddam, it will be difficult to the point of impossible to persuade the new Iraqi government to work with them.”

In other words: “Help us knock over Iraq and we’ll cut you in on the loot; get in our way and you get nothing.”

The most extensive initiatives have been taken in relation to the government of President Vladimir Putin in Russia, who has spoken to Bush repeatedly in recent weeks. A State Department delegation was dispatched last week to Moscow for a three-day visit aimed at reviewing “bilateral concerns” over Iraq. Early next month, Russian officials will hold an oil summit in Houston with their US counterparts and representatives of more than 100 American and Russian oil companies.

As a further incentive, Washington is allowing other governments to interpret the “war on terrorism” in a manner that suits their political interests, much as the Bush administration has done in the US. Thus,

while publicly stating its opposition to Russian military action in Georgia against Chechen separatists based there, it is widely believed that behind the scenes Washington is giving Moscow a green light to intensify its bloody repression inside Chechnya.

Similarly, the US recently gave its support to Beijing's crackdown on a separatist group in northwestern China, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement. The State Department added the organization to its roster of international terrorist groups, and the US backed China's bid to have it placed on the UN's terrorist list.

In an obvious bid to placate Canadian public opinion and smooth the way for Ottawa to support an invasion, the US Air Force announced last week that two US fighter pilots had been charged with manslaughter and assault for killing four Canadian soldiers and wounding eight in a "friendly fire" bombing in Afghanistan last April. The two Illinois Air National Guard pilots dropped a 500-pound laser-guided bomb on Canadian troops engaged in a night live fire exercise near Kandahar. US officials have admitted that the pilots' superiors failed to inform them about the Canadian maneuvers.

While Turkey will be dragooned into any US war on Iraq—its air bases at Diyarbakir and Incirlik are already being used in US-British air raids on the Arab country—the unstable government of Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit has expressed grave concerns about an invasion's impact on his country.

In an attempt to allay the concerns of the Turkish rulers, Bush inserted in his speech a carefully worded reference to US support for a "united Iraq." The phrase was designed to reassure countries in the region, especially Turkey, that Washington would suppress any move by Iraq's Kurdish minority to realize its long-standing aim of creating a separate state in Iraq's north and would back Ankara's military campaign against Turkey's own Kurds. At least 30,000 Kurds have already died in the 17-year counterinsurgency campaign in eastern Turkey. Turkish military forces have long conducted cross-border raids into Iraq "in pursuit" of guerrillas affiliated to the PKK Kurdish separatist movement.

Money is also likely to change hands in assuring Turkey's full cooperation in a US invasion. The regime in Ankara is anxious that Washington assure the favorable disbursement of a \$16 billion credit already approved by the International Monetary Fund, and is seeking forgiveness on \$5 billion in debt to the US for weapons contracts.

The other key country in terms of US military logistics is Saudi Arabia. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal said on Sunday that the monarchy would support a US invasion of Iraq if Washington obtained a resolution through the UN Security Council, and would once again allow the Pentagon to use Saudi soil as a launching pad for war.

At the same time, the Saudi prince said that his regime would act to stabilize world oil prices internationally if and when war is waged. Among the key concerns that the Saudis have reportedly discussed with Washington is whether a post-Saddam regime in Baghdad would maintain its membership in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. If Washington chose to pull it out of OPEC, Iraqi production and pricing could ruin the economies of other oil producers.

Other Arab regimes that had made dire warnings of the consequences of a US war on Iraq have also latched on to Bush's appeal to the UN as a cover for lining up behind Washington. Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, for example, made a tour of the region in the immediate aftermath of Bush's speech, urging united pressure by the Arab regimes to force Iraq to readmit the weapons inspectors.

After Israel, Egypt is the largest recipient of US military aid in the world.

In Pakistan, military ruler General Pervez Musharraf has been given a free hand by the US to consolidate his dictatorship. While the State Department issued a pro forma criticism of constitutional changes Musharraf introduced last month guaranteeing the military's control of the government and blocking the country's two most popular politicians from the polls, Bush made it clear that he was not concerned. "President Musharraf is still tight with us in the war against terror, and that's what I appreciate," said the US president.

Other countries with temporary members on the Security Council have begun making their own demands, hoping to get concessions from Washington in return for a vote on an Iraqi intervention resolution. For example, Mexican President Vicente Fox, a usually docile ally of Washington, made public statements last week complaining about the Bush administration's failure to carry through on its promise to legalize the status of some three million undocumented Mexican workers in the US. Regularizing their status, he said pointedly, should be possible while continuing to wage the "war on terrorism."

It will hardly come as a surprise to see new US aid projects quickly assembled for Cameroon, Guinea and Mauritius, all small and impoverished African countries that happen to hold three of the 10 temporary seats on the Security Council.

While opposed by sections of his own Republican party as a capitulation to "internationalism" and retreat from the unilateral use of American military might, Bush's turn to the UN to prepare a war against Iraq has once again exposed the central purpose for which the institution was designed—providing an international rubber stamp for imperialist intrigue. The ease with which the US is able to buy or intimidate government after government into backing an unprovoked war of aggression has also revealed the prostration and corruption of the ruling cliques not only in the Arab world, but throughout the regions of the globe that are oppressed by imperialism.

Washington's cynical maneuvers will prove far less effective, however, in dispelling the hostility of working people all over the world to war and the horror felt by millions at the prospect of massive civilian casualties and destruction in a US assault on Iraq.



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