

Mounting signs of early US invasion of Iraq

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14 November 2002

In the wake of Iraq's formal acceptance Wednesday of the United Nations Security Council resolution imposing a new weapons inspection regime, the Bush administration is continuing to prepare a war against the Arab country, which could begin as early as next month. Reinforcing its bellicose stance, the Pentagon leaked invasion plans involving a force of a quarter of a million troops to the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* earlier this week.

The war plan outlines a military offensive that would lead to thousands, if not tens of thousands of casualties. It is based on a concept of "rolling war," starting with an air campaign in which B-1 and B-2 bombers drop satellite-guided bombs on key targets such as Saddam Hussein's palaces, air defenses, political structures and military bases. A ground strike would initially focus on the north, west and south against Iraqi military bases, airstrips and ports, as opposed to an assault on Baghdad. This would allow the US to effect an early seizure of Iraq's oil facilities.

The Bush administration has mounted a concerted political offensive in the days following the United Nations Security Council's unanimous vote for its resolution on arms inspections. Washington's aim is to make war inevitable, sooner rather than later.

In order to make the UN resolution palatable to France, Russia, China and others, it did not specifically refer to a military response, and laid out a timetable for compliance that could theoretically stretch to February of 2003. Leading figures in the Bush camp have since made clear that the resolution gives the US what it wants—a cover for war—and that Washington does not consider a decision to launch military action to be subject to Security Council approval.

The timetable laid down by the UN does not require the first report from inspectors until February 21. By December 8, however, Iraq must give the UN a full accounting of not only all of its weapons programs, but also of all civilian chemical, biological and nuclear production and research activities in the country.

While UN weapons inspectors themselves criticized this deadline as unrealizable, Bush and his top aides have strongly suggested that it could provide the trigger for a US invasion.

The scenario that emerges is that Washington will declare *any* weapons report issued by Iraq to be false, and begin bombing soon after. US officials have already said they have prepared their own list of suspected sites, using reports from previous inspections and information from intelligence sources and Iraqi defectors, to compare against Iraq's list.

Both Bush and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice spelled out a US policy of "zero tolerance" toward any Iraqi "deception." If Iraq is deemed to have concealed information about its weapons production, it would be considered in "material breach" of the UN resolution and subject to military attack, with or without UN endorsement.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell told CNN, "We're not going to wait until February to see whether Iraq is cooperating or not.... We will ask the UN to give authorization for all necessary means, and if the UN is not willing to do that, the United States with like-minded nations will go and disarm him forcefully."

Interviewed Monday on NBC's morning news program *Today*, the former chief arms inspector Richard Butler also stressed that December 8 was viewed as the pivotal day, and implied that military action would soon follow.

Britain's Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw echoed these statements. Hoon stressed his belief that Iraq would fail to adequately disclose its weapons arsenal on December 8 or would prove unwilling to cooperate with the stringent conditions of the new UN weapons inspection regime even earlier. Straw said, "Saddam has got 30 days to produce a complete disclosure of his weapons of mass destruction and the means for producing them. We will know therefore within the next 30 days whether he is serious about complying."

Washington's push for an early commencement of hostilities confirms that its demand for weapons inspections was never anything more than a pretext for war. The last thing the Bush administration wants is weapons inspections to go forward, for fear they might expose as false or vastly exaggerated its claims that Iraq has built up a major arsenal of chemical, biological and even nuclear weapons. The war cabal in Washington is also concerned that once firmly under way, the process of weapons inspections could lead to

delays and complications in its drive for the military occupation of Iraq. It is seeking to abort the UN mission as soon as possible.

The US has already stationed 60,000 troops in or around the Persian Gulf, and is strengthening its forces every day. The Navy has two aircraft carriers in the region, and two more are set to arrive. From a purely military standpoint, February is considered the optimal time to wage war, because of its relatively longer nights and moderate weather.

Washington is eager to press home its military advantage over its European rivals. The major oil corporations have spent the past months scrambling to secure access to Iraqi oil supplies, with Franco-Belgian TotalFinaElf leading the pack. It plans to invest over \$10.5 billion in two projects that will produce more than one million barrels per day, and has other projects that would bring its overall investment to \$18.5 billion and increase its oil capacity to three million barrels per day. Once the US seizes control of Iraq, these contracts will in all probability be considered void. Washington is intent on sidelining the European powers: the Pentagon's leaked invasion plans include only a nominal British military presence of 15,000 troops.

Leaking its military plans serves a number of additional political and military functions. It cannot be ruled out that at least aspects of the purported war plans are disinformation designed to mislead Iraq. Some commentators have noted that before the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq was encouraged to believe that US forces would mount an amphibious landing on Kuwait's beaches, as opposed to the lengthy air campaign that took place, followed by a thrust into Kuwait and Iraq from Saudi Arabia.

The publication of US war plans is also aimed at encouraging fear and dissent within Iraq's military, possibly provoking a coup that would depose Saddam Hussein and thereby eliminate the need for the high number of casualties that would likely result from hand-to-hand combat in Baghdad.

Powell has already threatened Iraq's military brass with prosecution for war crimes should they fight to defend Hussein's regime, while Bush himself warned on November 7 that if they endangered "the lives of their own citizens, as well as citizens in the neighborhood, there will be a consequence." Bush added, "They will be held to account."

Designating a force of 250,000 troops appears to be a victory for uniformed military commanders, who had opposed the Pentagon civilian leadership's proposal for a far smaller force. The military brass is, according to various press reports, highly skeptical of claims by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and others that the conquest of Iraq could be accomplished with little more effort than the US occupation of Afghanistan.

There are many indications of dissent within the military over Bush's war drive against Iraq. Former top commanders, such as Gen. Joseph Hoar, who headed US forces in the Middle East after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and retired Marine Gen. Anthony Zinni, also formerly in charge of US Mideast forces, have publicly criticized administration plans for war with Iraq, and some have warned that US forces could suffer heavy losses.

Just last week, James Webb, Navy secretary during the Reagan administration, gave a speech at the Naval Postgraduate School in California denouncing Bush's war plans. Webb was warmly received when he opposed a US occupation of the country and said, "I don't think Iraq is that much of a threat."

Such divisions may be a further factor driving the White House to launch military action sooner rather than later. The longer the delay, the more time for internal opposition to build.

Another reason for leaking US invasion plans is to prepare public opinion for heavy civilian casualties. Media reports of the Pentagon plan dutifully stress the desire of the US to avoid civilian deaths, while citing reports that Hussein is preparing thousands of volunteers to make up "martyrs' brigades." The *New York Times*, for example, wrote of Baghdad's intention to "purposefully sacrifice" Iraq's population "to stain an American military victory with civilian blood." Thus, before a shot is fired, the Iraqi regime is being blamed for those who will be killed by US bombs and bullets.



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